

# When the Cat's Away, the Mice will Play? How Journalistic Intervention Influences Political Parties' Decision to Go Negative

Negative campaigning is widely studied in the context of American and Western European elections. Studies that seek to explain when political actors "go negative" often locate these determinants in contextual or party characteristics, such as parties' position in the polls, their incumbency status or political ideologically. Against the backdrop of our current high-choice media environment, a crucial element that is often overlooked is that parties can also weigh their rhetorical strategies across communication channels, based on the amount of journalistic intervention that takes place and the audience political parties can reach. Focusing on the 2017 Dutch General Elections, we examine how Dutch political parties use negative campaigning strategies across different communication channels. Analyzing 1490 appeals that appeared in newspaper articles, talk shows and in parties' Facebook posts, we show that an increase in journalistic intervention is associated with more negative appeals. Our findings highlight the importance of studying communication channels in comparative perspective and add more nuance to our understanding of rhetorical strategies during campaigns.

**Keywords:** Negative Campaigning, High-Choice Media Environment, Polling, Issue Ownership, Multiverse Analysis

Negative campaigning is widely studied in the American and West European context (e.g. for overviews, see Geer, 2006; Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Haselmayer, 2019; Lau & Rovner, 2009; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2015; Nai & Walter, 2015). This has resulted in a rich academic debate on the determinants of negative campaigning strategies during elections in two-party and multi-party systems. The majority of studies in this field locate these determinants of 'going negative' in the electoral context (for overviews, see e.g. Haselmayer, 2019; Lau & Rovner, 2009; Nai & Walter, 2015). More recent studies (Nai & Maier, 2020; Walter, Van der Brug, & van Praag, 2014), most notably in multi-party contexts, also highlight the importance of party characteristics. In addition, parties' perceived issue credibility plays into parties' rhetorical choices (e.g., see Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011).

While the existing state of the field paints a fine-

grained picture of strategic considerations from the party perspective, a crucial element remains largely absent: *How do parties weigh their rhetorical strategies across communication channels?*<sup>1</sup> Scholars of communication science indicate that political actors take into account the constraints of journalistic intervention – i.e. the level of control political actors exert over the ways their messages are conveyed to the electorate (Paletz, 2002) – and the audience they try to reach with their campaign messages (Ballard, Hillygus, & Konitzer, 2016; Baum, 2013; Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, &

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<sup>1</sup>The work by Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) also addresses this question, yet their data does not allow to test the question including social media data, where scholars have shown the dynamics, especially of uncivil and negative rhetoric are different (e.g., see Goyanes, Borah, & de Zúñiga, 2021; Rheault, Rayment, & Musulan, 2019).

Esser, 2019; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). Yet, understanding political actors' choices in a high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017) requires an analysis of a more diverse set of communication channels that also includes social media platforms.<sup>2</sup>

Demonstrating how parties craft their rhetorical strategies based on the particular media landscape is important, because the media landscape itself has changed fundamentally in the last decade. This change, in turn, drastically altered how political information is disseminated and consumed (Van Aelst et al., 2017). A cross-media analysis of campaign appeals thus tells us more about the ways in which political actors exploit the absence of journalistic intervention to their electoral benefit. Recent events underline how unmediated political communication can have serious political consequences. Donald Trump's suspension from Twitter (Twitter, 2021) following the Capital storming is a case in point. Moreover, during the 2021 Dutch Parliamentary elections, Twitter decided to delete Dutch far-right politician Thierry Baudet's Tweet with false claims about vaccines. These suspensions are not isolated cases (Twitter, 2019).

In this paper, we theorize and demonstrate that political parties rhetorically exploit the lack of journalistic intervention to reap electoral gains. We further show how journalistic intervention impacts campaign appeals, by analyzing the moderating role of common determinants of negative campaigning – such as parties' standing in the polls, ideological extremity and issue ownership. We utilize data from the 2017 Dutch elections. We have collected a unique data set of 1490 manually coded appeals which we combine with polling data (Polls by Peil.nl, I&O Research, Kantar Public/TNS NIPO, Eenvandaag en Ipsos (Politieke Barometer), 2017), survey data (Krouwel, Kleinnijenhuis, & Kutiyiski, 2016; Polk et al., 2017) and data from the Manifesto Project (Burst et al., 2021).<sup>3</sup> Conducting a multiverse analysis (see Simonsohn, Simmons, & Nelson, 2020; Steegen, Tuerlinckx, Gelman, & Vanpaemel, 2016), we show that journalis-

tic intervention has a direct effect on parties' use of negative appeals: the higher levels of journalistic intervention – regardless of measurement choices – the more likely parties are to make negative appeals. We find mixed results for the effect of issue ownership, standing in the polls, and ideological extremity on parties' decision to go negative. Our multiverse approach shows that the way one operationalizes these concepts affects the outcomes one get.

Our evidence thus suggests that communication channels are important determinants of the rhetoric we see in Dutch campaign messages. In line with Walter and Vliegenthart (2010), we show that campaign communication strategies differ across platforms and that this holds true in a high-choice media environment. Particularly, we show that the absence of journalistic intervention drives many parties to employ a more positive rhetoric than on other communication channels. This counterintuitive could be explained by the journalistic profession: While journalists act as watch dogs safeguarding democratic principles (Bennett & Serin, 2005), they also report on news events relying heavily on the news values negativity and conflict (Helfer & Aelst, 2016; Ridout & Walter, 2015). Our analysis therefore sheds new light on the interconnections between news values and campaign rhetoric. Methodologically our multiverse analysis shows that substantive outcomes strongly depend on how researchers construct their variables of interest, which has important implications for both the field of political and communication science.

<sup>2</sup>With some notable exceptions (Russmann, 2017; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010), we currently lack this overview.

<sup>3</sup>all our materials can be found at <https://anonymous.4open.science/r/c2b8960a-17ee-4a76-a4c7-68f8bbc99b4c/> – anonymized for the reviewing process.

### Parties' Strategic Behavior in a High Choice Media Environment

One of the key objectives that guides political parties' behavior during campaigns is obtaining votes (Müller & Strom, 2003). Ideally, political parties maximize their own vote share, while diminishing the support for their political opponents. To achieve this, one of the strategic tools they have at their disposal is the use of negative campaigning. Leveling criticism at political opponents (using the definition of negative campaigning by Geer, 2006)<sup>4</sup> can be a strategic tool to gain the support of voters who are still undecided, as well as to diminish the support for one's political opponents. For example, parties can question the competence, honesty, or ways of handling problems and issues in the past, present or future of their opponents (Nai & Maier, 2020). But this strategy is not without risk. While there are possible electoral pay-offs (i.e. vote gains), political parties might face a backlash. Inadvertently, a negative campaigning strategy may reduce the support for ones' own party (Lau & Rovner, 2009) or might demobilize key electorates (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994). In a multiparty context, the potential backlash effects are even stronger: Attacks leveled at political opponents may not only reduce support for one's own party or demobilize voters, but can also hinder post-election bargaining processes (Walter et al., 2014).

Negative campaigning, then, becomes a matter of risk-based decision making. Under certain circumstances, leveling criticism at political opponents might pay off while other circumstances might not yield any benefit. The current literature on negative campaigning offers great insight into these mechanisms, showing what kind of parties or candidates are inclined to go negative and under what electoral circumstances (Haselmayer, 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020). However, what is surprising is that most studies often focus their analysis of campaign appeals on just one communication channel: Studies have mainly looked at election broadcasts (Geer, 2006; Lau & Rovner, 2009;

Walter et al., 2014). These broadcasts offer a great benefit in terms of comparability over time and between countries and parties. Yet, they are barely representative of our current high-choice media environment. This is problematic, because political actors' campaign strategies and messages differ across communication channels in terms of their content and framing (Ballard et al., 2016; Ernst et al., 2019; Van Aelst et al., 2017). The focus on too few media channels may lead to incomplete conclusions, because it fails to account for the strategic choices parties make when disseminating their campaign messages across various channels (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010).

To understand how political actors weigh their negative campaigning strategies in a high-choice media environment, we consider two interrelated media characteristics: the *format* of the communication channel and its *audience*. In terms of the format, communication channel formats come with varying degrees of constraint. These constraints have been described as the level of control political actors exert over their messages (Paletz, 2002) – also called opportunity structures (Ernst et al., 2019). According to Paletz (2002) campaign messages can either be subjected to high, moderate or no journalistic intervention. Besides navigating different levels of journalistic intervention, we also take into account that political actors' media appearances are motivated by reaching certain audiences. More specifically, we adopt Baum (2013)'s framework of political communication strategies in relation to media types. Political actors either try to “convert the flock”, which entails that they try to attract new voters, or “preach to the choir”, which entails that they try to mobilize core supporters (Baum, 2013).

Communication channels without journalistic intervention – i.e. where political actors have full control over the way their messages reaches the audience; which is the case for social media

<sup>4</sup>In contrast, positive campaigning involves statements or claims why a political actor or party should deserve your vote (Geer, 2006).

platforms such as Facebook – have the advantage that political actors enjoy the freedom to promote themselves without contradiction or critical notes from journalists (Ernst et al., 2019). At the same time, these channels, such as social media platforms, blogs, or websites, only appeal to more narrow audiences (Ballard et al., 2016; Baum, 2013; Hillygus & Shields, 2008). Hence, these communication channels are more suitable for a "preaching to the choir" strategy. Positive claims about what political actors have done in the past or will do in the future will be most efficacious to mobilize or enthruse core supporters (Ballard et al., 2016). Moreover, because of the lack of journalistic intervention, political actors do not have to prove the veracity of their claims to journalists.

When the level of journalistic intervention goes up, a self-promoting strategy becomes more difficult. Parties are constrained by journalistic formats and methods of news selection that favor negativity and conflict as news values (Kleinnijenhuis, 2020; Ridout & Walter, 2015). This is reflected in the format of political talk shows. These have moderate levels of journalistic control (Ernst et al., 2019; Paletz, 2002). Political talk shows allow parties to voice their stances, yet the interruptive, adversarial, and combative format (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2016) ensures that parties adapt their message to that format. In traditional news media, such as newspapers, that have high levels of journalistic intervention (Paletz, 2002), the focus on negativity and conflict make it more likely that negative appeals make it into the news rather than the less newsworthy positive appeals of political actors (Ridout & Walter, 2015). Besides the format, media channels with higher levels of journalistic intervention also cater to larger audiences. Both from the demand (media) and the supply (political actors) side perspective, this creates favorable pathways to "go negative". More specifically, the opportunity to reach a relatively large cross-section of society without costs offers political parties the ideal outlet to persuade voters beyond their own voter's base and to "convert the flock" (Baum,

2013). Rhetorically, this means they do not only need to point out why their own party is good (e.g. a positive appeal), but also why their competitors are bad (e.g. a negative appeal).

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** *The more journalistic intervention on a communication channel, the more negative appeals made by a political party.*

Taking media environments into account also casts new light on the determinants of negative campaigning strategies that have been discussed extensively in the literature. One of these is parties' standing in the polls (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). Grounded in the prospect-theoretical work of Tversky and Kahnemann (1979; 1974; 1992), prospective losses in the polls are theorized and demonstrated to lower the threshold to go negative (Lau & Rovner, 2009; Nai & Maier, 2020). We expect that this mechanism is particularly pronounced in a multi-party context, because the costs of negative campaigning are higher and the benefits less clear (e.g. because of post-election bargaining; Walter et al., 2014). This was exemplified in the 2006 Dutch Elections where former prime-minister Jan-Peter Balkenende of the incumbent *Christian Democrats* was facing substantial losses in the polls and infamously criticized *Social Democratic* party leader Wouter Bos for "being a flip-flopper and insincere" on national television (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007; Van Holsteyn, 2007). While the benefit for the *Christian Democrats* might have been that they narrowly won over the *Social Democrats*, the relationship in the fourth Balkenende cabinet with Bos has never been restored (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007). Although studies show mixed evidence in support of the poll standing hypothesis (e.g. Lau & Rovner, 2009; Walter et al., 2014), most of these studies are based on election broadcasts. We expect to differ over the type of media channels: It is particularly pronounced on communication platforms with higher levels of control, since these platforms typically reach a large and persuadable audience

and are more responsive to changes in the polls than election broadcasts.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** *The more journalistic intervention on a communication channel, the more negative appeals made by political parties with negative prospects in the polls.*

Ideologically more extreme parties are more likely to use negative campaigning strategies (Nai & Maier, 2020). Several explanations may account for this. First, parties that are ideologically more extreme have less potential to become a part of a coalition which affords them more risk (Walter et al., 2014). In addition, more ideologically extreme parties are more likely to adopt a populist mode of appeal (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Therefore, the criticism of political opponents we find in negative campaigning is to a large extent endogenous to more extreme parties' populist mode of appeal (Kitschelt, 2018). For these reasons, we expect to find more attacks from ideologically extreme parties. More specifically, we argue that the effect of ideological extremity on the amount of negative appeals is particularly pronounced on communication platforms without journalistic intervention. Although we expect that parties are generally more positive on communication channels without journalistic intervention, ideologically more extreme parties have a less obvious repertoire of successes on which they can base their positive claims due to their lack of government experience. Thus, not positive claims but a populist mode of appeal might be their rhetorical weapon of choice, which is further accommodated by the direct link between citizens and political actors offered by sites without journalistic intervention (Ernst et al., 2019).

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** *The fewer journalistic intervention on a communication channel, the more negative appeals made by political parties with more extreme ideological positions.*

A key function of campaigns is to communicate issues to voters (Sides, 2006). Surprisingly, only

very few studies consider how issues moderate political actors' rhetorical strategies (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Seeberg & Nai, 2020). Including issues in the study of negative campaigning is critically important however. First, because voters increasingly identify parties on the basis of political issues instead of ideologies (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011). Second, as a consequence of the former development, we know that parties strategically try to exploit this issue credibility advantage during campaigns (Riker, 1984). We therefore expect that issues also play a role in parties' decision to go negative. In line with Elmelund-Præstekær (2011) we expect that parties will employ more positive rhetoric when talking about owned issues because they can draw on their reputational stock to claim successes (i.e. use positive appeals). Moreover, we expect that the negative effect of issue ownership on the amount of negative appeals becomes stronger as journalistic intervention decreases. This is because the lack of journalistic intervention offers more favorable opportunities to self-promote and mobilize and enthruse core supporters by pointing toward past or future successes (Ballard et al., 2016). In addition, parties are more likely to deviate from their own issue agendas to attract new or undecided voters (Aldrich & Griffin, 2003), which is most effectively done through communication channels with higher journalistic intervention (e.g. talk shows and newspapers) (Baum, 2013).

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** *The fewer journalistic intervention on a communication channel, the fewer negative appeals made by political parties on issues they own.*

### Data, Measurement & Method of Estimation

To investigate how journalistic intervention conditions parties' rhetorical strategy, we study the Dutch 2017 elections. We combine new manually annotated data with negative appeals made on various communication platforms with collected polling data (Polls by Peil.nl, I&O Research, Kan-

tar Public/TNS NIPO, Eenvandaag en Ipsos (Politieke Barometer), 2017), data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al., 2017), the Manifesto Project (Burst et al., 2021), and data from KiesKompas (Krouwel et al., 2016) to test Hypotheses 1 – 4. Our online research compendium<sup>5</sup> demonstrates how these data sources are connected and visualizes the data.

### Manually Annotated Data

To study parties' strategic campaign rhetoric, we focus on the appeals they make in several communication platforms: a) in articles published in newspapers *De Telegraaf* and *de Volkskrant*;<sup>6</sup> b) during talk shows *Pauw en Jinek*, *WNL op Zondag*, *Tijd voor Max* on TV;<sup>7</sup> and c) on their social media channel Facebook.<sup>8</sup> These communication platforms vary in their degrees of journalistic intervention. Newspapers have a high level of journalistic intervention, since the final product is primarily an outcome of decision-making among media actors (Paletz, 2002). Talk shows have a moderate level of journalistic intervention. While the format and questions are largely determined by media actors (Paletz, 2002), the space and time to discuss ideas is typically shared between media and political actors. Lastly, while Facebook has platform guidelines in place, there is no *journalistic* intervention. We focus on the Dutch campaign period, which typically last four weeks (Kleinnijenhuis, 2020; Walter et al., 2014), from the 15th of February 2017 till the day before the elections (i.e. March the 14th of the same year).

To investigate the relationship between parties' rhetoric and issues, we annotate *issue-based* appeals in our analysis (see Appendix A for details of the manual annotation instructions). Issue-based appeals are appeals connected to the policies and plans of a political actors (i.e. how they have handled certain policies or plans in the past, in the present or will handle in the future). Like other appeals (Geer, 2006; Walter et al., 2014), they can take on two forms: they are either *positive* or *negative*. An appeal is negative if a party crit-

icizes their political opponent(s) policies and or plans and an appeal is positive if a party praises itself or makes claims in relation to plans or policies. Hence, we do not include mobilization appeals or appeals that only focus on the personal characteristics or traits (e.g. competence, honesty) of political actors. Moreover, we only include *written and spoken appeals* made by political parties and politicians – not just the party leader, but also other politicians that were on the ballot list.<sup>9</sup> We chose this approach because campaigns in a

<sup>5</sup><https://anonymous.4open.science/r/c2b8960a-17ee-4a76-a4c7-68f8bbc99b4c/> – anonymized for the reviewing process.

<sup>6</sup>We include *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant* as right-leaning tabloid and left-leaning quality newspapers respectively to give a somewhat representative image of Dutch newspaper coverage (Walter & Vlienghart, 2010).

<sup>7</sup>We also include a representative selection of talk shows on TV. Talk show *Pauw & Jinek* was a daily talk show that focused primarily on politics and was broadcasted by left-oriented broadcaster *BNN-VARA*. *WNL Op Zondag* is a weekly talk show that focuses on politics, entrepreneurship and culture and is broadcasted by right-oriented broadcaster *Wij Nederland* (*WNL*). Finally, *Tijd voor Max* is a daily talkshow that focuses on lifestyle and health topics and is broadcasted by broadcaster *MAX* who primarily targets an audience over the age of 65.

<sup>8</sup>Unlike Twitter, which often takes the center in social media campaign research (Stier, Bleier, Lietz, & Strohmaier, 2018), Facebook gives political parties more opportunities and space to make appeals since there is no character limit (Ernst et al., 2019).

<sup>9</sup>For coding the articles published in *De Telegraaf* and *de Volkskrant* (using data stored in AmCAT, Van Atteveldt, Ruigrok, Takens, & Jacobi, 2014), this implies that we only include appeals made by party candidates, not by journalists. To annotate the appeals made in the TV talk shows, this implies that we only include appeals made by party candidates, not by talk show host(s), other guests that are present at the table, or from member of the audience. We also exclude non-verbal cues from our analysis. While we recognize that these cues are an important part of political actors' tele-

party-oriented (versus candidate-oriented) political system like that of the Netherlands are a “team sport” including campaign efforts by multiple candidates on the party list. Thus, following (Walter & Vliegthart, 2010), we included quoted or paraphrased campaign messages from political candidates.

In total, 1490 appeals were made by political parties: 925 of those appeals were sourced from political parties' Facebook pages, 275 from newspaper articles, and 290 from tv-shows.<sup>10</sup> We randomly selected appeals for inter-coder reliability. Krippendorff (2012, p.240) recommends at least 127 documents for determining inter-coder reliability for this case ( $P_c = .50; \alpha \geq .8; sig. \leq .005$ ). We therefore annotated 200 appeals, using the instructions in Appendix A. The initial inter-coder agreement of this coding was Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.92$  for the issue theme, and Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.87$  for negative appeals. All disagreements were discussed between the authors and resolved where possible.

Figure 1 shows the distributions in percentages of the total number of appeals a party makes for the several communication channels. The left-hand panel of Figure 1 shows the percentages of negative appeals, and the right hand channel shows the positive appeals. What stands out is that for all media types, parties make more positive appeals than negative appeals, especially the Animal Rights Party (PvdD) on Facebook. Second, we see that in newspapers (top of Figure 1) the fewest negative appeals are made, and on social media (bottom of Figure 1) the most negative appeals are made. In newspapers, former government parties (VVD and PvdA) are making most of the negative appeals. For TV shows (middle of Figure 1), we see that most of the negative appeals are made in the daily evening talk show *Pauw en Jinek*, especially by the Liberal Conservative (VVD), Socialist Party (SP), Greens (GL), and Democrats '66 (D66). In 10 percent of the time they are on TV, they make negative appeals. To compare, in about 20 percent of the time they are on TV, they make positive appeals. On social media, the So-

cialist Party (SP), the Greens (GL), and Forum for Democracy (FvD) are most negative: in about 20 percent of their appeals they choose to level criticism at their political opponents.

## Measurement of Variables under Study

In our study, we measure the variables under study in various ways to increase the robustness of our tests – in the *Methods* subsection on page 11, we detail our approach.

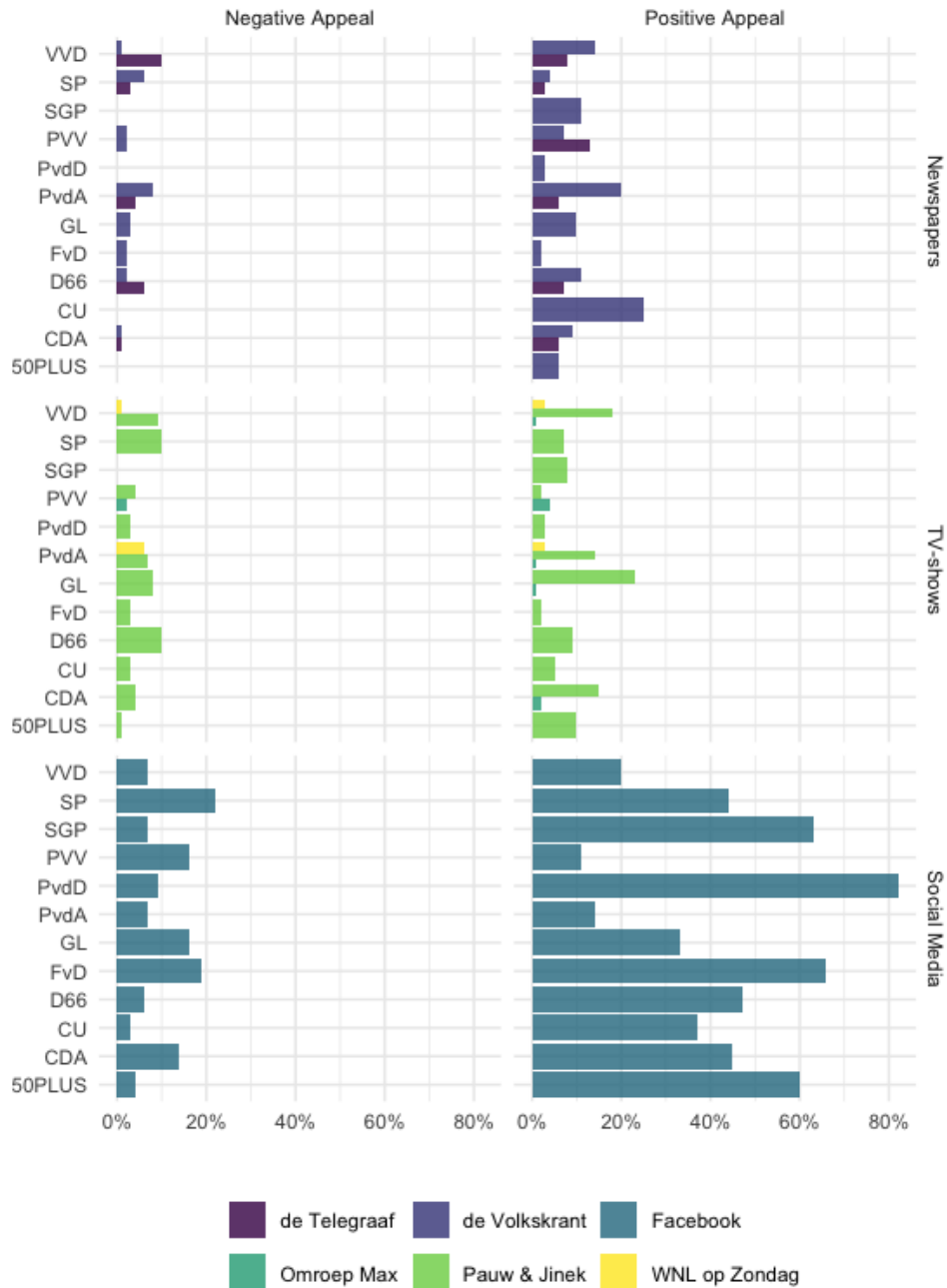
**Dependent Variable: Negative Appeals.** The dependent variable under study is the amount of negative appeals a party makes on a day. This results in a variable ranging from 1 to 30 negative appeals a day. On average 4.77 appeals made per day, with a standard variation of 5.55 (see Table 1), indicating that in most days 0 to 15 appeals are made by political parties.

**Independent Variable: Journalistic Intervention.** To investigate whether parties employ different rhetorical strategies dependent on the level of journalistic control (H1 – H4), we use Paletz (2002)'s three-way classification of journalistic intervention. If appeals appeared on political parties'

vision performance (Druckman, 2003), they require a different empirical strategy than the one we use in this study. To annotate the appeals made on parties' Facebook page, we include appeals that appeared in the text message, that appeared as text in a photo, that appeared as text or as a spoken appeal in a Facebook video, or that were part of a link description or link title. We excluded live videos as well as comments, reactions and shares from our analysis. While we acknowledge that these can be meaningful components of online campaign messages (e.g. Asker & Dinas, 2017), they are beyond the scope of our study.

<sup>10</sup>For modelling purposes (see Section Method of Estimation, page 11, for details), we aggregate our data to the daily level, leaving us with 336 observations (i.e. 28 days for the 12 parties in this study). All our materials are available in our online research compendium (see <https://anonymous.4open.science/r/c2b8960a-17ee-4a76-a4c7-68f8bbc99b4c/> – anonymized for the reviewing process).

Figure 1. Overview of Positive and Negative Appeals made by Dutch Political Parties



Facebook pages, we assigned the value 0 to indicate that there was no journalistic intervention. If appeals appeared on TV shows, we assigned the value 0.5 to indicate that there was moderate journalistic intervention. Finally, if appeals appeared in newspaper articles, we assigned the value 1 to indicate that there was high journalistic interven-

tion. Because our unit of analysis is `party_day`, we have to aggregate the journalistic intervention to a daily level. Subsequently, we created three measures of journalistic intervention (see Table 1). Our first measure takes the mean value of journalistic intervention per day, with a range between 0-1 ( $M = 0.15$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.30$ ). Our second



measure takes the sum of journalistic intervention per day, with a range between 0-20 ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $St.Dev = 3.12$ ). Our last measure takes the deviation from the mean value of journalistic intervention per day by subtracting this mean value from the sum of journalistic intervention. This results in a variable with a 0 to 19.2 range ( $M = 1.10$ ,  $St.Dev = 2.91$ ).

***Independent Variable: Standing in the Polls.***

To test whether parties' electoral fortunes moderate the relation between parties' rhetorical strategies and the level of journalistic intervention (H2), we use polling data from the five most well-known Dutch polling companies (Polls by Peil.nl, I&O Research, Kantar Public/TNS NIPO, Eenvandaag en Ipsos (Politieke Barometer), 2017). There are several ways in which one could measure parties' electoral fortunes, and therefore we operationalize how well parties do in the polls in nine different ways (see Table 1). Our first measure divides the polled seats by parties' current parliamentary seats during the election ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $St.Dev = 1.27$ ). In our second measure we repeat this step but lag the polled amount of seats by one day ( $M = 1.58$ ,  $St.Dev = 1.28$ ). Our third measure divides the weekly average of parties' polled seats by parties' current parliamentary seats ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $St.Dev = 1.31$ ), and in our fourth measure we substitute the rolling mean for the weekly average ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $St.Dev = 1.23$ ). Our fifth measure divides parties' polled seats by the lagged polled seats ( $M = 0.96$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.36$ ), and in our sixth and seventh measure we substitute the weekly average ( $M = 0.94$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.37$ ) and rolling meaning for the lagged polled seats respectively ( $M = 0.94$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.32$ ). Lastly, our eighth measure divides parties' lagged polled seats by the weekly average of parties' polled seats ( $M = 0.95$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.38$ ), and in our ninth measure we substitute the rolling mean for this weekly average ( $M = 0.94$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.29$ ). As lines 6 to 14 of Table 1 show, the measures with the current seats as a denominator that on average, parties increase their number of seats (i.e. scores > 1),

while the measures using polls as a denominator demonstrate that there are no big changes in the electoral landscape.

***Independent Variable: Ideological Extremity.***

To investigate how ideological extremity interacts with the relation between parties' rhetorical strategies and the level of journalistic intervention (H3), we rely upon both *The Chapel Hill Expert Survey* (CHES) (Polk et al., 2017) and the *Manifesto Project Database* (Burst et al., 2021). We calculate ideological extremity by calculating the parties' absolute deviation from the ideological center. The higher the deviation, the more extreme a party's ideology is. How to measure ideology is a debate deeply rooted in political science (e.g., see Benoit, Laver, Lowe, & Mikhaylov, 2012; Ecker, Jenny, Müller, & Praprotnik, 2021; Mikhaylov, Laver, & Benoit, 2012; Mölder, 2016). Both expert surveys, such as CHES, as well as the Manifesto's Project's core-sentence approach have up- and downsides. We therefore include measures coming from both. Moreover, how to calculate the ideological center is not straightforward. We therefore include both the mean and the median of the ideological spectrum. Lastly, the work of Somer-Topcu (2009) suggest that parties also consider their ideological position of last elections when deciding on what to say. Hence, we included measures of ideological extremity based on the previous rounds: the 2014 EU elections for the CHES data, and the 2012 national elections for the Manifesto Project data. These considerations result in eight measures of ideological extremity (see rows 15–22 in Table 1). First, we calculate ideological extremity based on the CHES 2017 left-right general 10-point scale measure<sup>11</sup> using the mean value as the ideological center ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $St.Dev = 1.45$ ), and for our second measure we use the median value as the ideological center ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $St.Dev = 1.38$ ). Our third and fourth measure are similar to the first two, but based on the CHES 2014 data with means of respectively 1.87 ( $St.Dev = 1.49$ ) and

<sup>11</sup>This variable measures the position of the party in terms of its overall ideological stance.

Table 1

*Descriptive Information of Variables under Study*

Variable	Mean	St.Dev.	Min.	Max.
1 Negative Appeals	4.77	5.55	1.00	30.00
2 Negative Appeals (First lag)	4.58	5.44	1.00	30.00
3 Journalistic Intervention (Daily Average)	0.15	0.30	0.00	1.00
4 Journalistic Intervention (Daily Sum)	1.25	3.12	0.00	20.00
5 Journalistic Intervention (Deviation from Daily Average)	1.10	2.91	0.00	19.20
6 Polls/Seats	1.59	1.27	0.00	8.50
7 Polls (First Lag)/Seats	1.58	1.28	0.00	8.50
8 Polls (Weekly Average)/Seats	1.57	1.31	0.00	8.50
9 Polls (Rolling Mean)/Seats	1.59	1.23	0.00	4.89
10 Polls/ Polls (First Lag)	0.96	0.36	0.00	4.00
11 Polls/ Polls (Weekly Average)	0.94	0.37	0.00	2.29
12 Polls/ Polls (Rolling Mean)	0.94	0.32	0.00	2.26
13 Polls (First Lag)/ Polls (Weekly Average)	0.95	0.38	0.00	2.75
14 Polls (First Lag)/ Polls (Rolling Mean)	0.94	0.29	0.00	1.92
15 Ideological Extremity: Mean (CHES 2017)	2.19	1.45	0.00	4.30
16 Ideological Extremity: Median (CHES 2017)	2.20	1.38	0.04	4.24
17 Ideological Extremity: Mean (CHES 2014)	1.87	1.49	0.00	4.44
18 Ideological Extremity: Median (CHES 2014)	1.88	1.47	0.00	4.29
19 Ideological Extremity: Mean (MP 2017)	15.33	8.18	2.97	28.27
20 Ideological Extremity: Median (MP 2017)	15.33	9.29	0.00	31.24
21 Ideological Extremity: Mean (MP 2012)	12.27	6.90	0.00	24.76
22 Ideological Extremity: Median (MP 2012)	11.88	8.74	0.00	27.38
23 Associative Issue Ownership	0.05	0.07	0.00	0.31
24 Competence Issue Ownership (Mean)	0.10	0.27	-1.10	1.06
25 Competence Issue Ownership (Median)	0.13	0.49	-2.00	1.00
26 Competence Issue Ownership (Standard Deviation)	0.62	0.57	0.00	1.65

1.88 ( $St.Dev = 1.47$ ). Our fifth till eighth measures are based on the Manifesto Project. We use the *rile-index* (Volkens, Bara, Budge, McDonald, & Klingemann, 2013), ranging from -100 to +100, to acquire the right-left positions of Dutch political parties in our sample. For the fifth and sixth measure, we subtract the parties position from the ideological center based on respectively the mean ( $M = 15.33$ ,  $St.Dev = 8.18$ ), and the median of the 2017 data ( $M = 15.33$ ,  $St.Dev = 9.29$ ). For the seventh and eighth measure of ideological extremity, we use the 2012 data with means of respectively 12.27 ( $St.Dev = 6.90$ ) and 11.88 ( $St.Dev = 8.74$ ). For both the CHES and Mani-

festo Project data holds that the the means indicate that on average, there was more polarization – i.e. higher mean values of absolute deviation from the center – in the 2017 electoral landscape compared to 2014 and 2012.

**Independent Variable: Issue Ownership.** To examine the conditioning role of issue ownership on the effect journalistic intervention on parties' rhetorical strategies (H4), we use survey data from polling company Kieskompas (Election Compass) (Krouwel et al., 2016). We measure two forms of issue ownership that are commonly found in the literature: associative issue ownership and competence issue ownership (Walgrave, Lefevere, &

Tresch, 2012). We create one measure of associative issue ownership and three measures of competence issue ownership (see rows 23–26 in Table 1). First, we measured associative issue ownership with the question: “Which issue comes to your mind when you think about <party>?” For our measure of associative issue ownership, we take the summation over respondents to calculate the percentage of respondents who associate an issue with a party ( $M = 0.05$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.07$ ). Second, we measured competence issue ownership with the question: “Do you agree or disagree with <party> on the issue you associated with the party?”. We take summation over the respondents to calculate percentages of competence issue ownership. Negative figures imply that more people disagree with the position of the party than people have agreed with the position of the party. Subsequently, we create three different measures based on the summation over respondents: we take the mean as our first measure ( $M = 0.10$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.27$ ), the median as our second ( $M = 0.13$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.49$ ), and the standard deviation as our third ( $M = 0.62$ ,  $St.Dev = 0.57$ ).

### Method of Estimation

We estimate four models, one with the direct effect of journalistic intervention (H1), and three with interaction effects between journalistic intervention and standing in the polls (H2), ideological extremity (H3), and issue ownership (H4). To estimate our models, we need to deal with variation between party observations (13 in total) as well as over time (28 days in total). In our online compendium, we show the structure of our data and conduct stationary tests.<sup>12</sup> Estimating a simple regression on the pooled data could therefore lead to erroneous conclusions (Beck & Katz, 1995). We have to account for heteroskedastic error terms, since it is very likely that the error terms have different variances between panels and are also correlated across different panels. Furthermore, it is likely that the observations of # Negative Appeals (our dependent variable) are correlated across time within panels.

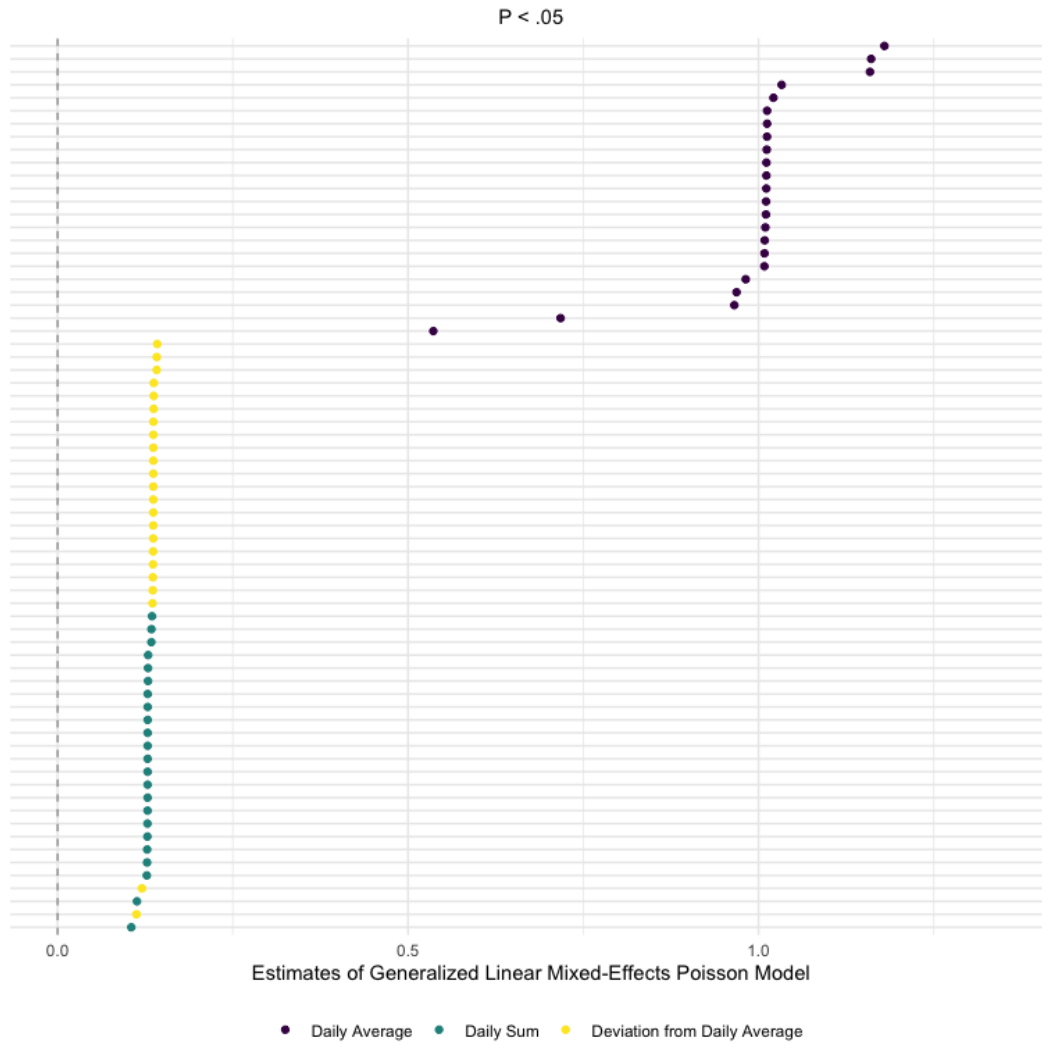
Consequently, we estimate a Poisson generalized linear mixed model with a lagged dependent variable and fixed effects for parties, meaning that we look at within party effect.

Table 1 demonstrates that we could construct several options to measure our theoretical constructs. Choosing which ones or which combinations to include in the main analyses and robustness checks typically comes with *researchers' degrees of freedom* (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). Therefore, our data does not consist of a single data set necessary to test our hypotheses, but *to multiple alternatively processed data sets, depending on the specific combination of choices—a many worlds or multiverse of data sets* (Simonsohn et al., 2020, p.702). Each combination of independent variables can lead to different outcomes of the statistical model. Hence, rather than modeling some separate “single data sets”, we choose to model the multiverse of data sets (Simonsohn et al., 2020), also referred to as the specification curve (Steenen et al., 2016). We use the R package *specr* (Masur & Scharkow, 2020) to estimate the effect of each different combination of independent variables to explain when parties make negative appeals. Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 demonstrate the regression estimates and the 95% confidence intervals for the concept tested in each hypothesis.

### Does Journalistic Intervention Influences Political Parties' Decision to Go Negative?

How has parties' campaign rhetoric changed when acting in a high-choice media environment? Do the seminal explanations of “going negative” (e.g. see Haselmayer, 2019; Nai & Walter, 2015; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010) still apply? Or, do the parties play when the journalists are away? To answer these questions, we first look at the direct effect of journalistic intervention: Do parties make

<sup>12</sup><https://anonymous.4open.science/r/c2b8960a-17ee-4a76-a4c7-68f8bbc99b4c/> – anonymized for the reviewing process.

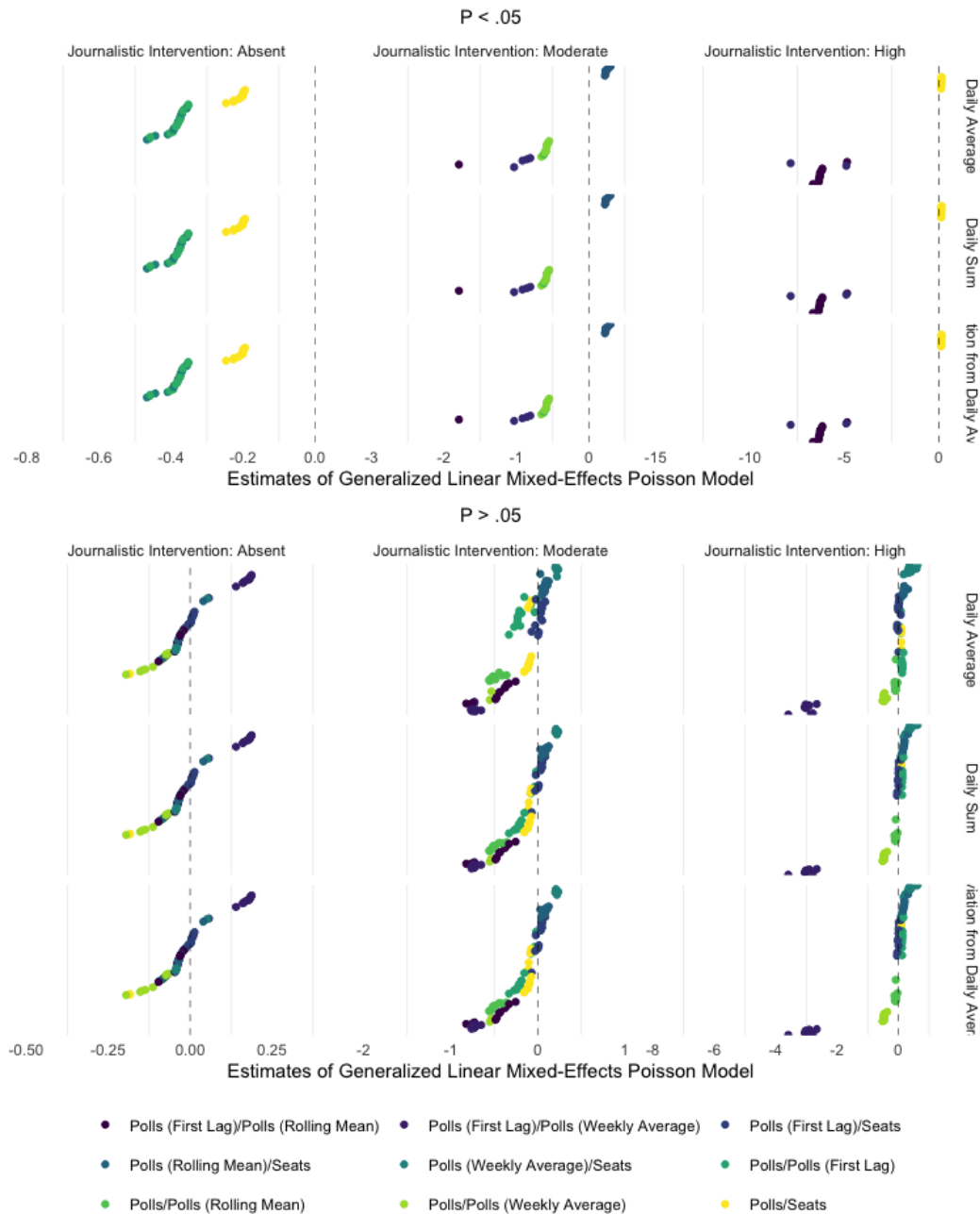
*Figure 2. Effect of Journalistic Intervention on # Negative Appeals (H1)*

*Note:* Controlled for Standing in Polls, Ideological Extremity and Issue Ownership (H2)

more negative appeals when levels of journalistic intervention increase? Figure 2 demonstrates for 69 different model specifications the coefficient for journalistic intervention. For all of these models, the coefficients are positive and statistically significant. This indicates that we find quite robust effects for journalistic interventions: The higher the levels of journalistic interventions, the more likely parties are to make negative appeals. This is in line with our expectation (H1). Figure 2 also demonstrates that it matters how one measures journalistic intervention. Taking the daily average of ap-

peals (in purple) or the daily sum (in green) matters in terms of effect sizes. Looking at the daily averages, the effect sizes range from 0.35 to 1.20 – indicating that the effect size varies from one time the standard deviation to four times the standard deviation. Hence, quite a substantive effect. Looking at the other two measures, the daily sum and the deviation from the daily average, we see that the effect sizes ranges are about 0.20. The measures have respective means of 1.25 and 1.10, with standard deviations of 3.12 and 2.91, indicating that the found effect size is minimal.

Figure 3. Effect of Standing in the Polls on # Negative Appeals



*Note:* Controlled for Ideological Extremity and Issue Ownership

Second, we hypothesized that more journalistic intervention on a communication channel leads to more negative appeals made by political parties facing negative prospects in the polls (H2). Figure 3 shows the specification curve for the effect of

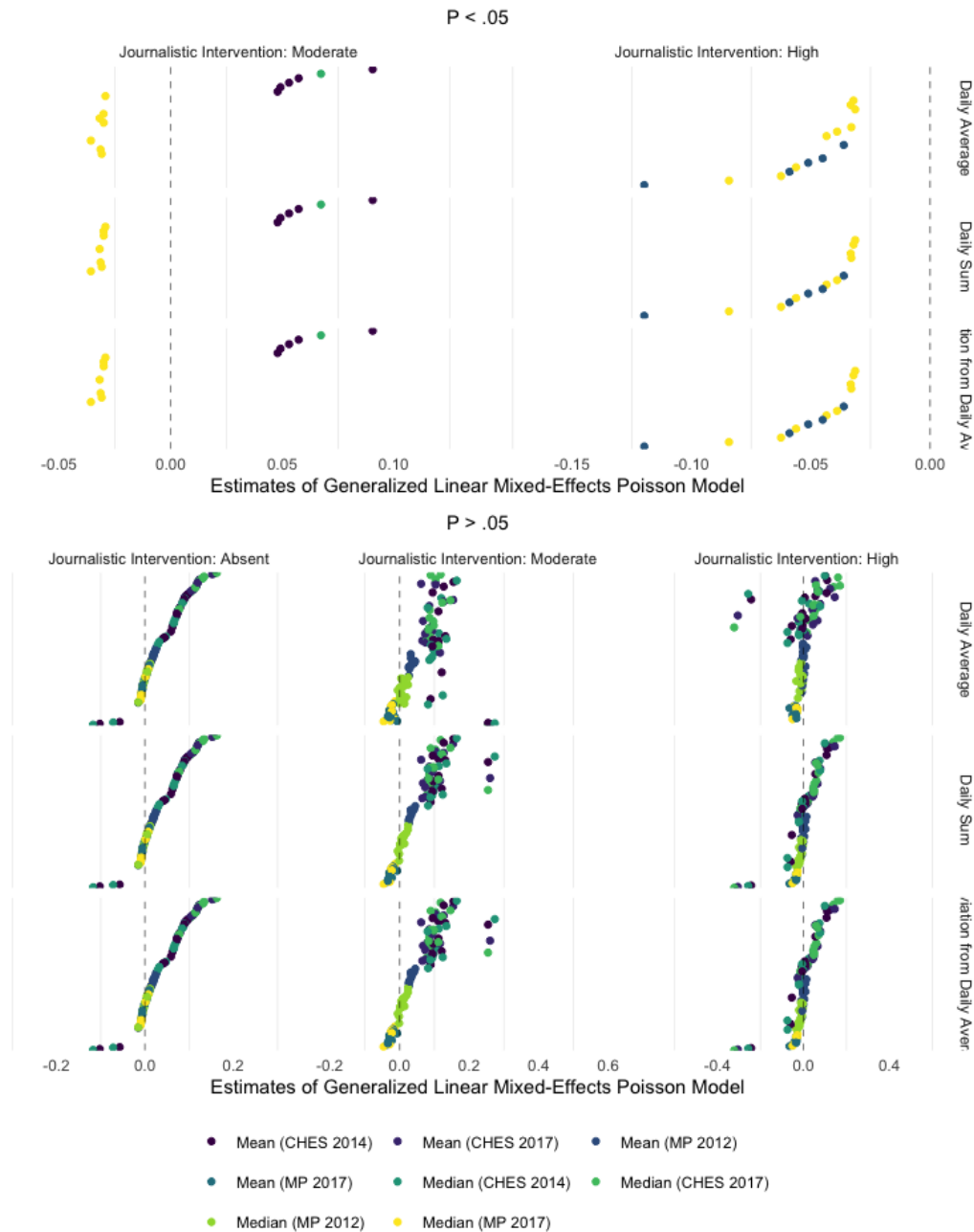
parties' standing in the polls on the amount of negative appeals across levels of journalistic intervention (columns of the panels) and measures of journalistic intervention (rows of the panels). For each measure of journalistic intervention (Daily Aver-

age, Daily Sum, and Deviation for Daily Average), we run 504 models. The upper-panel of Figure 3 demonstrates in the specifications in which the  $p$ -value is smaller than 0.05 – i.e. statistically significant, the lower panel shows the statistically insignificant values ( $p$ -value > 0.05). Twenty-four percent of the specifications (273 models) yield statistically significant results. Zooming into the upper-panel of Figure 3, we show that a) how you measure electoral prospects based on polling data measures, and b) that these measures give different statistical significant results based on the type of data – i.e. the level of journalistic intervention – one uses. When journalistic intervention is absent (upper-left), specifications using measures of standing in the polls relative to respectively the current number of seats, the rolling mean of polls, and the first lag (i.e. row 6, 10, and 12 in Table 1) – irregardless of controlling for various measures of issue ownership and ideological extremity – yield statistically significant results. The coefficients are negative, and range between  $-0.2$  and  $-0.54$ . This indicates that facing better electoral prospects leads to less negative appeals on the party's Facebook channel. The respective means of 1.59, 0.94, and 0.96, with standard deviations of 1.27, 0.29 and 0.36, indicating that the found effect size is minimal for the measure relative to the current seats, but relatively sizable for the other two measures. When there is moderate journalistic intervention (upper-middle panel), different measures of standing in the polls elicit statistically significant results. For the measures of polls relative to the weekly average or last weeks polls relative to the rolling mean (i.e. row 11 and 14 in Table 1), we find negative significant coefficients, ranging from  $-0.5$  to  $2$ , which are relative to their respective means and standard deviations sizeable effects. Yet, when standing in the polls is measured as the weekly average of the polls relative to the current number of seats (i.e. row 8 in Table 1) the effects are positive and significant. So, when parties are doing well in the polls, our models predict that parties make both more and less negative appeals on

TV-shows. For high levels of journalistic intervention (upper-right panel), we again see both positive and negative statistically significant effects. Measuring standing in the polls relative to a party's seats (i.e. row 6 in Table 1), we find positive, yet substantively small, statistically significant effects. At the same time, when we measure standing in the polls based on last weeks polls relative to the rolling mean (i.e. row 14 in Table 1), we show sizeable negative statistically significant results. Thus, when parties are doing well in the polls, our models predict that parties make both more and less negative appeals in news articles. These findings illustrate the importance of showing several model specifications, because some specifications would allow us to conclude support for our second hypothesis, while others do not. Given that for 76% of the models, we do not find statistically significant results, and because the evidence that is statistically significant is also not uniformly in the hypothesized direction, we conclude that we do not find support for our second hypothesis (similar to Walter et al., 2014). Yet, Figure 3 demonstrates important findings for the field regarding measuring standing in the polls.

Third, we hypothesized that the fewer journalistic intervention on a communication channel, the more negative appeals are made by political parties with extreme ideological positions (H3). Figure 4 shows the specification curve for the effect of ideological extremity on the amount of negative appeals across levels of journalistic intervention (columns) and measures of journalistic intervention (rows). We ran 480 models per measure of journalistic intervention. The upper-panel of Figure 4 shows the specifications that elicit statistically significant results: Only 81 out of 1440 models (8%). Regardless of the model specification, none of the 480 models show statistically significant results when journalistic intervention is absent. The upper-two panels of Figure 4 shows that for most of the specifications measuring ideological extremity based on the deviation from the median in 2017 in manifesto data yield statistically

Figure 4. Effect of Ideological Extremity on # Negative Appeals (H3)



*Note:* Controlled for Standing in Polls, and Issue Ownership

significant negative results for both moderate and high levels of journalistic intervention, meaning that the more ideological extreme parties are, the fewer negative appeals these parties make on TV-shows and news articles. This finding is the result

of selection: The more ideological extreme parties in the Dutch 2017 elections were often smaller parties that typically receive less media attention by both TV and news papers. At the same time, also for the concept of ideological extremity our

results show that the model specification matters. When we measure ideological extremity based on the mean of last elections (2012) using manifesto data, we show statistically significant positive results for moderate levels of journalistic intervention. Using the mean based on the election manifesto's of 2017, we show statistically significant negative effects for high levels of journalistic intervention. Thus, Figure 4 demonstrates that when predicting the conditions under which parties decide "to go negative" the results hinge upon which communication channel scholars investigate – we demonstrate statistically significant effects for TV-shows and news paper articles – and how one operationalizes ideological extremity. Nevertheless, Figure 4 consistently shows no evidence for our third hypothesis that ideologically more extreme parties make more negative appeals on communication channels with lower levels of journalistic intervention.

Lastly, we hypothesized that the fewer journalistic intervention on a communication channel, the fewer negative appeals are made by political parties on issues they own (H4). Figure 5 shows the specification curve for the effect of issue ownership on the amount of negative appeals across levels of journalistic intervention (columns) and measures of journalistic intervention (rows). We ran 168 models per measure of journalistic intervention. Fifty-five percent of these specifications (279 models) yield statistically significant results. These are visualized in the upper-panel of Figure 5. The upper-left panel shows that regardless of the specification, there is a statistical significant positive effect of issue ownership on the amount of negative appeals parties make on communication channels without journalistic intervention. This indicates that if parties are issue owner – either measured using the competence or associative dimension – they are more likely to make negative appeals on their Facebook page. This is contrary to our expectations. The effect is stronger for the associative dimension than for the competence dimension. For the other two levels of journalistic

intervention (i.e. moderate and high), Figure 5 demonstrate that the different specifications matter. For moderate levels of journalistic intervention, specifications where issue ownership is measured using the median of the competence issue ownership dimension only yield statistically significant positive effects when controlling for some measures of ideological extremity – i.e. when this is measured using the CHES data or the 2012 manifesto's. For specifications measuring issue ownership with the mean of the competence issue ownership dimension, this elicits statistically significant positive effects when controlling for all measures of ideological extremity and some measures of polling data – i.e. using all forms of calculating standing in the polls relative to the current number of seats. For high levels of journalistic intervention in the upper-right panel, we only see statistically significant negative effects. This indicates that if a party is an issue owner, they are less likely to make negative appeals in news papers. We see these effects when we measure issue ownership using the associative dimension and the competence dimension using the mean. For the associative dimension, the effects are also substantively meaningful. Hence, we see again that measurement matters for the substantive outcomes. For our hypothesis (H4), however, we do not find sufficient support. All in all, we find very minimal evidence that the *preaching to the choir or converting the flock* logic applies in the 2017 Dutch campaign. On the one hand, parties do employ a more positive rhetoric when communicating with their core supporters (i.e. Facebook versus talk shows or newspaper coverage) which implies that self-promotion is more common when "preaching to the choir". On the other hand, contrary to our expectation, our results also suggest that political parties do not strategically promote themselves by emphasizing the issues on which they have a credibility advantage (Sides, 2006).



Figure 5. Effect of Issue Ownership on # Negative Appeals (H4)



Note: Controlled for Standing in Polls, and Ideological Extremity

## Discussion

The media landscape has changed over the last decades (Van Aelst et al., 2017): The number of communication channels have increased dras-

tically. This rise has given political parties ample new campaigning options (Kruikemeier, 2014; Kruikemeier, Gattermann, & Vliegenthart, 2018). Yet, when scholars study parties' rhetorical strategies, they typically include only one type of com-

munication channel. At the same time, recent research (e.g. Ballard et al., 2016; Ernst et al., 2019) suggest that political actors bear in mind the level of control they have over their message – i.e. the level of journalistic intervention (Paletz, 2002). This indicates that parties craft their rhetorical strategy based on the outlet. We address the question of *how parties weigh their rhetorical strategies across communication channels* leveraging a unique data set of the Dutch 2017 elections. This enables us to test the existing predictors of making negative appeals across various communication channels. Moreover, using multiverse approach, we employ an exceptional design to give insights into the robustness of measurements of common predictors.

In general, negative campaigning does not seem to be the chief rhetorical strategy for most Dutch parties – which is a similar finding as previous studies of multiparty systems (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Walter et al., 2014). Nevertheless, we show that political actors do pursue different rhetorical strategies in a high-choice media environment. In general, parties make more use of negative rhetoric on communication channels with high levels of journalistic intervention. We bring to the fore that our theoretical explanations of party behavior are dependent on the communication channel they use. Recently, scholars have already shown that parties consider the width of their audience by using press releases to reach the masses (e.g., see Meyer, Haselmayer, & Wagner, 2020; van der Velden, Schumacher, & Vis, 2018) or micro-targeting techniques for specific groups (e.g., see Dobber, Trilling, Helberger, & De Vreese, 2017; Endres & Kelly, 2018). Moreover, Boukes and Boomgaarden (2016) suggested earlier that the competitive format of talk shows invite more combative rhetoric, of which going negative is one manifestation. Our analysis also shows that the “cat’s presence makes the mice play”. That is, we demonstrate that next to the parties’ agency to decide whether or not to go negative towards an adversarial party, the journalistic format inter-

venes. Yet, most scholars studying parties’ strategic rhetoric either look at unmediated sources (e.g. Bernardi & Adams, 2019), or only consider one communication platform (for similar critique, see Walter & Vliegthart, 2010). Our results highlight that to fully understand *when and why* parties choose a particular rhetorical strategy, one should understand the interaction between journalistic and party agency. Thereby, we touch upon the question if it is really parties’ social media engagement that drives these negative rhetoric during campaign times. We find the opposite: The news value *negativity* (Harcup & O’neill, 2017) seems to play a bigger role than parties’ own agency. We argue therefore that we should better understand the journalistic choices of reporting on politics (for an excellent example hereof, see Helfer & Aelst, 2016).

Moreover, our results indicate, especially when looking at the common determinants of ‘going negative’ (for a recent overview, see Nai & Maier, 2020), that there is a real need for multi-platform studies when looking at the determinants of parties’ rhetoric. A common one from the negative campaigning literature (Nai & Maier, 2020) is the electoral prospects parties face: Doing poorly in the polls lowers the threshold to go negative (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Lau & Rovner, 2009; Nai & Maier, 2020). When we look at different levels of journalistic intervention by exploring how this common finding holds for Facebook posts, TV shows and newspaper coverage, we present that there is a negative relationship between standing in the polls and making negative appeals. That is, the better electoral prospects a party faces, the fewer negative appeal one makes. We also show that this effect is stronger the more journalistic control there is over a communication channel. While this is in line with the existing literature and therefore our second hypothesis, we do show that these results are very much dependent on the choice of measurement of standing in the polls as well as on the choice of media channel. For different communication channels, different measures of standing in the polls yield statistically significant results. In

only 24% of our models the results support the second hypothesis. We show the same for the third hypothesis, where we investigate the effect of ideological extremity on going negative on various levels of journalistic intervention. While we do show that on channels with more journalistic intervention, ideologically extreme parties are less likely to make negative appeals (similar to e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Walter et al., 2014), it is only for a very low number of model specifications. Again, as illustrated in Figure 4, we show how important it is to test the determinants of going negative over various measurements and various communication channels. Also, this finding sheds light on how important it is to understand the journalistic process: Often ideologically extreme parties are smaller parties, and hence get less media attention. A third important determinant of going negative is issue ownership (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Kleinnijenhuis, 2020; Nai & Maier, 2020). In contrary to the literature – and against our fourth hypothesis – we show that parties make more negative appeals on issues they own. Particularly, they do so on communication channels where journalistic intervention is absent. Hence, parties are more likely to go negative on issues they own on Facebook. The opposite is true for high intervention channels: In news coverage it is less likely that a party goes negative on an issue they own. With only about half of our models (55%) gave positive results, we cannot state to have found robust evidence for our hypothesis. Again, we do show that measurement and communication channel matter.

In addition to our theoretical contributions, we also make an important methodological contribution to the literature. Conducting multiverse analyses enabled us to get a clear picture of how our data processing choices affected the statistical outcomes of our analyses (Steege et al., 2016). Not only does this increase the robustness of our own findings, but it also has important implications for the field of communication and political science where many such data processing choices exist. Our study offers several compelling examples of

how seemingly arbitrary choices in variable construction can lead to different effect sizes and statistical outcomes. First, we see this evidenced in our measure of journalistic intervention. Although it is robust against different measures, we find that the effect is stronger if we take the daily average instead of the daily sum or deviation from the daily average. Second, most of our measures of standing in the polls show no significant effect, but some measures show a negative significant or positive borderline significant effect. In other words: dependent on the measure we would have used in a single analysis, there could have been a scenario where we would have found a negative effect and a scenario where we would have found a positive effect.

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## Appendix Coding Instructions

### Introduction

The following coding instructions have been adapted from Walter et al. (2014) and Geer (2006) who distinguish between *negative* and *positive* appeals in their study of negative campaigning. The main question that informs our analysis is to what extent negative campaigning strategies differ across communication channels and whether we can observe an effect of a party's standing in the polls, ideological extremity and issue ownership on negative campaigning strategies across these channels. We are primarily interested in measuring negative campaigning, which we define as all forms of criticism levelled against political opponents (Geer, 2006). The opposite would be positive campaigning, which includes all forms of self-praise and claims of political actors (Geer, 2006). To measure negative campaigning, we focus on the 2017 General Elections in the Netherlands and analyze campaign messages that appeared in political parties' Facebook posts, in several talk shows, and in newspaper coverage.

### Instructions

**Unit of Analysis.** The unit of analysis in our study is the *appeal*. Appeals are any mention in which parties either 1) praise themselves or 2) criticize their opponent (Walter et al., 2014). More specifically, we look at *issue appeals*. These appeals refer to plans or policies of a party or specific candidate. Thus, parties either praise themselves in relation to plans or policies or criticize their political opponents for their plans or policies.

The context in which the appeals are read is the communication channel, which in our study is either the talk show, the newspaper or party's Facebook page. Appeals can vary in length, but end when a different aspect of the party or politician is praised or attacked. To find all the

appeals the text should be carefully read and sentences including critique towards opponents or self praise of parties should be dissected.

### Examples of issue appeals from Walter et al. (2014):

- '*Labour, labour, labour that is what matters*'. (three positive issue appeals)
- '*We want healthcare improvement*'. (one positive issue appeal)
- '*The next cabinet will be as unable to change the healthcare waiting list as the former*'. (two negative issue appeals one attacking the upcoming cabinet, one attacking the former)

**Not coded.** Mobilization appeals (i.e. appeals aimed at mobilizing people to get out and vote), parties' self-criticism (i.e. parties leveling criticism at themselves), and *character-based* negative appeals (i.e. attacks aimed at personal traits, competence) were not coded. Furthermore, only appeals were coded and not other text surrounding the appeals. This includes for instance sentences as: '*The campaign has never been that exciting*' and '*The prime minister spoke at the conference*' (Walter et al., 2014).

### Special coding instructions

***appeal.*** Paste all the individual appeals made during the 4-week campaign period ahead of the 2017 Dutch General Elections.

***neg.*** What type of appeal is made? Positive appeals are any mention of self-praise and negative appeals are any reason or criticism to vote against the opposing parties.

0 = Positive

1 = Negative

***issue\_theme.*** To which issue is the appeal related? Coders can choose from a list of 19 common issues (based on 2016 KiesKompas research Krouwel et al., 2016, see our online research compendium for more information), as described in Table A1.



**par.** Which party is making the appeal? Which party is posting the appeal on Facebook? Which party (or political actor on behalf of a party) is making the appeal in the talk show? Which party (or political actor on behalf of a party) is quoted or paraphrased in newspaper content? Note that there can only be one source per appeal.

**cda** Christen Democratisch Appel (Christian Democrats)

**cu** ChristenUnie (Christian Union)

**d66** Demcraten '66 (Democrats '66)

**fvd** Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy)

**gl** GroenLinks (Greens)

**pvdd** Partij voor de Dieren (Animal Rights Party)

**pvda** Partij van de Arbeid (Social Democrats)

**sgp** Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (Orthodox Christians)

**sp** Socialistische Partij (Socialists)

**vvd** Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (Liberal Conservatives)

**50plus** 50Plus Partij (Elderly Party)

**medium.** On which platform did you find the appeal?

**fb** Facebook page of political party

**np** Newspaper

**ts** Talk show

**from.** What is the medium source? (For Facebook posts, these are coded as parties, see 'par')

**pauwjinek** Pauw en Jinek

**wnl** WNL op Zondag

**max** Tijd voor Max

**telegraaf** De Telegraaf

**volkskrant** De Volkskrant

**date.** When was the appeal made? For example: When was the Facebook post with the appeal posted? When did the talk show with the appeal air? Or when was the newspaper article with the appeal published?

Table A1  
*Issue Themes*

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Example</b>
1	environ	Environment and nature	Environmental policies, combating climate change, caring for/restoring nature, animal welfare
2	social	Social security and pensions	Monetary assistance, employment benefits, wages, support for maintenance of children, pensions, sick leave, social protection
3	foreignaid	Foreign aid	Transfers of resources to developing countries, either directly or through multilateral institutions
4	jobs	Labour market	Job creation, job availability, unemployment rates
5	edu	Education	Policies and plans related to lower, middle and higher education, vocational education, semi-vocational education, (research) universities
6	health	Healthcare	Healthcare plans, health insurance, hospitals, national health, premiums, care for the elderly, care homes, healthcare professionals
7	norm	Norms and values	Emphases of local, regional, national, cultural values and norms, interpersonal norms and values (how one is ought to behave)
8	agrar	Agriculture	Agricultural reform, bio industries, animal slaughter, agricultural safety and standards
9	admin	Institutional reform	Proposal of referendums, direct election of mayors and president, new threshold for parties to enter parliament
10	housing	Housing	Availability of (affordable) housing, quality standards, public housing, inheritance tax, mortgage rate deduction
11	econ	Taxes, budget and the economy	Increasing or decreasing taxes, government budget, references to the state of the (national) economy, purchasing power, national debt
12	entrep	Entrepreneurship	Small business owners, trading, trading policies
13	gov	Government efficiency	More transparent, more efficient government
14	defence	Defence	Military spending, military operations, NATO, national security
15	mobility	Mobility	Public transit, high way maintenance, traffic congestion, alternative ways of traveling, air travel
16	crime	Crime reduction	Reduction and prevention of crime, punishments, decriminalisation
17	terror	Terrorism prevention	Prevention of domestic or international terrorism
18	eu	European Union	Policies and plans related to European Union, the EU commission, EU parliament, council of the EU, European council, national sovereignty (vis-à-vis EU), monetary union
19	imm	Immigration	Immigration policies, Dutch citizens with immigrant background, refugee policies, asylums