Patterns of Negative Campaigning during the 2019 European Election: Political Parties' Facebook Posts and Users' Sharing Behaviour across Twelve Countries

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Abstract

Focusing on the 2019 European Parliament campaign, we investigate parties' engagement in negative campaigning on Facebook and the relationship to a parties' ideology and their status as governing versus opposition party at the national level. Manual coding of 8,153 Facebook posts of parties from twelve European countries shows parties create less negative posts than positive and neutral ones. However, these negative posts attract more shares than positive, neutral, and balanced statements, which increases their prominence on the platform. Hence, users and algorithms create a negative campaign environment on Facebook to a greater extent than parties.

Keywords: Negative campaigning, political parties, user engagement, Facebook, European elections, content analysis

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Negative campaigning is not only one of the most used, but also one of the most debated communication strategies in electoral campaigning (Haselmayer, 2019; Richardson, 2001). One reason for this is that studies analysing the impact of negative campaigning report positive as well as negative effects on voters; thereby not providing a clear directive for campaigning parties. For instance, a positive effect is that voters can get information for political choices they would otherwise not get (Kahn & Kenney, 2000; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014) and this can contribute to more informed voters. At the same time, at the societal level, negative messages can reduce trust in politics, potentially leading to disengagement of citizens in democratic processes (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Papp & Patkós, 2019).

The aim of this study is twofold: first, we are interested in how parties use negative campaigning on Facebook and whether this varies according to their role in national government or opposition and their ideological standpoint. Second, we analyse how users respond to negative messages and whether their engagement is dependent on the parties that are posting the content. Hence, we do not assess the broader implications of the sharing of negative messages, whether they are positive in the sense of increasing voter's search for more information or negative in terms of, for example, reducing voter's trust in politics. But knowledge about users' sharing behaviour is of great importance for campaigning parties as user engagement is an important indicator for the evaluation of a party's message. Indeed, the results presented by Ennser-Jedenastik and colleagues (2021) suggest that parties dynamically respond to the social media behaviour of their potential voters by adapting Facebook communication depending on the received user feedback, leveraging the 'expected reception' (Kristensen, 2021) that negativity triggers.

We believe that our endeavour is relevant because research about negative campaigning on social media platforms, such as Facebook, is still limited (Haselmayer, 2019; for exceptions see Auter & Fine, 2016; Ceron & Curini, 2018; Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Heiss et al., 2019). Previous academic undertakings have shown notable differences in the degree, types and effects of negative messages between a broad range of communication channels—election manifestos, political advertisements, campaign posters, press releases, televised election debates, news coverage, websites (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Russmann, 2017; Geer 2006; Holtz-Bacha, 2001; Johnston & Kaid, 2002; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Lau & Pomper 2004; Schweitzer, 2010). As the media landscape evolves, Facebook has become the most important social media platform for political news across Europe (Newman et al., 2020), and political actors meanwhile use it as one of their central communication channels in electoral campaigns (Magin et. al., 2017).

Moreover, with a few exceptions, comparative studies on the role of negative campaigning in multiple countries (Maier & Nai, 2020; Nai, 2020; Papp & Patkós, 2019; Valli & Nai, 2020; Walter et al., 2014) or in European Parliamentary elections (Ceron & Curini, 2018; Raycheva & Simunas, 2017; Schweitzer, 2010) are scarce. Therefore, we still know surprisingly little about the use of negative campaigning by parties in different countries - especially in Europe. Despite the stigma of the secondary character of EP elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), their importance (at least in terms of turnout) continues to grow (Ehin & Talving, 2021). From a scholarly perspective, however, they represent an arena of significant research interest. They have overlapping campaign durations, slight differences in voting systems and identical legal conditions in all EU countries. Hence, they are a unique opportunity for comparative research, the results of which can make an important contribution to the state of knowledge about election campaigns from a broad perspective.

Our study contributes to closing these gaps by presenting an exploratory investigating how parties from 12 countries have used Facebook for negative campaigning in the 2019 European election campaign. We provide novel, empirical descriptive insights on the use of negative campaigning in electoral communication on Facebook and users' reactions across multiple countries. More specifically, we investigate to what extent parties use negative campaigning and how often users share posts with negative compared to non-negative statements. We further explore how these patterns are affected by two party characteristics: (1) party´s role in government or opposition at the national level and (2) their ideological standpoint. Our analysis of 8,153 Facebook posts is the first to investigate negative campaigning on Facebook in such a broad range of countries and in a common political election contest. Thus, the analysis of a heterogeneous set of European countries in a single election contest increases the social significance and generalizability of the results compared to previous studies (Riffe et al., 1998).

Negative campaigning on Facebook as an amplification strategy

"Negative campaigning takes a variety of forms" (Haselmayer, 2019, p. 356). Following previous research (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Geer, 2006) we define it as a campaign strategy used by political actors to attack political opponents by criticizing their behaviour, ideologies, policy positions, set of values, or personal qualities. The aim of this strategy is to change recipients' attitudes in a negative way towards the political opponent. Hence, exaggerations and negative emotions such as fear, envy, blame and anger can be an aspect of negative campaigning (Raycheva & Suminas, 2017). Negative campaigning aims at gaining voters' support by downgrading their attitudes towards the political opponents (Haynes & Rhine, 1998), decreasing the utility that they expect by supporting the opponents, and/or reinforcing and strengthening extant negative associations voters have with the

opponents (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Meffert et al., 2006). However, it cannot be taken for granted that these hopes of the political actors will necessarily be fulfilled.

Previous research suggests that, on balance, negative campaigning seems more likely to appeal to and mobilize a party's most loyal supporters such as Facebook followers rather than its opponents (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Meffert et al., 2006) and to persuade neutral voters if the negative message resonates (e.g. Weeks, 2015). Overall, research has shown that parties resort to negative campaigning to get voters' support (Russmann, 2017; Nai, 2020) while demobilizing and depressing their opponent's voter base (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004). Negative messages are considered important for election campaigning since they are more memorable for voters and stimulate their knowledge about a campaign (Lau et al., 2007) and can gain high media attention (Haselmayer et al., 2019; Maier & Nai, 2020).

Negative messages (also statements in Facebook posts) can be distinguished from positive, balanced, and neutral ones. Positive messages refer to highlighting, supporting and applauding a party's or politician's success, qualifications, accomplishments, and campaign tactics (Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Lau & Pomper, 2004). In digital communication, this "positive campaigning" has been used to "stress the effectiveness of hope-driven and positive content" (Gerbaudo et al., 2019) to elicit user reactions, "with the ultimate aim of maximizing motivation and engagement" (Gerbaudo et al., 2019). In balanced messages, negative as well as positive statements are used in about equal shares. That is, the sender both criticizes or attacks a political opponent but also supports and applauds the own party and its politicians or other political opponents in the same message (Richardson, 2001). Last, neutral messages include neither positive nor negative statements and usually have an informative character.

Facebook provides political actors with strategic affordances for negative campaigning which makes it a worthwhile strategy to use on the platform due to three reasons: first,

political actors' negative messages can bypass the filter of the news media and directly reach users through Facebook posts. Certainly, negative messages can attract media attention (Haselmayer et al., 2019; Maier & Nai, 2020), but journalists often frame negative messages in a particular way, focusing on their strategic role rather than their substance (Pedersen, 2014), and giving them context by supplementing them with opponents' reactions or by interpreting and criticizing them. Hence, Facebook posts reflect how political actors position themselves and how they want to be seen by the public. Second, Facebook users are not only highly receptive to negative messages (Bene, 2017a; Heiss et al., 2019), but also often express negative and critical positions on the platform themselves (Bene, 2017b; Ziegele et al., 2014). Consequently, negative campaigning fits well the overall atmosphere of this communication environment. The third reason is related to the attention-grabbing character of negative messages on Facebook: the main challenge for political actors is to compete for users' attention on the platform alongside the multitude of personal and entertaining content appearing on their newsfeed. Negativity is a viable strategy in this context of information overload as users are more likely to pay attention to negative content (Meffert et al., 2006; Soroka, 2014).

The direct, organic communication of parties is only one part of campaigning on Facebook as user engagement largely affects the way voters perceive the campaign. In fact, the dissemination logic of Facebook is virality (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), where followers can make content visible for their friends by engaging with them (i.e., through liking or sharing). Additionally, the number of interactions with individual posts is one of the most important factors for Facebook's newsfeed algorithm and may cause a popularity bias: Posts earning high engagement and already highly visible posts become even more visible compared to less engaged ones ("Matthew effect"; Bucher, 2012) – and a high number of shares is particularly efficient in this respect. According to Bossetta and colleagues (2018)

shares are discursive acts and constitute a certain degree of political engagement on Facebook, which positively affects the algorithmic driven ranking and "organic" spreading of content across the platform. Shares are an extremely important form of interaction on Facebook because by forwarding a post to a user's network, the message is endorsed by the sharer among his/her friends, consequently offering additional verification of the shared material and ultimately being a more engaging activity than like and comment (Kim & Yang, 2017). Recent studies (Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Heiss et al., 2019) call for a more balanced understanding of the relationship between post characteristics and user engagement. In private settings, studies found a "positivity bias" in users' self-disclosure and in feedback processes (Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017), and news articles on Facebook were more likely to go viral if positive (Berger & Milkman, 2012). However, research on content published by political actors shows users are more likely to engage with negative posts than with neutral or positive content (Bene, 2017a; Ceron & D'Adda, 2016; Heiss et al., 2019). This phenomenon can be explained by psychological and sociological factors. The psychological approach argues that negative content triggers stronger psychophysiological reactions (Shoemaker, 1996) alongside greater attention (Meffert et al., 2006; Soroka, 2014) resulting in higher levels of cognitive involvement (Lau, Sigelman & Rover, 2007) that may lead to action (Heiss et al., 2019). The sociological explanation highlights that engaging with negative content may enable users to express political opinions in a way that does not require positive identification with existing political actors, which is generally avoided in front of a wide and heterogeneous network of Facebook friends (Bene, 2017b). Given these apparent incentives of going negative and assuming that political actors intentionally spread negativity with the expectation of triggering engagement due to their potential, our first hypothesis (H1) is that: *Facebook posts containing negative statements were more often shared than posts with (H1a) balanced, (H1b) positive, and (H1c) neutral statements in the 2019 European election campaign.*

Party characteristics as determining factors of negative campaigning and sharing behaviour

Campaign strategies among parties usually differ (at least to a certain extent) and the decision for negative campaigning is dependent on structural conditions. A well-documented pattern is that negative campaigning is a less popular tactic in multiparty systems such as Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands than in two-party systems like the U.S. (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Holtz-Bacha, 2001; Russmann, 2017). The reason for this is the need to form coalitions in multiparty systems, which becomes more difficult if the former target of an attack has to become a partner in government later. However, being less likely does not mean non-existent. Despite the multiparty structure of the European parliament, negative campaigning has been used in European elections, both in traditional campaigning channels and on social media. Indeed, its use differs between countries and parties (Ceron & Curini, 2018; Raycheva & Simunas, 2017). Previous research has consistently shown that differences in campaigns are often larger between parties than between countries, and party characteristics are particularly important in explaining negative campaigning (Magin et. al., 2017; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Walter et al., 2014). Moreover – as second-order elections – European elections typically focus on national concerns rather than EU issues (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Therefore, our study analyses negative campaigning from a party perspective. More specifically, we focus on two party characteristics – (1) parties' role in national parliaments and (2) their positions on the ideological spectrum – and investigate how these determine (a) different parties' degree of negativity on Facebook and (b) the number of shares of their negative posts. Based on the following theoretical and empirical findings, we expect these two party characteristics to be the main drivers of parties' strategic decision to use negative campaigning:

(1) Role in national parliaments. Previous studies show that challenger parties are more likely to go negative than incumbents (e.g., Auter & Fine, 2016; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Nai, 2020; Russmann, 2017; Stromer-Galley et al., 2018). Geer (2006, p. 110) notes that a challenger is "serving its role as a critic of those in power" by going negative to make the voters aware of the incumbent's weaknesses. Challengers need to convince the voters of the advantages of themselves being in office, and the past actions of incumbents offer much scope for attack. In addition, when going negative leads to a backlash effect, challengers have less to lose than incumbents (Walter et al., 2014). Yet, given negativity on Facebook has the potential to increase user engagement (Bene, 2017a; Ceron & D'Adda, 2016; Heiss et al., 2019), smaller parties can use negativity as an equivalent of having lower prominence in traditional media. However, our current understanding of these dynamics comes from studies of negative campaigning in national contexts. European election campaigns differ significantly from national ones for two reasons: first, in contrast to national parliaments, there is no formal government and opposition in the European Parliament. Instead, governing coalitions tend to form on an issue-by-issue basis. Second, research has consistently shown that European elections are second-order elections in which campaigning parties focus more on national issues and constellations than on European ones (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). This is particularly salient for opposition parties, which are more likely to omit EU issues from their campaigns (Eugster et al., 2020) and try to translate EP elections into a national contest. Therefore, we assume that the government/opposition divide at the national level has more influence on each party's level of negativity in the European election campaign and hypothesize: *H2: Parties in opposition in the national parliament used negative campaigning in their Facebook posts to a greater extent than parties in government at the national level in the 2019 European election campaign.*

User engagement can also depend on the role of the originator of negative posts in the national parliament. Parties in national government often have higher follower bases than opposition parties and can gain attention even from users that do not support them by addressing topics that they are responsible for in their government positions. Additionally, negativity can strongly influence committed party supporters and thus mobilize them to intensify their support (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), resulting as a part of mobilisation strategy. Thus, previous research shows that posts by government members typically gain high levels of user-engagement (Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2020). Nevertheless, parties in national opposition are often more active on social media and have more extensive first-degree networks, which might act as a multiplier for engagement with their posts (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). Moreover, previous research has shown that opposition parties in national elections are far more inclined to use negative strategies in their election campaigns (Walter et al., 2014). Given these discrepancies in the current literature, we formulate the following research question: *RQ1: How did a parties' status as a governing or opposition party in the national parliament determine how often its negative posts were shared in the 2019 European election campaign?*

(2) Ideology. Studies in national contexts show parties with more extreme ideological views take more extreme positions in their campaigns. Nai (2018) found that the ideological distance between parties fosters negative messages, because when parties disagree on key issues they are more likely to criticize each other. In that regard, studies found differences along parties' ideological lines (Lau & Pomper, 2004), with candidates and parties far from the ideological centre (particularly far-right ones: Nai, 2020; Valli & Nai, 2020), more likely to use negative campaigning (Maier & Nai, 2020; Walter, 2014; Walter et al., 2014). A recent study on the 2019 EP election campaign found that ideology was a key aspect in parties' issue strategy (Haßler et. al, 2021), therefore ideology is expected to also drive negativity in

second-order elections. Consequently, we hypothesize: *H3: The further a party is ideologically away from the political centre, the more negative were its Facebook posts in the 2019 European election campaign.*

Furthermore, the frequency with which users share negative posts might vary according to the parties' ideological standpoint. Some studies show that users tend to engage more with posts that align to their ideological worldview (e.g., Garrett, 2009). Moreover, the results of Hiaeshutter-Rice and Weeks' (2021) study of activity on various news portals' fanpages suggest higher activity among users on the left and right of the ideological spectrum in terms of shares. Putting these results into the context of political communication, this could indicate that party supporters may be exceptionally prone to promote negative posts. However, it is still unclear to what extent the sharing of posts is determined by the posts overall ideological position. This leads to our final research question: *RQ2: How did the party's ideology of left, centre and right determine how often its negative posts were shared in the 2019 European election campaign?*

Method

Sample and data collection

To test our hypotheses and answer our research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of parties' Facebook posts during the 2019 European election campaign. Altogether, 8,153 Facebook posts of parties, which reached at least 5% of the votes during the 2019 European election campaign in 12 countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and UK) were coded. We chose these 12 countries because they cover 82% of the European population and their parties represent a majority of the EP´s seats (540 of 751) before the 2019 EP election. Further justification is given by their systematically balanced selection regarding important structural dimensions (e.g., political and media systems, influence on the European level, geographic

regions, citizens´ attitudes towards the EU). Taken together, our country selection was driven by our effort to give robust insight into the European election campaign as a whole.

All posts of the selected parties were centrally saved at a daily interval in the month leading up to the elections (28 April to 26 May 2019, UK: 25 April to 23 May, Ireland: 26 April to 24 May) using the API-based software "Facepager" (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). The posts were coded separately in each country. Conducting a cross-national content analysis faces several methodological challenges, which we approached with the following steps (see for a comprehensive discussion Rössler, 2008; Rössler, 2012; Lauf & Peter, 2001): First, to reduce a coder bias due to language skills, 29 coders (1 to 5 in each country) were trained on a joint coding scheme in English. Second, to address different coding capacities in the countries, random samples were drawn ensuring a proportional distribution of days and parties in Denmark, France, Poland, Sweden, and the UK (Table 1). Third, to test for reliability, a random sample of 50 English posts from European parties and groups was drawn to allow a comparison of coding where no country-specific background knowledge was necessary. The Holsti's CR values of all categories used in the current analysis show a common understanding (all Holsti ≥ 0.7; all Brennan & Prediger's $\kappa \geq 0.65$; all Gwet's AC ≥ 0.94; for the detailed results see Table A1). Although the Holsti coefficient is considered too liberal in single country studies (Rössler, 2012), the complexity of our cross-national content analyses, the use of binary variables, and the careful selection, preparation and training of coders justify our decision to perform reliability testing for intercoder agreement based on the Holsti coefficient[1].

[Table 1 about here]

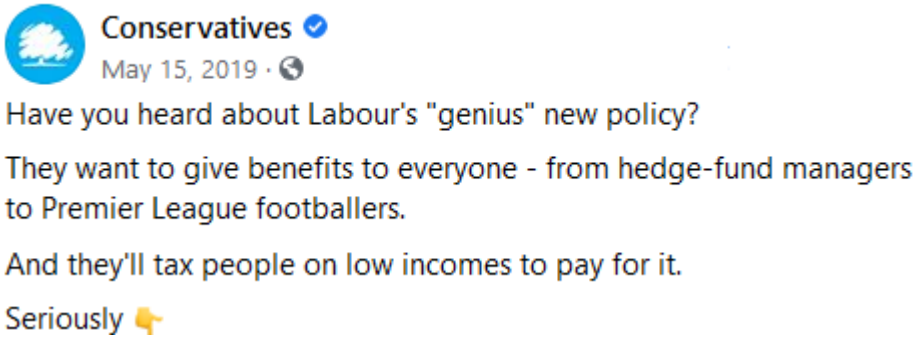
[1] Because the central categories of the analysis were measured as binary variables some of which rarely occurred in the posts, kappa-based coefficients like Krippendorff's alpha appear to be too conservative and strict. To account for the zero inflation in the data that tends to cause bias when calculating these coefficients, we calculated Holsti values, also excluding codings where all decisions led to '0' with the result that all values still show a common understanding (robustness check: all Holsti CR ≥ 0.7)

Data and analysis

In order to analyse our data gathered from the content analysis, we use a descriptive approach using different non-parametric statistical tests of the following main variables:

Negative campaigning. The overall impression of all post elements (texts, pictures and videos) was manually coded in terms of *(1) positive* and *(2) negative statements* addressed to a specific target - an individual or collective political actor representing a particular political affiliation in the case of negative statements (the potential targets of the attack have been identified as separate variables in the codebook - see Table A1 for details). An example for a positive statement in a post is:

An example for a negative statement in a post is:



Posts were coded for the tone and the target of positive or negative statements (e.g. the host party, specific other parties, parties within the broader European grouping, the EU, etc.). All these variables were coded binary indicating whether a content criteria was present (=1) or absent (=0) (see Table A1 for a full description of the variables). Neutral posts are all posts that neither include positive nor negative statements. For example:

Posts that include both are counted as balanced. For example:

Number of shares. Facebook users can share the content which was published by the analysed parties on their profiles. The number of how often party posts were shared was collected four weeks after the election to account for possible differences in the share numbers at the publishing time of a post and the time of data collection.

Party ideology. We compared parties from 12 European countries. The use of the 'ideology' variable was a deliberate simplification to help verify the impact of the three main ideological orientations on user behaviour (sharing). To analyse negative campaigning by parties depending on ideological positions, we used the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey–

CHES (Bakker et al., 2020), positioning European parties by various factors. We used the 'lrgen' variable, which positions each party in terms of its overall ideological stance from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'extreme left' and 10 'extreme right'. For categorization of "left", "centre" and "right" parties, lowest parties in the lowest quartile of CHES 'lrgen' variable were categorized as "left", parties in the highest quartile were categorized as "right" and parties in the two quartiles in between were categorized as "centre".

Findings

Negative campaigning on Facebook and users' sharing behaviour

To get a first overview about the use of negative campaigning on Facebook, we analysed the proportions between posts containing negative and positive statements as well as those identified as neutral and balanced. The results indicate that across the 12 countries, 17% of all posts were coded as negative, while 26% were positive, 49% neutral, and 8% balanced. Figure 1 provides a more detailed picture by European party groups. It shows significant but very weak associations between party groups and the tone of campaign messages ($\chi(27) = 752.117$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.18$). Negative statements were dominant only in the posts of Non-Inscrits (NI) party members, hence new parties (not present in the European Parliament before the 2019 elections) used the negative strategy to a greater extent. All other parties posted with neutral (ALDE, ECR, ENF, EPP, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL, NEW, S&D) and positive (EFDD) tone more frequently than with negative tone[2].

[Figure 1 about here]

The analysis of all posts and its shares provides significant evidence that, in line with *H1b* and *H1c,* users shared posts with negative statements more often than positive or neutral (Figure 2). However, differences between negative and balanced posts were not significant

[2] See the Online Appendix for the acronyms of groups and the list of parties belonging to each category.

(Kruskal-Wallis test, $H(3) = 475.95$, $p < .001$; Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in all other comparisons: $p < .001$), which is why *H1a* is rejected. To control for different engagement levels on different party profiles, z-standardization within individual parties was used. A more detailed analysis of the posts' shares by European party groups reveals significant differences in the sharing behaviour of party posts across the groups in relation to the posts´ tone (Figure 3). Kruskal-Wallis tests show that the posts' tone significantly affects how often a post is shared (in each case $p < .05$; see test statistics for each European party group in Figure 3). Negative posts published by all party groups were shared more often than those with neutral, positive and balanced statements. The only exception are negative posts by EFDD (*Mdn* = -0.2447), ENF (*Mdn* = -0.1412), and EPP (*Mdn* = -0.2271), where balanced posts were shared overall more frequently by Facebook users, although not significantly in all comparisons.

[Figures 2 & 3 about here]

Party characteristic variables

1) Role in national parliaments. In the next step, we compare how party characteristics influence parties' use of negative campaigning, starting with a party's role in the national parliament. The number of posts with negative statements yields evidence supporting our assumption that opposition parties used negative campaigning (N = 1,090) in their Facebook posts to a greater extent than governing parties (N = 269) (*H2*). Table 2 shows the share of negative statements by status of parties on national level (government vs. opposition) in comparison to neutral, balanced and positive statements. The associations are significant but weak ($\chi(3)=230.808$, $p<.001$, $V=0.17$). Parties in opposition at the national level use negative statements in nearly 20% of posts compared to only 10% in the case of governing parties. Relatedly, positive posts were more common in the case of governing (35%) compared to

opposition parties (22%). The use of neutral and balanced posts does not differ according to the parties' role in the national parliaments. Altogether, *H2* is supported by our data.

[Table 2 about here]

Regarding RQ1, the analysis indicates that posts with negative statements are shared significantly more often (*Mdn* = -0.1697) than balanced (*Mdn* = -0.2474), positive (*Mdn* = -0.2758) and neutral posts (*Mdn* = -0.3284) if they were posted by parties in national opposition (Kruskal-Wallis test, $H(3) = 169.36$, $p < .001$; Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in each comparison $p < .05$) (see Figure 4). In contrast, this is not the case for posts from national governing parties Here, users shared balanced posts significantly more frequently (*Mdn* = -0.059) than negative (*Mdn* = -0.1679), positive (*Mdn* = -0.2639) and neutral ones (*Mdn* = -0.2736) (Kruskal-Wallis test, $H(3) = 66.7$, $p < .001$; Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in each comparison $p < .05$ except for the comparison of neutral and positive posts of ruling parties).

[Figure 4 about here**]**

2) Ideology. To test *H3*, we analysed how the parties' positions on the ideological spectrum influence the negativity of their Facebook posts. With the median as a measure of central tendency for both balance of post (mean value of the balance of negativity/positivity of the posts) and the position of the party in terms of its overall ideological stance (Figure 5), the analysis shows noticeable differences between political deviation from the theoretical centre and negativity. Centrist parties, such as national parties affiliated with EPP or ALDE, used mostly positive campaigning in their electoral communication. The majority of political actors associated with the right-wing ECR group primarily used balanced communication in their campaigning. However, far-right parties belonging to EFDD (British Brexit Party and German Alternative für Deutschland) and ENF (French Rassemblement National and Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) clearly show that the further a party is ideologically away from the political centre, the more negative is its campaign, confirming *H3*. Looking at

the left side of the political spectrum reveals comparable results. The main centre-left party group, S&D, with the majority of parties arranged around a single ideological axis, demonstrates a rather balanced style of communication. Negativity of posts published by political actors associated with Green/EFA also did not show any relationship with ideological differences. However, far-left parties affiliated with GUE/NGL (especially German LINKE, Swedish Vänsterpartiet) and new parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum (Polish Wiosna and French La France Insoumise) are more likely to go negative.

To strengthen our argumentation, a Spearman rank correlation coefficient was performed to assess the relationship between a calculated extremity-score and the mean balance of a post, and indicates a significant positive correlation between the two variables (Spearman's $rho = .36$, $p < .01$). Thus, both far-right and far-left parties tend to use more negative campaigning in their Facebook posts.

[Figure 5 about here].

Finally, to answer *RQ2*, we investigate if the parties' ideological position influences how often their posts are shared. Figure 6 reveals differences between the most shared posts by parties with different ideological stances. For negative campaigning, we do not find significant differences in terms of the overall share value for posts with negative statements published by parties of different ideology (Kruskall-Wallis test for negative campaigning: $H(2) = 0.511$, $p > .05$). This result indicates that regardless of the ideological stance of a party, negative campaigning can get more shares and therefore reach a broader audience. However, a comparison of the unstandardized median share values reveals a significant difference for negativity in posts published by the parties of different ideologies (Kruskall-Wallis test for negative campaigning: $H(2) = 79.335$, $p < .001$) and significant divergence in terms of sharing and the parties' ideological stance (Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in each comparison $p < .05$).

Facebook users shared posts containing negative statements of right-wing parties more often (*Mdn* = 175) than negative posts from left (*Mdn* = 105) and centre parties (*Mdn* = 75).

[Figure 6 about here]

Discussion and Conclusion

Our exploratory descriptive analysis of data gathered from a cross-country content analysis breaks new ground in research on negative campaigning by (a) focusing on a broad range of countries in (b) a common political contest, and thereby, allowing for identifying and systematizing structural influences on parties' negative campaign communication on the most important social media platform Facebook. Furthermore, it is the first study that (c) is taking user reactions to parties' negative posts into account. The findings show important common patterns for negative campaigning in European election campaigns and advances prior research in the field of political campaign communication.

Negative campaigning is clearly present, but not dominant on parties' Facebook pages in the 2019 European election; posts with positive and neutral statements were more frequent than negative ones. That said, the share of negative messages during the analyzed campaign is in-line with previous research on negative campaigning on social media. Previous studies on Twitter campaigns in the United States, the Netherlands, and Italy report a share of negative posts around 15-18% (Ceron & Curini, 2018; Evans et al., 2014; Hosch-Dayican, et al., 2016). Moreover, the findings imply that the type of election plays a role in the use of negative, positive, and neutral posts. European elections are second-order elections with lower voter turnout than national elections, indicating a lower interest amongst voters for European elections than for national elections. In advancing the second-order elections literature, we argue that parties seem to try attracting their users' interest on Facebook by spreading positive messages to increase users' engagement and motivation (Gerbaudo et al., 2019). In

comparison, parties in national elections typically use Facebook to go negative (e.g., Auter & Fine, 2016; Joathan, 2019; Steffan & Venema, 2020). The scope beyond national elections in this study and the differences in negative campaigning from national elections show that findings from one type of election are not necessarily transferable to other elections or non-election contexts. Given these dynamics, regional and local elections as well as non-election times should become the object of future studies.

The study shows that Facebook users' exposure to more or less negativity is dependent on the parties they and/or their friends follow. Consistent with the literature (Walter, 2014; Walter et al., 2014), parties located on the ideological extremes are more likely to use a negative strategy (*H3* confirmed). This applies to both far right and far-left parties. Similarly (and perhaps because most ideologically extreme parties fall into this category), and in line with the existing scholarly research, parties in opposition at the national level are more inclined to adopt a negative campaigning strategy (*H2* confirmed). Particularly Non-Inscrits MEPs without a connection to a political group and new parties not present in the European Parliament before the 2019 election were going negative on Facebook. Hence, the main campaign strategy of these small, non-established parties was obviously to grab the media and voter attention by going negative. We do not find governmental parties eschew negativity; rather, their communication represents a mix of negative and positive content, while positive posts are rather infrequent for opposition parties. In sum, these findings confirm that party characteristics are important for explaining negative campaigning (Magin et. al., 2017; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Walter et al., 2014).

Our study provides evidence that "going negative" works in terms of engaging users. Posts with negative statements get significantly higher levels of shares than positive or neutral posts, while there are no differences for balanced posts (*H1* rejected). This result is in line with previous studies (Bene, 2017a; Heiss et al., 2019, Stromer-Galley et al., 2018) as well as

with evidence that supporters find negative messages more compelling (Meffert et al., 2006; Weeks, 2015). This increases the probability that Facebook users with broad networks of politically active users will be exposed to negative content – both due to users' sharing behaviour and the Facebook news feed algorithm, which rewards post interaction with a greater visibility (popularity bias). Thus, our study advances previous literature in the field by showing that users and algorithms are driving negative campaign communication on Facebook to a greater extent than parties, and thereby, contributing to social media's reputation as an uncivil space. At the societal level, this finding indicates that even when parties are not overly negative in their communication strategies, the greater interactions with posts with negative statements mean that the campaign might *feel* more negative in its tone than it actually is. Unintended, but negative effects of this might be boosting citizens' disenchantment with politics and reducing their trust in politics, potentially leading to disengagement of citizens in democratic processes (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Papp & Patkós, 2019).

Particularly, opposition parties benefit from adopting a negative campaigning strategy, because their posts containing negative statements were shared more often than those of national governing parties (*RQ1*). Similarly, right-wing parties benefit from their highly mobilised networks, which leads to their posts (particularly the negative and balanced ones) gaining higher engagement which increases their visibility through sharing thus making their arguments more prominent in the election campaign (*RQ2*).

A limitation of the findings on user engagement is that we only investigated how negative campaigning affects the number of shares. From a strategic perspective, the shares are more important than likes and comments since they increase parties' visibility on Facebook to a particular extent. However, restricting our analysis to shares means that we cannot determine the full spectrum of how users engage with negative messages on social

media. This should be explored by future research. Furthermore, in the context of Facebook data, the possibility of social bots and Facebook advertising influencing the analysed Facebook communication needs to be addressed (however, we cannot make any statement about possible bots or Facebook advertising in our material). Our focus is on the pure quantitative number of shares per post, because these are an indicator of visibility. In other words, we are interested in the visibility; independent of whether it was caused by shares of real users or of bots. Finally, it is important to note that even though our study covers 12 European countries, the generalizability of our findings to other contexts is limited. European elections are different from elections at other political levels, and Facebook is only one social media platform. Future research should use our codebook to investigate the use of Facebook compared to other platforms in the context of national, regional, and local elections. An increasing number of studies using the same measuring instruments would help increase the degree of generalizability of the findings.

A party's decision to go negative is a tactical choice that is influenced by structural and situational conditions in different (electoral) contexts. This study has widened the scope of research on negative campaigning, but as outlined above, more research is necessary. Therefore, research needs to focus to a greater extent on the online context examining negative campaigning on other prominent social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, where parties fully control their communication and directly talk to citizens.

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Tables and figures

Table 1. Overview of the coded posts per country*.

Country	**Number of published posts** (***n***)	**Number of posts coded manually** (***n***)	**Random sample** ***(%)***
Austria	824	818	100
Denmark	581	306	53
France	1074	697	65
Germany	532	531	100
Hungary	948	947	100
Ireland	304	303	100
Italy	4597	2003	44***
Poland	849	142	17
Romania	1060	995	100
Spain	789	779	100
Sweden	751	372	50
UK	570	260	43
Total	**12879**	**8153**	-

* Only original or shared posts created by the parties under investigation in the respective national language or in English were coded. Only national parties were coded in Spain. Percent values of the random sample deviating from round values derive from the fact that some posts could not be coded because they contained foreign language content or did not contain text and were deleted.

** Of national parties.

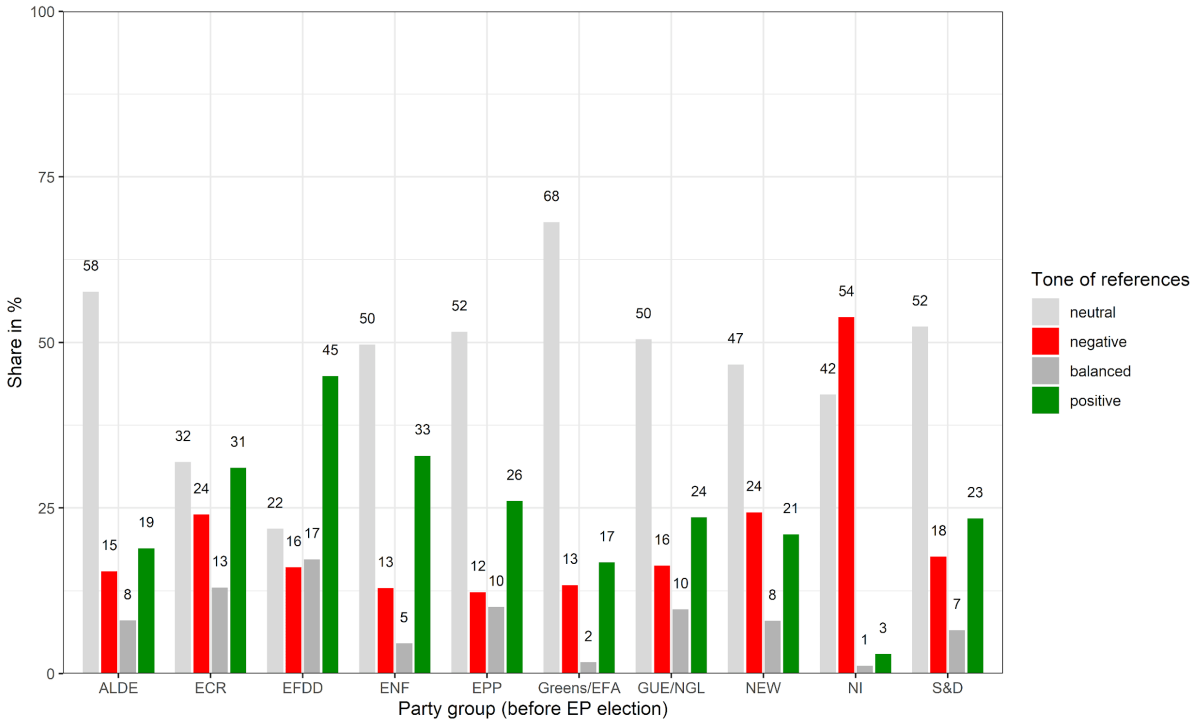
*** In the Italian sample, Lega alone posted 3234 posts. To reduce bias, a sample of 20% of the posts from Lega was drawn (while holding the share of posts per day constant). For all other Italian parties, the full sample was coded.

Table 2. Tone of references to political actors by status of party on national level (in %).

	Opposition parties **(n = 5441)** **in %**	**Governmental parties** **(n = 2712)** **in %**
neutral	50	47
negative	20	10
balanced	9	8
positive	22	35
Total	*101*	*100*

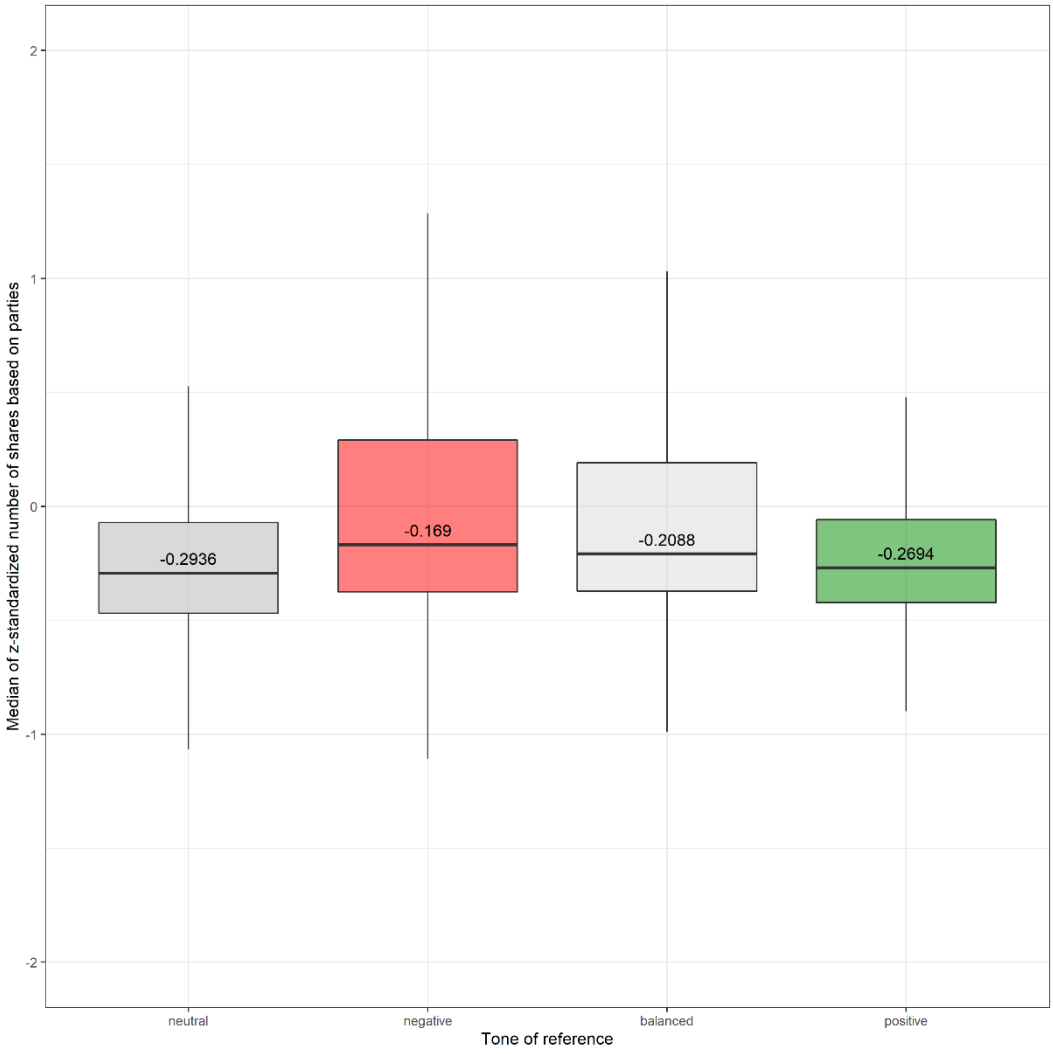
Note: 8,153 coded posts. Deviation from 100 due to rounding. Chi-square = 230.808, df = 3, p = 0.001, V = 0.17

Figure 1. Overall distribution of posts with neutral, negative, balanced, and positive tone of references by European party groups.



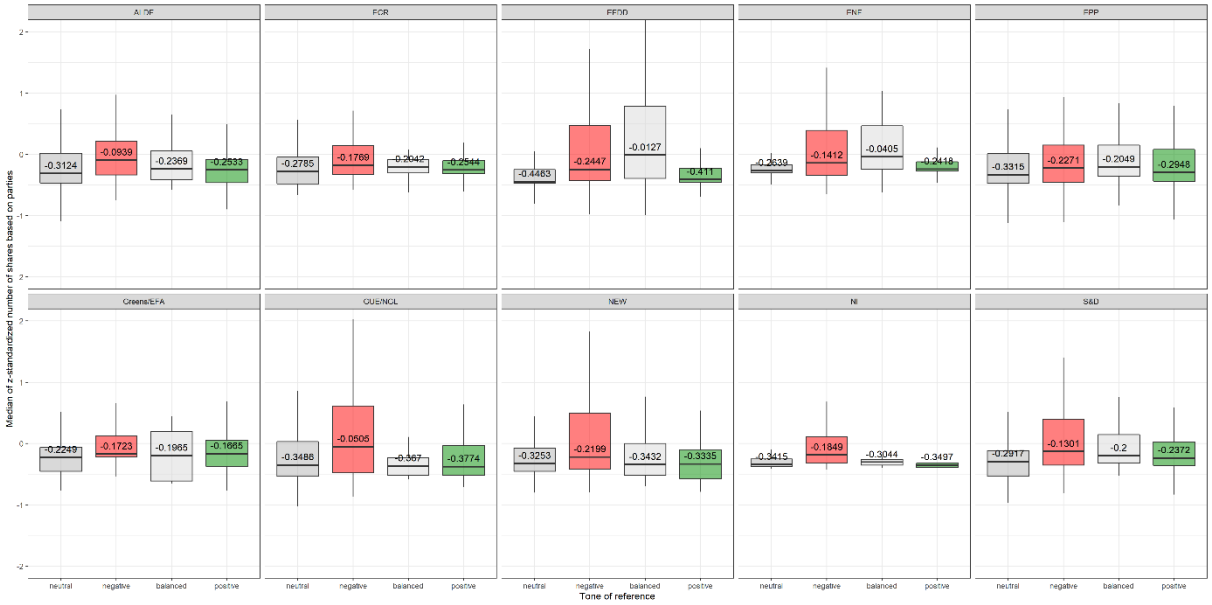
Note: 8153 coded posts. Chi-square = 752.117, df = 27, $p < .001$, V =0.18

Figure 2. Median post shares differentiated between tone of references to other political actors.



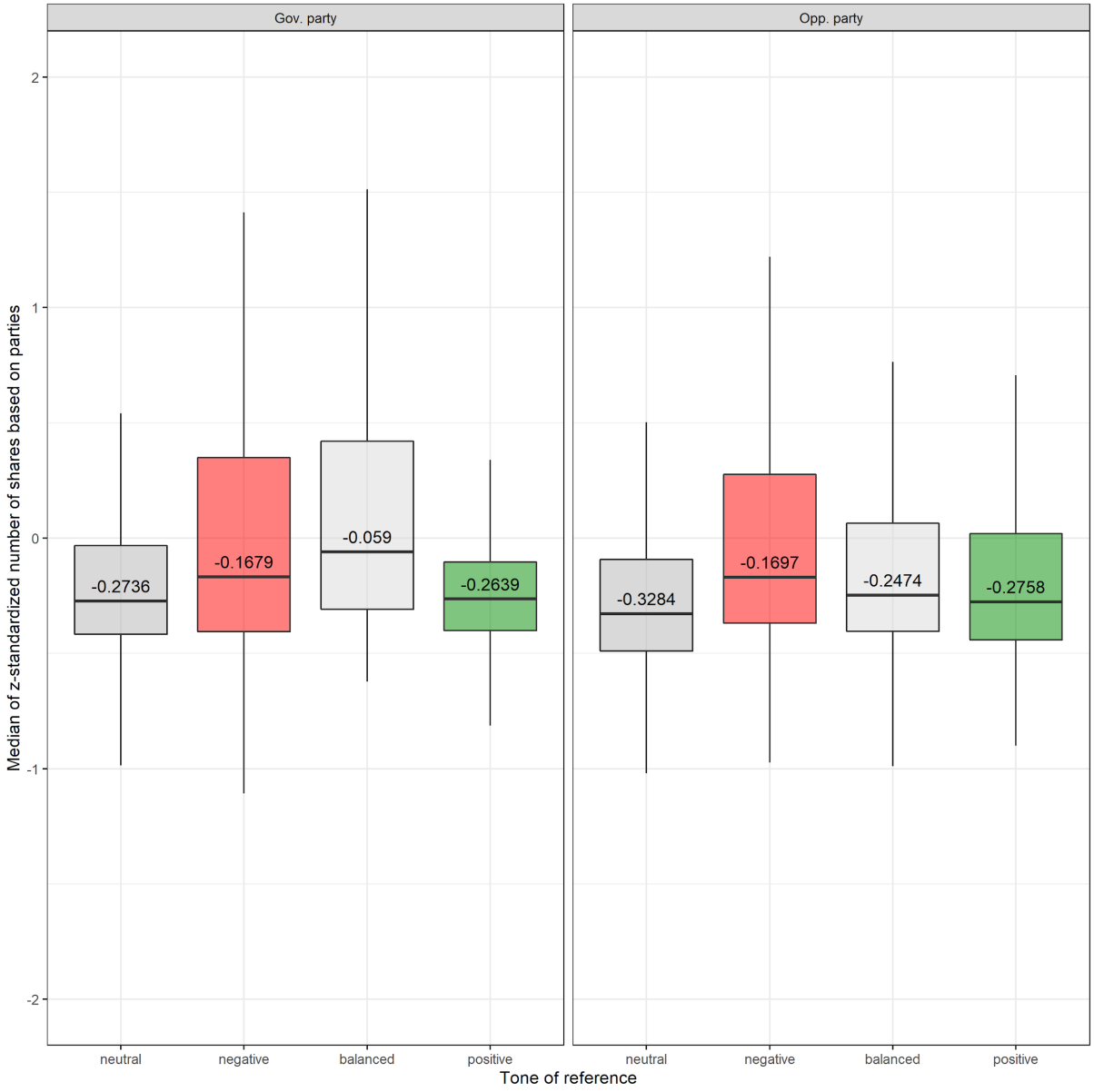
Note: N(neutral)=3822, N(negative)=1481, N(balanced)=764, N(positive)=2086; Kruskal-Wallis test: chi-squared = 475.95, df = 3, p-value < .001. Pairwise comparison using Wilcoxon rank sum test: balanced-negative: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .001. Due to the highly skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is the reason that the median is negative for each category.

Figure 3. Median post shares differentiated between tone of references to other political actors by European party groups.



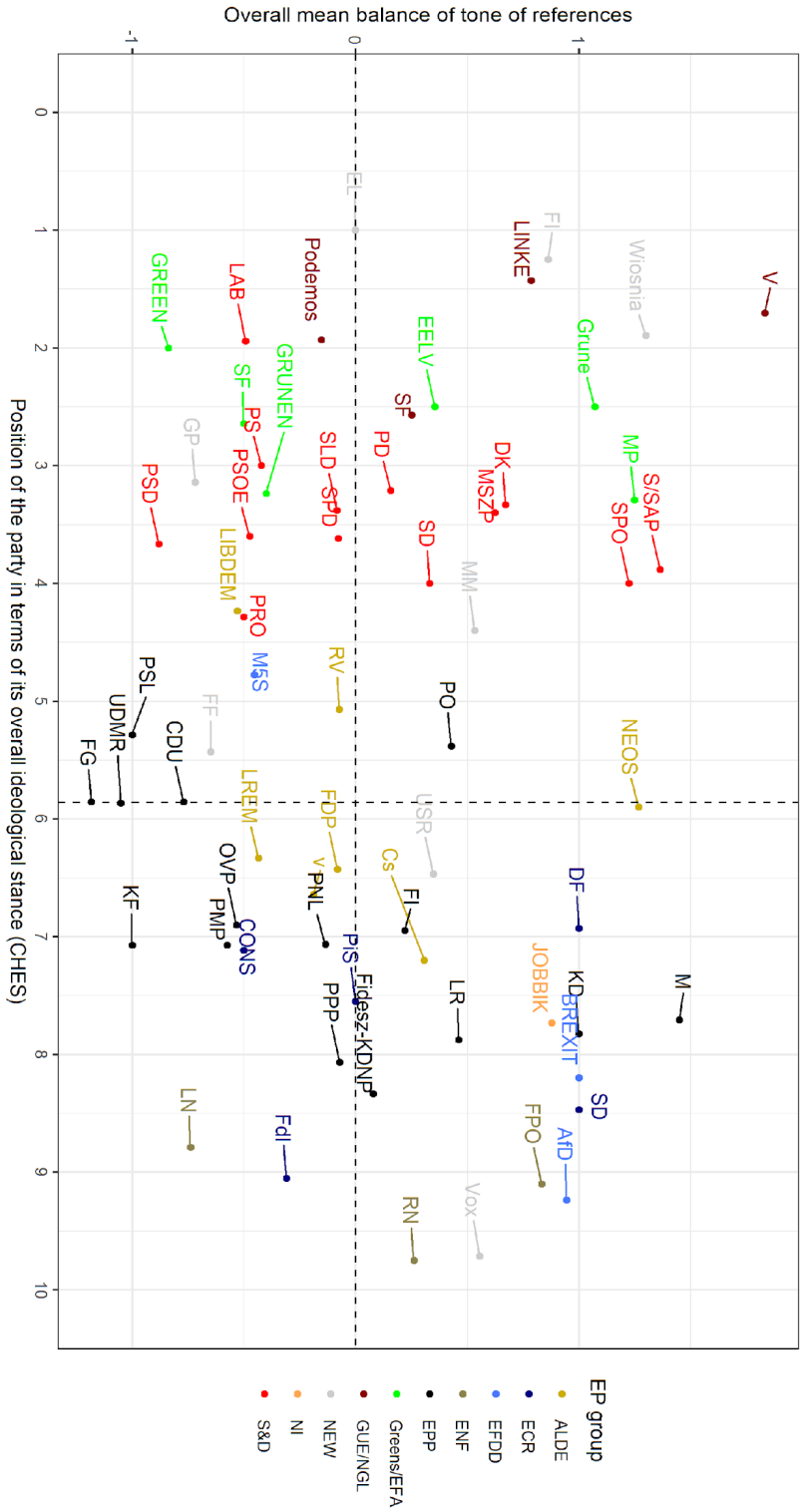
Note: Results of Kruskal-Wallis tests and pairwise comparisons using Wilcoxon rank sum tests: **ALDE**: chi-squared = 23.595, df = 3, p-value < .001. Neutral-negative, negative-positive: p < .001; balanced-negative, balanced-positive: p < .05, all other comparisons: p > .05. **ECR**: chi-squared = 8.628, df = 3, p < .05. all comparisons: p > .05. **EFDD**: chi-squared = 79.217, df = 3, p < .001. Neutral-positive: p < .01, negative-balanced: p >.05, all other comparisons: p < .001. **ENF**: chi-squared = 51.605, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced: p >.05, negative-positive: p <.05; all other comparisons: p < .001. **EPP**: chi-squared = 21.486, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced, negative-positive: p > .05, balanced-positive, neutral-positive, negative-neutral: p <.05; balanced-neutral: p < .001. **Greens/EFA**: chi-squared = 11.514, df = 3, p < .01. Negative-neutral: p < .001, all other comparisons: p > .05. **GUE/NGL**: chi-squared = 10.557, df = 3, p < .05. Neutral-balanced, balanced-positive, neutral-positive: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .05. **NEW**: chi-squared = 15.319, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced: p < .05, neutral-balanced, balanced-positive, neutral-positive: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .001. **NI**: chi-squared = 27.163, df = 3, p < .001. Neutral-negative: p < .001, all other comparisons: p > .05. **S&D**: chi-squared = 102.6, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced, balanced-positive: p > .05, negative-positive: p < .01, all other comparisons: p < .001. Due to the highly skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is the reason that the median is negative for each category.

Figure 4. Median post shares differentiated between tone of campaigning to other political actors by national party role.



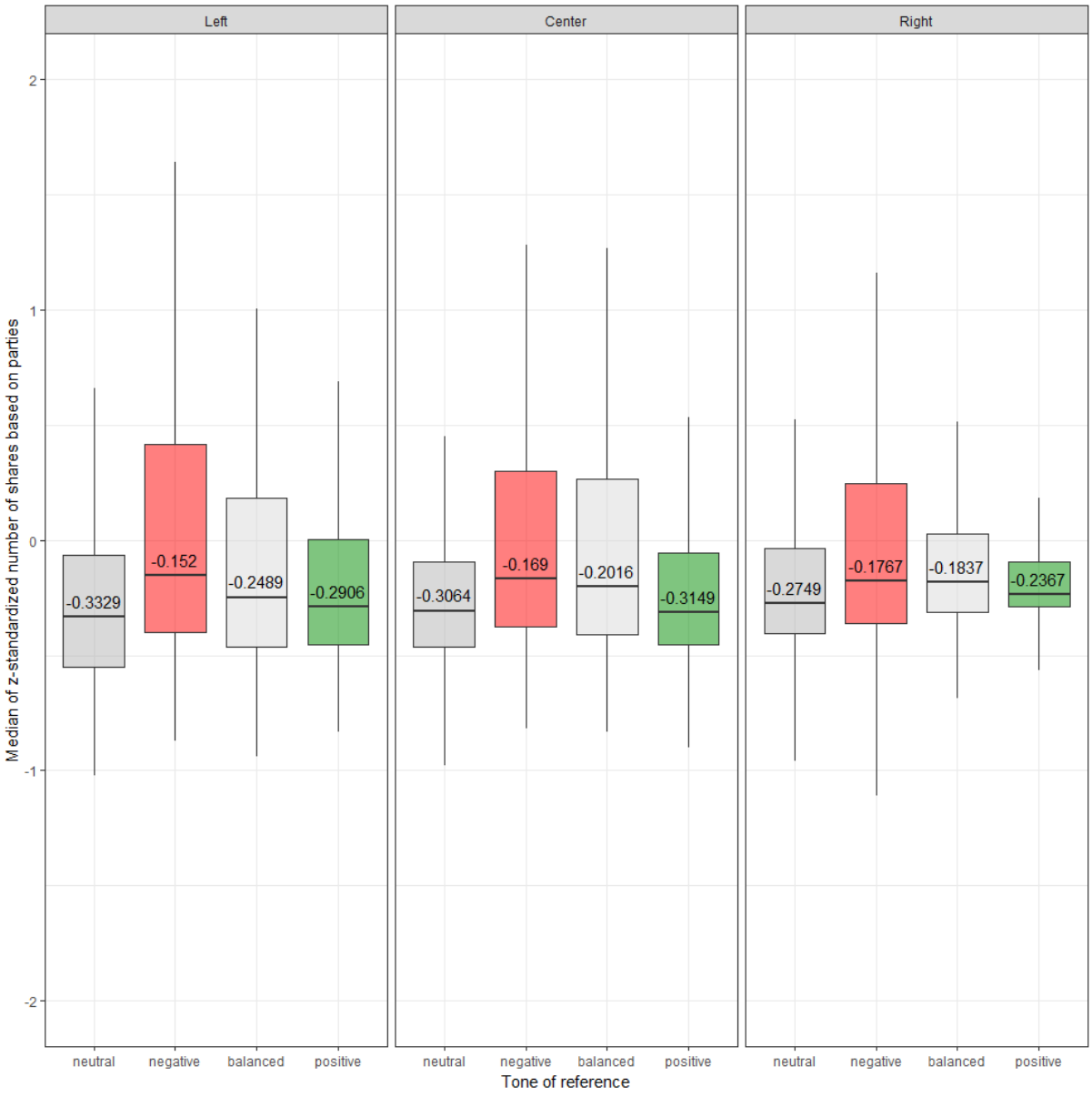
Note: **Opp. party**: Kruskal-Wallis test: chi-squared = 169.36, df = 3, p-value < .001. Pairwise comparison using Wilcoxon rank sum test: balanced-positive: $p < .05$, all other comparisons: $p < .001$. **Gov. party**: Kruskal-Wallis test: chi-squared = 66.7 df = 3, p-value < .001. Pairwise comparison using Wilcoxon rank sum test: negative-balanced: $p < .05$, neutral-positive: $p > .05$, all other comparisons: $p < .001$. Due to the highly skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is the reason that the median is negative for each category of sentiment.

Figure 5. Overall tone in parties' Facebook posts (without neutral posts).



Note: Colours represent party groups before European Parliamentary elections of 2019; dashed lines represent median values for both indicators. Overall balance = mean value of the balance of negative posts - positive posts per party. Pearson correlation between political deviation from the theoretical centre (lrgen 5) and negativity: Spearman's rho = .36, $p < .01$.

Figure 6. The median of shares on the ideological spectrum.



Note: Kruskal-Wallis test for negative campaigning: chi-squared = 0.511, df = 2, p-value > .05. Due to the highly skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is the reason that the median is negative for each category of sentiment.

Table A1. Coding scheme and intercoder reliability of variables used in the analysis

Variable	**Coding Scheme**	**Holsti[b]**	**Brennan & Prediger's κ[b]**	**Gwet's AC**
Target actors[a] of negative statements and emotions	Coded when negative statements or emotions are addressed to a specific target actor. Target actors are either specific persons, such as politicians; or organized groups of people, such as parties. A target actor is coded if he/she/it is addressed explicitly by a negative statement or emotion.	Mean = 0.99 (Min = 0.94, Max = 0.99)	Mean = 0.95 (Min = 0.81, Max = 0.98)	Mean = 0.99 (Min = 0.95, Max = 1)
Target actors[a] of positive statements and emotions	Coded when positive statements or emotions are addressed to a specific target actor. Target actors are either specific persons, such as politicians; or organized groups of people, such as parties; A target actor is coded if he/she/it is addressed explicitly by a positive statement or emotion.	Mean = 0.97 (Min = 0.90, Max = 1.00)	Mean = 0.86 (Min = 0.65, Max = 0.98)	Mean = 0.98 (Min = 0.94, Max = 1)

[a]The precise identification of targets was achieved by listing them as binomial variables in the codebook. [b]To calculate Holsti and B&P's κ we used the R-package 'tidycomm': https://github.com/joon-e/tidycomm, Unkel (2021); [c]To calculate Gwet's AC we used the R-package 'irrCAC': https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/irrCAC/irrCAC.pdf, Gwet (2019).