

“Liars” and “Frauds”: A Longitudinal Study of Negativity on Austrian Election Posters

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Abstract

This article studies negative advertising on election posters in Austria over a time period of 79 years. Election posters are still one of the most important and long-lasting campaign tools in Austria, therefore allowing for the examination of long-term trends in political communication. The article uses data from 1,082 posters from 24 national legislative elections. A multilevel model is used to test whether the level of negativity decreases over time, whether opposition parties and smaller parties resort to negative messages more often, and whether the degree of negativity varies with party system polarization. The results indicate that negativity on election posters has steadily decreased. Parties choose to use the public space to promote their own strengths rather than the opponent’s weaknesses; negative messages may have disappeared or moved to the digital sphere. The article contributes to the literature by explaining the seemingly “recent” phenomenon of negative advertising in a historical context.

Keywords

Austria; election posters; negative campaigning; political advertising

1. Introduction

In every national election, political parties in Austria have spent up to 50 percent of their campaign budgets on election posters (Gärtner & Hayek, 2022). However, they have not used these costly means of communication to promote only their own qualities. “Beat the Fascists—vote Communist.” “Austria shall not become red!” “Less sheepish than the others.”—slogans like these, displayed on Austrian election posters in 1945, 1966, and 2013, respectively, illustrate the enduring appeal of negative advertising: political posters that attack opponents

rather than promoting one's own agenda. However, a puzzle emerges when examining these attacks across time: The fiercest confrontations occurred not in recent elections characterized by populism and polarization, but in the immediate postwar decades. By the 2000s, negative appeals had nearly vanished from Austrian poster campaigns, only to resurface modestly in 2013. This pattern contradicts widespread assumptions about the intensification of negative politics in modern democracies.

The dominant narrative in political communication research holds that campaigns have become increasingly negative as they professionalize and adopt tactics pioneered in the US (Plasser & Plasser, 2003). In American presidential contests, where television advertising dominates and two parties compete directly, negative ads are ubiquitous and appear to be rising over time. However, multi-party systems operate under fundamentally different strategic logics. When voters can choose among five or six parties, attacking Party B risks driving voters to Party C or D rather than to the attacker (Ridout & Walter, 2015). Coalition dynamics further complicate attack strategies, as parties must balance electoral competition with post-election cooperation (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008).

The current study addresses two research questions: How has negative advertising evolved on Austrian election posters from 1945 to 2024? What factors at the poster, campaign, and electoral levels predict when parties deploy negative messages? To answer these questions, I analyze 1,082 election posters from Austrian national legislative elections (*Nationalratswahlen*) between 1945 and 2024. Posters in Austrian election campaigns are not only a means of advertising, but are central to manifesting a party's overall campaign strategy. They are usually revealed at large press events and broadly discussed in the media (see e.g., "Babler präsentiert die erste Plakatwelle," 2024). Even though it may seem anachronistic, surveys regularly show that more than 90 percent of voters have at least seen an election poster in the weeks before an election (Plasser et al., 2000; Roose, 2022).

The findings reveal a clear pattern: Negative advertising on election posters has declined substantially over time. The most aggressive periods were the 1950s and 1960s, when existential ideological conflicts shaped political competition. As coalition governance became routine and the party system fragmented, negativity diminished. Opposition parties campaign more negatively than governing parties, and greater system polarization predicts more attacks, but smaller parties do not attack more than larger ones. These results demonstrate that multi-party systems create distinctive incentive structures that discourage negative advertising on expensive, visible poster platforms, suggesting that attack politics may have disappeared or migrated to cheaper, more targeted digital channels rather than simply intensifying across all media.

2. Negative Advertising on Election Posters

2.1. Defining Negative Advertising

Negative advertising encompasses any form of political communication that attacks, criticizes, or otherwise disparages political opponents during electoral competition (Lau & Rovner, 2009). While some scholars distinguish between "negative" campaigning (legitimate criticism of policy positions) and "dirty" campaigning (personal attacks and misinformation; Reiter & Matthes, 2022), this study adopts a broader definition that includes any attack on political opponents, whether focused on policy positions, political strategy, personal characteristics, or party performance (Haselmayer, 2019). This study focuses specifically on negative

advertising—strategic messages disseminated through paid media that attack political opponents. While negative campaigning encompasses the full range of attack strategies, including debates, speeches, and press releases, negative advertising represents the subset of attacks that parties choose to amplify through purchased communication channels.

First, distinguishing between direct attacks and indirect attacks is often difficult in visual media where targets may be implied rather than named (Geise & Brettschneider, 2010). Second, strategic ambiguity about the target is itself a meaningful communication choice: Parties may deliberately avoid naming opponents to reduce backlash risk while still conveying criticism. Third, even system-level criticism (“politics is broken”) serves attack functions when deployed by outsider parties positioning themselves against established competitors.

The prevalence and effects of negative messages have generated extensive scholarly debate. Experimental and survey research demonstrates that negative messages can depress voter turnout, increase political cynicism, and contribute to partisan polarization (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997). Yet negative appeals also convey substantive information, help voters distinguish between candidates, and may increase knowledge about candidate positions (Maier & Nai, 2023). From a strategic perspective, parties face complex calculations: Negative campaigning can damage opponents and energize core supporters, but risks backlash effects that harm the attacker’s reputation, particularly when attacks are perceived as unfair or excessively personal (Walter et al., 2014). These competing considerations shape when and how parties choose to go negative.

2.2. Strategic Logic in Multi-Party Systems

Multi-party systems introduce distinctive dynamics that complicate negative campaigning strategies in at least three ways. First, party-system fragmentation creates uncertainty about attack effects. When Party A attacks Party B in a two-party system, weakening B directly benefits A. But in systems with five or six parties, voters defecting from Party B may support Party C, D, or E rather than Party A (Ridout & Walter, 2015). This diffusion of potential gains increases the risk that attacks will prove costly for the attacker while benefiting third parties. Rational parties should therefore exercise greater restraint in multi-party contexts, attacking only when they can reasonably expect to capture defecting voters.

Second, coalition formation necessities shape attack incentives. In fragmented party systems, most governments require multi-party coalitions. Parties that attack each other aggressively during campaigns may find themselves negotiating coalition agreements weeks later. Anticipating this possibility, potential coalition partners moderate their attacks to avoid creating obstacles to post-election cooperation (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008). Governing coalitions typically exhibit this restraint during campaigns, while opposition parties face fewer coalition constraints and can afford more aggressive tactics. However, even opposition parties must consider that future coalition possibilities may include current governing parties, creating complex strategic calculations that extend beyond single election cycles.

Third, multi-party systems feature patterns of retaliation and alliance signaling. Dolezal et al. (2016) demonstrate that attacks in Austrian campaigns often represent retaliation for previous attacks rather than autonomous strategic choices. Party A’s attack on Party B may be responding to B’s earlier attack, or even to attacks by Party C on shared policy positions. This creates complex webs of interdependence in which

individual attack decisions cannot be understood in isolation (Song et al., 2019). Moreover, parties use attacks not only to damage specific opponents but also to signal ideological distance or proximity. Attacking the far-right may signal moderation, while attacking centrist parties may signal ideological purity (de Nooy & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013). These signaling functions add layers of strategic complexity absent from simple two-party competition.

2.3. The Case of Election Posters

The medium through which campaigns are conducted shapes the strategic deployment of negative messages. While television advertising allows targeting specific demographic groups through program selection and social media postings additionally permit rapid response to opponents' messages, election posters occupy public space, reach broad audiences indiscriminately, remain visible for weeks, and rely primarily on visual imagery and brief text.

Recent comparative research suggests that negative appeals are less common on election posters than in other campaign media. Steffan and Venema (2019, 2020) find that German election posters contain relatively few negative messages, and that parties increasingly reserve attacks for online platforms where they can target specific audiences and respond rapidly to political developments. Similarly, Holtz-Bacha and Johansson (2017) document that while negative appeals persist on German and Swedish election posters, they remain at modest levels.

Several factors may explain posters' limited negativity. First, posters require substantial financial investment. The findings above indicate that parties may prefer to use this expensive public space to promote their own strengths rather than highlight opponents' weaknesses. Second, posters' public visibility creates reputational risks. While negative messages on social media or in television ads can be targeted and fleeting, poster attacks are witnessed by the entire community, including those who might find them distasteful or excessive. Third, posters' simplicity limits the sophistication of attacks. Without the time for detailed arguments, poster attacks risk appearing shallow or mean-spirited. Finally, the permanence of posters prevents rapid adjustment, as a poster displayed for three weeks cannot respond to changing campaign dynamics as quickly as social media posts or television spots.

2.4. The Austrian Context

Austria exemplifies these multi-party dynamics while offering unique advantages for studying long-term trends in negative advertising. The Austrian party system has evolved substantially since 1945, beginning with social democratic (SPÖ) and conservative (ÖVP) dominance, incorporating the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) as a significant force from the 1980s onward, and subsequently fragmenting to include the Greens (from 1986), the liberal NEOS (from 2013), and various smaller parties. This evolution from effective two-party competition to multi-party fragmentation provides natural variation in party system structure across time.

Austrian campaigns also feature distinctive institutional characteristics that enhance the importance of poster campaigning. Political advertising is prohibited on public television, Austria's dominant broadcast medium (Holtz-Bacha, 2017). This restriction forces parties to rely heavily on alternative communication

channels, particularly election posters. Austria maintains exceptionally high billboard density with up to nine billboards per thousand inhabitants, the highest in Europe (Jobst-Rieder, ca. 2004). Poster advertising accounts for 6.6 percent of Austria's total advertising market, compared to 2.8 percent in neighboring Germany (Schierl, 2017). Since 2013, political parties have to submit their campaign budgets to the *Rechnungshof* (Court of Audit) and have them published, broken down to different sorts of expenses. We therefore know, at least for the last 10 years, that posters consume up to 50 percent of campaign budgets (Hayek, 2016, p. 6; Rechnungshof, 2024), far exceeding expenditure on any other communication channel. In the most recent 2024 elections, for example, party spending for out-of-home media was as follows: FPÖ 30.1 percent, ÖVP 25.4 percent, SPÖ 21.4 percent, Green party 50.4 percent, NEOS 30.3 percent (Rechnungshof, 2024). This sustained centrality of poster campaigning creates unusual consistency across time, enabling reliable longitudinal comparison.

Finally, Austria's democratic-corporatist media system and consensual political culture (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) may discourage aggressive campaign tactics. The dominance of coalition governments, the tradition of social partnership between major interest groups, and relatively restrained media coverage of political conflict all suggest that Austrian campaigns might exhibit less negativity than those in more adversarial political systems. Whether these cultural and institutional factors have prevented Americanization-style increases in negativity, or whether they have merely shifted attacks from posters to less visible media, remains an open empirical question.

3. Determinants of Negative Advertising in Multi-Party Systems

Drawing on the theoretical framework developed above, this section formulates testable hypotheses about the determinants of negative advertising on Austrian election posters.

3.1. Temporal Trends

A dominant expectation in political communication research holds that negative advertising increases over time as campaigns modernize and professionalize (Plasser, 2012). According to this "modernization" perspective, the adoption of professional consultants, sophisticated polling, and media-centric strategies should drive rising negativity. Professional campaign management allegedly recognizes that negative messages attract attention, generate emotional responses, and create memorable contrasts, making attack advertising increasingly prevalent in modern campaigns.

However, multi-party systems may follow different trajectories than the American two-party context from which modernization theories derive. As Austria's party system fragmented from effective two-party competition to multi-party governance with routine coalitions, the strategic incentives for negative campaigning fundamentally changed. Attacking specific opponents became less efficient when voters could defect to multiple alternatives rather than benefiting the attacker. Coalition governance necessities created additional disincentives for aggression between potential partners who might need to cooperate in forming governments (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008; Schmücking, 2015). These structural dynamics suggest that negative campaigning should decline rather than increase as multi-party fragmentation intensifies.

Empirical research on election posters supports this expectation of declining or stable negativity rather than increases. Schmücking (2015) demonstrates in his longitudinal study of German campaigns that negativity does not represent the adoption of an external trend, but has existed since the beginning of political competition without showing consistent increases. Similarly, Vliegthart (2012) finds no evidence of increasing negativity on Dutch election posters between 1946 and 2006. These studies suggest that expensive, highly visible poster campaigns may not follow the same professionalization-driven trajectory toward greater negativity documented in other media channels.

Moreover, Austria's early postwar period featured unique conditions, like intense ideological conflict, the presence of the Communist Party (1945–1959), and existential uncertainty about democratic consolidation, that may have generated particularly aggressive campaigns. As consensual political culture and coalition norms developed, these confrontational dynamics should have moderated. The combination of increasing party system fragmentation and the institutionalization of coalition governance created an environment inhospitable to aggressive poster campaigns.

Based on preliminary evidence from Austrian campaigns (Rußmann, 2015) and the distinctive logic of multi-party systems, this study expects:

H1: Negative advertising on election posters has decreased over time.

3.2. Message Content: Policy vs. Campaign Issues

Negative advertising can target either substantive policy positions or campaign-related matters such as candidate characteristics, strategic behavior, coalition possibilities, or electoral prospects. The choice between policy-focused and campaign-focused negativity reflects different strategic objectives and risk calculations.

Policy-based attacks criticize opponents' ideological positions, programmatic proposals, or governing records. These attacks convey substantive information, help voters distinguish between alternatives, and can be framed as legitimate democratic debate (Maier & Nai, 2022). However, policy attacks require voters to process complex information and may not generate the emotional responses that drive media coverage and voter engagement. Campaign-based attacks, by contrast, focus on personalities, strategic failures, coalition maneuvering, or electoral viability (Pinkleton, 2008). These attacks are simpler to communicate visually, potentially more memorable, and may generate greater media attention.

From the attacker's perspective, campaign-focused negativity also carries lower reputational risks. Criticizing an opponent's coalition strategy or campaign style avoids the perception of undermining democratic discourse about substantive issues. Particularly in Austria's consensual political culture, personal and strategic attacks may be more acceptable than aggressive policy confrontation. This suggests:

H2: Posters addressing campaign issues are more likely to contain negative messages than posters addressing policy issues.

3.3. Candidate Gender

Gender shapes both the deployment and reception of negative advertising in complex ways. Research on gender stereotypes in politics consistently shows that female politicians face different expectations than male politicians. Women candidates are stereotypically associated with social policy domains such as healthcare, education, and social welfare, while men are linked to security and economic domains such as national security, defense, and economic management (Fox & Oxley, 2003; Hayek & Russmann, 2020). These stereotypes extend to campaign behavior: Female politicians who engage in aggressive attacks risk being perceived as violating gender norms, potentially triggering backlash from voters who expect women to be collaborative rather than confrontational (Gordon et al., 2003).

Empirical evidence generally supports the expectation that women campaign less negatively than men. Herrnson and Lucas (2006) find that female candidates in US elections employ fewer negative tactics than male candidates. Voters appear to reward this restraint—women who campaign positively are evaluated more favorably than women who attack aggressively, while men face weaker penalties for negativity (e.g., Tschla et al., 2023).

For Austria specifically, Ennser-Jedenastik et al. (2016) analyze press releases from four national campaigns and find that female top candidates employ negative messages significantly less often than male candidates. Female politicians appear to recognize that aggressive attacks could undermine their electoral appeal, leading them to emphasize positive messages even when serving in opposition roles that might otherwise encourage negativity.

However, this hypothesis faces an important empirical challenge in the Austrian context: Female top candidates have been rare. Across 24 elections from 1945 to 2024, only seven campaigns featured women as party leaders. Despite these limitations, testing gender effects remains theoretically important:

H3: Campaigns with female top candidates employ less negative advertising than campaigns with male top candidates.

3.4. Opposition Status

In parliamentary democracies, opposition parties play a constitutionally defined role in scrutinizing and criticizing government performance. This institutional position shapes campaign incentives in ways that should promote negative messaging by opposition parties relative to governing parties.

Opposition parties benefit from attacking the government for several reasons. First, criticizing government failures is their formal democratic function—voters expect opposition parties to identify problems and propose alternatives. Negative campaigning by opposition parties, therefore, appears legitimate rather than gratuitously aggressive. Second, governing parties must defend their records, leaving them less freedom to attack opponents without appearing to dodge accountability questions. Opposition parties face no such constraint and can focus entirely on government shortcomings. Third, opposition parties typically receive less media coverage than governing parties (Haselmayer et al., 2017).

Empirical research consistently supports these expectations. Hansen and Pedersen (2008) find that Danish opposition parties campaign more negatively than government parties. Walter et al. (2014) demonstrate that opposition status significantly predicts negative campaigning across multiple European democracies. For Austria specifically, Dolezal et al. (2016) show that opposition parties issue more attack-focused press releases than governing parties, particularly targeting the government's policy record and competence.

Therefore, I hypothesize:

H4: Opposition parties employ more negative advertising than governing parties.

3.5. Party Size

Party size may influence negative campaigning strategies through multiple mechanisms (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). Smaller parties face distinctive challenges in gaining media attention, establishing credibility, and differentiating themselves from larger competitors. Negative advertising offers one potential solution to these challenges.

An alternative expectation holds that small parties should focus on name recognition and positive messaging rather than attacks. However, the attention-seeking logic suggests that smaller parties use attacks to generate media coverage and public awareness. In crowded media environments, small parties struggle to break through with policy proposals or positive messaging. Attacking major parties, however, creates newsworthy conflict that media outlets are likely to cover, giving smaller parties visibility they could not otherwise achieve (Walter & van der Brug, 2013).

The differentiation logic emphasizes that smaller parties must distinguish themselves from larger competitors to justify their existence. One strategy is to position themselves as principled critics of mainstream parties, attacking established players as corrupt, complacent, or ideologically compromised. This oppositional identity can attract voters who are dissatisfied with major parties while establishing the small party's distinctive voice. Negative campaigning serves this positioning function more efficiently than detailed policy proposals that might overlap with larger parties' platforms. Therefore, I hypothesize:

H5: Smaller parties employ more negative advertising than larger parties.

3.6. Party System Polarization

The ideological distance between parties should fundamentally shape the prevalence of negative campaigning. When parties occupy similar ideological positions, they compete primarily on competence, leadership qualities, and minor policy distinctions. Negative campaigning in such contexts risks appearing petty or fabricated, as parties struggle to identify genuine points of conflict. By contrast, when substantial ideological distance separates parties, attacks can target fundamental value differences and major policy disagreements, making negativity appear more legitimate and substantive.

The polarization–negativity relationship operates through multiple channels. First, ideologically distant parties have more to disagree about. Their policy positions genuinely conflict across multiple domains,

providing ample material for attacks. Second, polarization signals to voters that the stakes of electoral competition are high, justifying aggressive campaign tactics. Third, polarized parties typically have distinct electoral coalitions with different values and priorities, reducing the risk that attacks will alienate potential supporters. Fourth, polarization may reflect broader social divisions that parties both exploit and reinforce through negative messaging.

While parties might alternatively attack ideologically proximate rivals competing for the same voters, substantial empirical evidence suggests that ideological distance between parties is the primary driver of negativity. Dowling and Krupnikov (2016) show that negative campaigning increases when parties are more polarized. Walter et al. (2014) demonstrate that ideological distance between competitors predicts attack behavior across European democracies. Maier and Nai (2022) find that party system polarization correlates with campaign negativity globally. For Austria, the early postwar period featured sharp left–right divisions between social democrats and conservatives, while later decades saw ideological convergence toward the center, a pattern that should produce declining negativity over time if polarization drives attacks.

However, the causal relationship between polarization and negativity remains contested. Does ideological distance cause parties to attack each other, or does sustained negative campaigning create the perception of greater polarization? Longitudinal data cannot definitively resolve this question, but the weight of theory suggests that polarization primarily drives negativity rather than vice versa. Parties' ideological positions reflect long-term programmatic commitments shaped by core constituencies and historical traditions, making them relatively stable inputs to campaign strategy rather than outputs of campaign tactics.

This study operationalizes polarization using the party system polarization index from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Dalton, 2008; Lehmann et al., 2025). The hypothesis is:

H6: Elections with a higher party system polarization feature more negative advertising.

4. Data and Methods

This study includes all posters displayed nationwide by parties that successfully entered parliament in the respective election periods between 1945 and 2024. The dataset includes all posters produced by the national parties; however, we do not know anything about their actual placement patterns or geographical distribution. The nine parties included in the analysis are the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (Social Democratic Party of Austria [formerly Sozialistische Partei Österreichs], SPÖ—successfully competed in every election since 1945); the Österreichische Volkspartei (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP—successfully competed in every election since 1945); the Kommunistische Partei Österreichs (Communist party of Austria, KPÖ—successfully competed in the elections of 1945–1953); the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria [formerly Verband der Unabhängigen/VdU], FPÖ—successfully competed in every election since 1949); Die Grünen (Austrian Green Party—successfully competed in the elections of 1986–2013 and 2019–2024); Liberales Forum (Liberal Forum, LIF—successfully competed in the elections of 1994–1995); the Bündnis Zukunft Österreichs (Alliance for the Future of Austria, BZÖ—successfully competed in the elections of 2006–2008); Team Stronach (successfully competed in the election of 2013); and NEOS – Das Neue Österreich, (NEOS – The New Austria—successfully competed in the elections of 2013–2024).

For the 24 national legislative elections between 1945 and 2024, 1,082 different posters were recorded (Table 1 provides their distribution across parties and elections). The highest number of different posters was employed by the SPÖ in 1949 (39) and NEOS in 2017 (42). Those years were also the election years with the highest number of posters overall. According to the media law (Bundeskanzleramt der Republik Österreich, 2023, §43), everything printed in Austria needs to be submitted to the Austrian National Library's poster archive (Austrian National Library, 2026), which is where most of the posters were retrieved from, especially up until the 2013 election (Hayek, 2016). In recent years, parties have not been as committed to this archive, which is why the collection was completed through enquiries to party headquarters and online archives. However, the collection only includes those posters that were physically printed and published (this was confirmed, for example, through media reports of physical poster presentations). It cannot be determined with certainty that all posters in the period were lawfully archived and therefore included in the sample, but the data constitute at least a near-exhaustive collection of post-war election posters. Local and regional regulations allow parties to put up posters and billboards six weeks prior to election day during the period of

Table 1. Number of posters per party and year.

Year	SPÖ	ÖVP	VdU/FPÖ	Grüne	BZÖ	LIF	KPÖ	Stronach	NEOS	Total
1945	16	24	-	-	-	-	8	-	-	48
1949	39	19	2	-	-	-	20	-	-	80
1953	14	10	5	-	-	-	14	-	-	43
1956	15	23	2	-	-	-	14	-	-	54
1959	19	26	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	52
1962	8	15	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	27
1966	19	14	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	44
1970	8	12	27	-	-	-	-	-	-	47
1971	7	14	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	25
1975	18	18	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	42
1979	12	27	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	46
1983	13	18	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	43
1986	10	13	7	3	-	-	-	-	-	33
1990	4	13	3	9	-	-	-	-	-	29
1994	10	5	4	12	-	3	-	-	-	34
1995	11	13	5	15	-	2	-	-	-	46
1999	9	7	12	6	-	-	-	-	-	34
2002	8	9	8	27	-	-	-	-	-	52
2006	11	17	7	9	2	-	-	-	-	46
2008	9	19	9	11	6	-	-	-	-	54
2013	10	9	7	12	-	-	-	10	2	50
2017	19	13	15	-	-	-	-	-	42	89
2019	6	4	2	4	-	-	-	-	2	18
2024	9	8	9	8	-	-	-	-	12	46
Total	305	349	175	116	8	5	56	10	58	1,082
% of total	28.9	33.1	16.1	10.2	0.8	0.5	5.5	1	4.3	100

“intensive campaigning” (Jakubowski, 1998). Only posters from this campaign period are considered in the study. Furthermore, I only included posters released by national parties and affixed throughout the country (no advertisements for regional candidates or events). Quantitative content analysis was applied, and coding was conducted in three waves between 2011 and 2024. Posters from 1945 to 2008 were coded as part of AUTNES – Austrian Election Study, by a group of four coders (including the author). Reliability tests were conducted on a randomly selected subsample of 92 posters (10 percent), and a re-test took place after half the posters had been coded. Posters from 2013 to 2019 were coded in a smaller project funded by the University of Innsbruck’s Early Stage Funding in 2020, with a coding team of three (including the author). Posters from the 2024 election were coded solely by the author, using the codebook and coding experience from the previous waves. Comparability across coding waves relies on the consistent application of the same codebook and the author’s participation in all three waves, rather than formal cross-wave reliability testing, which constitutes a limitation of the study. Intercoder reliability 2011 (Holsti coefficient): 0.96 (see also Hayek, 2016). Intercoder reliability 2020 (Krippendorff’s alpha): 0.7588. Different reliability measures reflect evolving methodological standards across the coding waves. The Holsti coefficient, used in 2011, calculates the ratio of agreements to total coding decisions. Krippendorff’s alpha, used in 2020, applies a chance-correction and is therefore the more rigorous estimate.

The operationalization employed here (see Druckman et al., 2017) captures any poster content that criticizes, attacks, or otherwise negatively portrays political opponents, whether through direct attacks on specific parties/candidates, implicit criticism of governing coalitions, or attacks on the broader political establishment. Negative advertising as the dependent variable is therefore measured as a dichotomous variable with 0 for no negativity and 1 for any type of negativity (Druckman et al., 2017; see Table 2 in the current article). To facilitate the coders’ identification of negativity, several categories of negative appeals were provided in the codebook (see Supplementary File). These were then collapsed into a dichotomous variable. This inclusive approach enables comprehensive tracking of attack patterns across eight decades.

The poster issues were coded within 13 policy issue categories and three issue categories that dealt with campaign issues (Melischek et al., 2010). At the party’s campaign level, the independent variables are female

Table 2. Specifications of the negative advertising multilevel model.

Variable	Description	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Dependent variable				
neg	negative advertising measure	0	1	0.186
Independent variables				
<i>Level 1: Poster</i>				
issue	campaign issue	0	1	0.5
<i>Level 2: campaign</i>				
female	female top candidate	0	1	0.061
opposition	party is in opposition	0	1	0.496
vote share	vote share in previous elections	0	51	26.25
<i>Level 3: Year</i>				
rile-polarization	polarization of the party system	0.255	3	1.57

for campaigns with a woman as the top candidate, the party's vote share in the previous election, and a variable indicating whether the party acted from the opposition bench. The index of polarization was obtained from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2025). It has a value of 0 if all parties occupy the same position on the left-right scale and 10 when the parties are split between the two extremes (Dalton, 2008). For 1945 and 2024, I extrapolated a value using Stata's *ipolate* function, to avoid losing data points in the model.

The data are structured hierarchically: Single posters (Level 1) constitute the individual units, which are clustered into campaigns (Level 2). Campaigns refer to groups of all posters produced by a party in an election. Campaigns again are nested within elections (Level 3). As units of analysis are structured within clusters, we assume that units from the same cluster are more similar to each other than randomly selected units from different clusters. Multilevel analysis, therefore, is an adequate method to analyze these data and identify the effects on different levels (Bartholomew et al., 2008; Gelman & Hill, 2007; Hox, 2010). The models were estimated in Stata using the *gllamm* routine (Rabe-Hesketh et al., 2004).

5. Results

This section presents the empirical analysis in two parts. First, descriptive patterns reveal the evolution of negative advertising across time, parties, and content. Second, multilevel logistic regression models test the hypotheses formulated in Section 4.

5.1. Descriptive Patterns

Overall, 21.3 percent of the 1,082 posters contained negative messages, with substantial variation across parties and time. KPÖ (1945–1959) was most aggressive at 50 percent, while the FPÖ and ÖVP averaged 25 percent; the SPÖ, 15 percent. Parties entering parliament later used negativity sparingly.

To establish the temporal development of negative advertising, I ran a simple logistic regression predicting negativity from election year, with robust standard errors clustered by election. The model reveals a significant negative temporal trend ($\beta = -0.026$, $SE = 0.010$, $z = -2.49$, $p = 0.013$), indicating that each additional year decreases the log-odds of negative posters by 0.026. This 2.6 percent annual decline in the odds of negativity compounds to an 86 percent decline over the 79-year period. Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities from this model, showing the decline from approximately 35 percent in the late 1940s to below 10 percent by 2024.

The immediate postwar period featured the most aggressive campaigns. During these elections, parties accused each other of failure, terror, establishing dictatorships, selling off state property, and lying. A 1956 ÖVP poster exemplifies this confrontational style: "This is how the SPÖ lied to you three years ago. Let them continue lying—vote ÖVP!" (Figure 2). From the mid-1960s onward, negativity declined markedly. The 1980s and 1990s featured largely positive campaigns, with the 2002 election producing not a single negative poster across all parties. This near-disappearance persisted through the 2000s before a modest resurgence in 2013, when parties employed humor and irony. The Green Party's 2013 poster "Less sheepish than the others" (Figure 3) illustrates this shift toward lighter, humorous attacks rather than existential accusations.

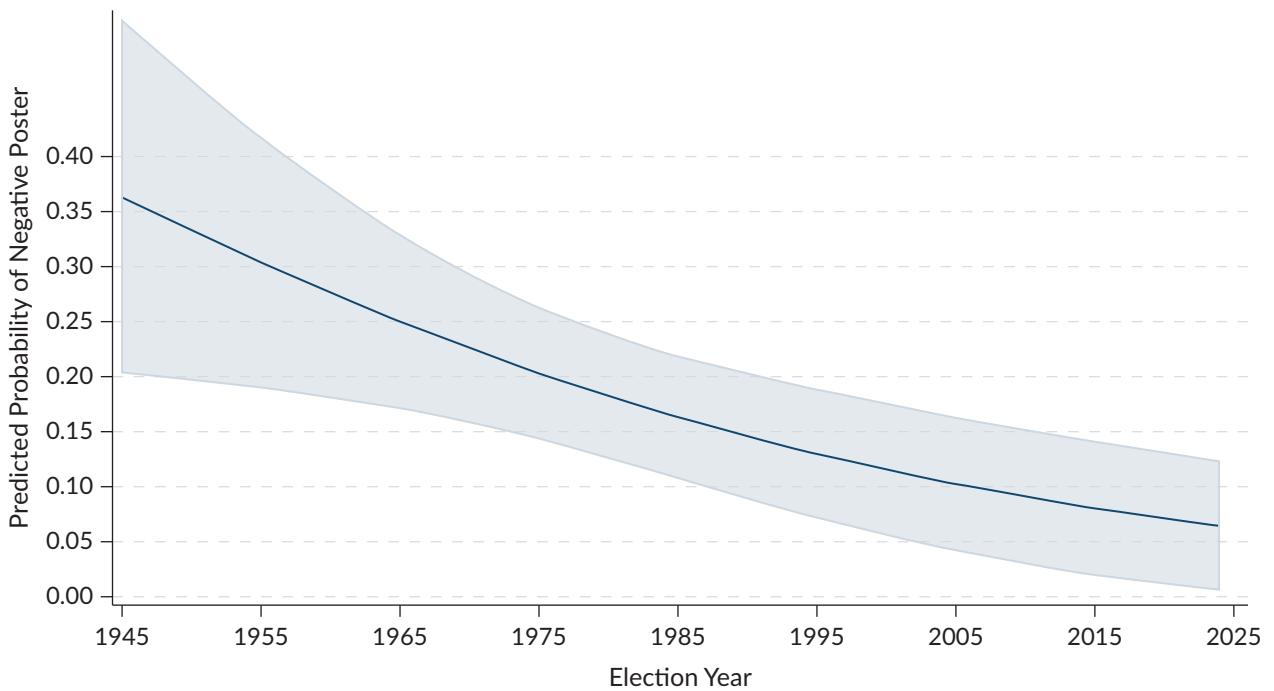


Figure 1. Decline in negative advertising, 1945–2024.



Figure 2. ÖVP election poster (1956). The poster shows a previous SPÖ poster (from 1953) that had criticized ÖVP governance, with a large red X crossed over it. The text reads: “This is how the SPÖ lied 3 years ago” (top), “let them continue lying” (bottom), and “VOTE ÖVP” (bottom).



Figure 3. Green Party election poster (2013) featuring a lamb. The text reads: “Less sheepish than the others” (playing on the German word “belämmert” which relates to lambs but colloquially means “stupid” or “daft”), with the tagline “Clean environment. Clean politics.”

Figure 4 shows that this decline occurred across all parties. Even the FPÖ, which produced the most negative single campaign in 1966, positioning itself as the alternative against both major parties, substantially reduced poster negativity in subsequent decades. The SPÖ almost entirely avoided negative messages from 1971 onward, even during opposition periods. Both major parties have largely refrained from employing negative messages since the late 1990s. The ÖVP’s transformation under Sebastian Kurz brought highly professionalized visual campaigns focusing solely on the candidate, leaving negative messages out altogether. In their first successful election in 2013, NEOS displayed only two posters, both of which bore negative messages. This small-n outlier causes the spike in Figure 4.

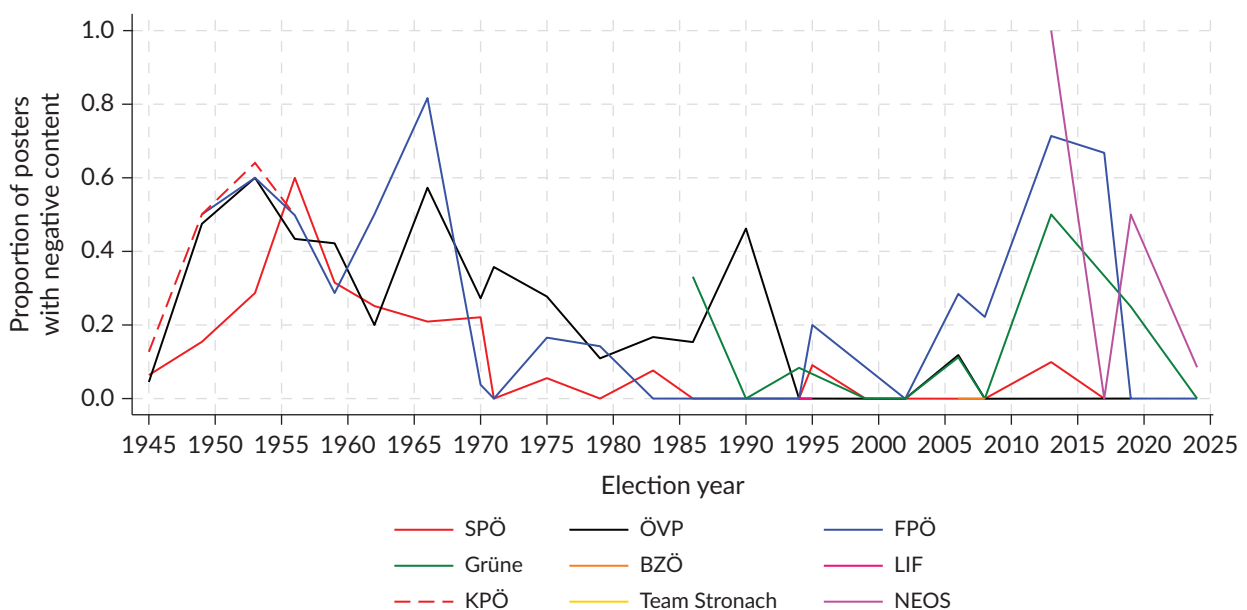


Figure 4. Negative advertising on election posters by party, 1945–2024.

5.2. Multilevel Analysis

I tested H1 separately using logistic regression predicting negative content from year, with robust standard errors clustered by year. Each additional year significantly decreases negativity odds (OR = 0.974, $p = 0.006$)—a 2.6 percent annual decline compounding to 86 percent over 79 years. This contradicts Americanization expectations and supports the hypothesis that multi-party fragmentation and consensual governance discourage attacks.

Table 3 presents three-level mixed-effects logistic regression results. The model significantly outperforms simple logistic regression (LR $\chi^2 = 118.43$, $p < 0.001$). Variance decomposition reveals substantial clustering: 29.1 percent of variance occurs between elections, 11.2 percent between campaigns, totaling 40.3 percent.

Table 3. Three-level mixed-effects logistic regression: Negative advertising.

Variable	OR	SE	95% CI	p
<i>Poster level (L1)</i>				
Campaign issue (vs. policy)	1.391	0.138	[1.146, 1.690]	0.001***
<i>Campaign level (L2)</i>				
Female top candidate	1.189	0.757	[0.341, 4.135]	0.786
Opposition party	7.013	3.332	[2.764, 17.797]	< 0.001***
Previous vote share (%)	1.037	0.013	[1.011, 1.063]	0.005**
<i>Election level (L3)</i>				
Party system polarization	2.458	1.155	[0.979, 6.176]	0.056 [†]
<i>Random effects</i>				
Election variance (σ^2)	1.605	0.698		
Campaign variance (σ^2)	0.618	0.283		
<i>Model fit</i>				
N (posters/campaigns/elections)	1,082/96/24			
Log likelihood	-427.09			
ICC (total)	40.3%			

Notes: Odds ratios from three-level mixed-effects logistic regression; [†] $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

H2 predicted that campaign-issue posters would be more negative than policy-issue posters. Results confirm this expectation (OR = 1.39, $p = 0.001$): Campaign-focused posters are 39 percent more likely to contain negative messages, supporting the depoliticization thesis that parties frame attacks around personality and strategy rather than policy.

H3 predicted that female-led campaigns would be less negative. The coefficient shows no significant effect (OR = 1.19, $p = 0.786$), though with only seven female-led campaigns, statistical power is severely limited. H4 predicted that opposition parties would campaign more negatively. This receives exceptionally strong support: Opposition parties are seven times more likely to deploy negative posters than governing parties (OR = 7.01, $p < 0.001$). This effect is substantially larger than reported in previous European studies (e.g., Hansen & Pedersen, 2008), suggesting that opposition parties' institutional role as critics fundamentally shapes communication strategies.

H5 predicted that smaller parties would attack more frequently. Results contradict this: Larger parties are slightly more likely to be negative (OR = 1.04, $p = 0.005$), though the effect is substantively small. This likely reflects historical confounding—early elections featured both high negativity and two-party dominance. H6 predicted that greater party system polarization would increase negativity. The effect is substantial and approaches conventional significance (OR = 2.46, $p = 0.056$). Each one-unit increase in polarization more than doubles the odds of negativity.

Figure 5 displays election-level random effects with 95 percent confidence intervals, showing which elections deviated from the model's predictions. Random effects capture election-specific variation not explained by the fixed predictors (opposition status, party size, polarization, campaign issues, and candidate gender). Positive residuals indicate more negative advertising than predicted; negative residuals indicate less. The 1966 election shows the largest positive residual, reflecting the FPÖ's increasingly antagonistic positioning and heightened ideological tensions. The 1953 election (with KPÖ still competing) and the 2013 one (with the modest resurgence of humorous attacks) also exceeded predicted negativity levels. Conversely, the 2024 election shows the strongest negative residual, with exceptionally positive messaging, even accounting for the overall declining trend. The 2002 and 2008 elections similarly featured less negativity than expected, consistent with the near-complete absence of negative posters during the 2000s. These patterns reveal that while our predictors explain substantial variation, election-specific dynamics matter. Particular campaigns featured unique circumstances that either encouraged or discouraged attacks beyond what systemic factors alone would predict.

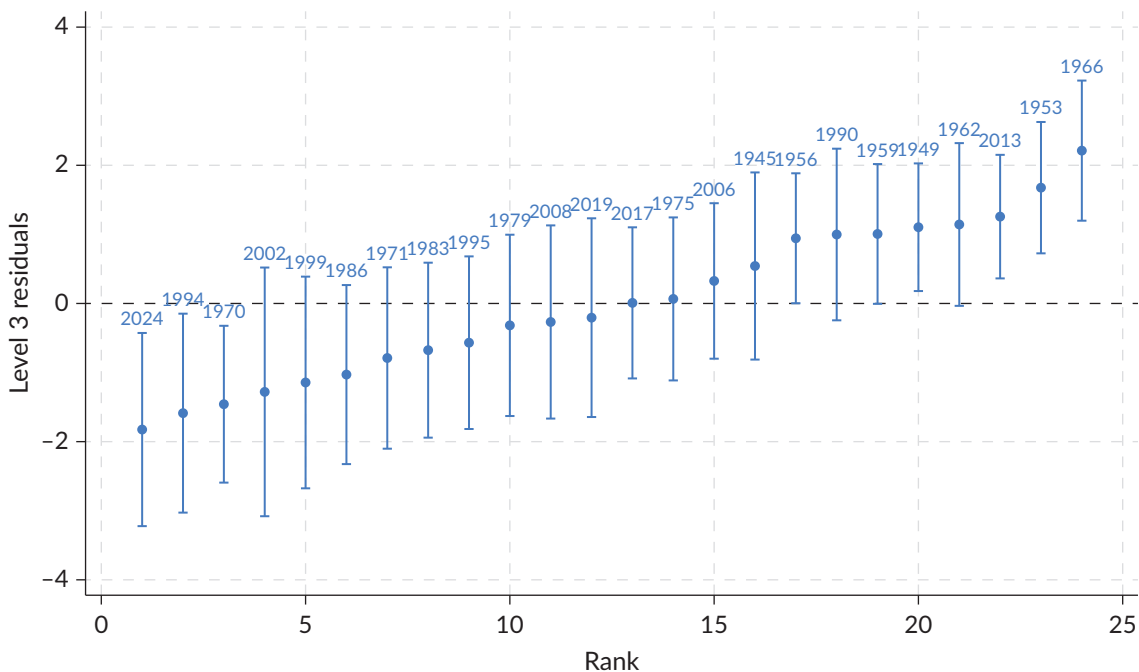


Figure 5. Caterpillar plot: Level 3 residuals.

5.3. Summary

The analysis tested six hypotheses. H1 received strong support: Negativity declined 86 percent over 79 years (OR = 0.974, $p = 0.006$), contradicting Americanization expectations. Campaign-issue posters are

significantly more negative than policy-focused posters (H2 supported; OR = 1.39). Opposition parties are seven times more likely to attack than governing parties (H4 strongly supported; OR = 7.01)—the study's most striking finding. Party system polarization substantially increases negativity (H6 marginally supported; OR = 2.46), explaining why early high-polarization elections were more aggressive. Female candidate effects could not be reliably estimated (H3, limited cases), and party size showed unexpected positive effects (H5 contradicted), likely due to historical confounding. Results emphasize that negative advertising patterns reflect context-specific interactions between party system structure and competitive dynamics rather than universal modernization trends.

6. Conclusion

Negative advertisements do not promote a party or candidate's own views, but attack and criticize political opponents. This study analyzed negative advertising on Austrian election posters from 1945 to 2024, examining 1,082 posters from 24 national legislative elections. Election posters provide an excellent basis for longitudinal analysis, as they remain a long-lasting and important campaign tool in Austria, where parties continue to invest up to 50 percent of campaign budgets in this medium.

This study makes three key contributions to political communication research. First, it examines long-term trends in Austrian campaign negativity beyond simplistic modernization narratives, demonstrating an 86 percent decline in negativity over 79 years. Second, it identifies structural and strategic determinants of negative messaging in poster campaigns using multilevel modeling. Third, it analyzes these patterns using a comprehensive dataset spanning eight decades, providing one of the longest longitudinal studies of negative advertising in any democracy.

The findings directly contradict Americanization/modernization expectations that professionalization drives increasing negativity. Each additional year significantly decreased the odds of negativity, compounding to an 86 percent decline over the observation period. The immediate post-World War II period (1945–1960s) featured highly confrontational campaigns reflecting genuine ideological conflict amid uncertainty about Austria's political future. A 1956 ÖVP poster exemplified this: "This is how the SPÖ lied to you three years ago. Let them continue lying—vote ÖVP!" As consensual political culture developed and coalition governance became routine, negative messaging on posters became increasingly rare, nearly disappearing in the 2000s before a modest resurgence in 2013 with humorous attacks such as the Green Party's poster (Figure 3).

The multilevel analysis revealed four significant determinants of negative advertising. First, campaign-focused posters are 39 percent more likely to be negative than policy-focused posters, supporting the depoliticization thesis that attacks increasingly target personality and strategy rather than substantive policy. Second, opposition parties are seven times more likely to deploy negative posters than governing parties, confirming that institutional roles fundamentally shape communication strategies. Third, party system polarization substantially increases negativity, explaining why early high-polarization elections were more aggressive. Fourth, contrary to expectations, larger parties proved slightly more likely to be negative, likely reflecting historical confounding when early two-party dominance coincided with peak negativity.

These results demonstrate clearly that in multi-party systems, negative advertising is not a preferred campaign technique on expensive, highly visible platforms such as posters. As Austria's party system evolved from effective two-party competition to fragmented multi-party governance, attacking specific opponents became strategically inefficient: Voters turning away from one party could defect to multiple alternatives rather than benefiting the attacker. Coalition governance necessities created additional disincentives for aggression between potential partners. The combination of declining polarization, increasing fragmentation, and coalition norms explains the temporal decline independent of campaign professionalization.

The study has limitations. The variables tested do not constitute an exhaustive list of negative advertising determinants. Campaign context, candidate personalities, and financial constraints surely influence strategic decisions but prove difficult to measure systematically across historic campaigns. Moreover, the dichotomous dependent variable only captures whether the poster contains negative messages or not, and not the diversity of these negative messages, from harsh accusations to humorous jabs. Future research could delve deeper into variations in tone and target of negative advertising (across media channels).

Notably, the analysis only deals with election posters. Remembering the elections of the 1980s and 1990s, one thinks of controversial campaigns, with two new parties emerging and the FPÖ becoming a third strong player in the political system. Now, five to six parties regularly make it into parliament. This growth of the party system seemed to also have an effect on the level of negative advertising in poster campaigns: The new controversies were not played out on billboards in the public space, as they had been 30 years before. Over time, parties ceased using election posters for negative messages.

While the election poster is still an important means of campaign communication, negative messages have moved from posters to other communication channels. These findings from Austria can also hold true for countries with a similar system of political campaigning, such as Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, or Scandinavian countries (see e.g., Johansson, 2014; Johansson & Holtz-Bacha, 2019; Steffan & Venema, 2019).

Therefore, further research across European countries should consider the media mix employed during an election campaign. Although negative messages are nowadays less present on election posters, this does not mean the overall degree of negativity has decreased. Parties choose other media channels to attack their opponents; particularly, social media channels are being used with similar visual displays as posters. Using these channels is much less expensive—and more flexible. For example, even today, one wave of election posters stays up for at least two weeks, whereas the origin of negative or even dirty campaigning on the internet cannot be easily traced. However, while there would be incentives for political actors to act aggressively in the digital sphere, evidence shows that some communicate even more positively during election periods (Cowburn et al., 2025). Alternatively, other actors within the party universe (e.g., youth groups, unionists, local organizations) could be the bearers of negative attacks rather than the core national party. Future research on negative advertising should consider the full media mix and evaluate the links between the different communication channels.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data can be requested from the author.

LLMs Disclosure

Claude.ai was used to assist with statistical analyses.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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