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What is This?

# Issue ownership as a determinant of negative campaigning

**Christian Elmelund-Præstekær**

## Abstract

Existing studies on the determinants of negative campaigning conclude that context matters as the degree of positive and negative campaigning vary according to factors such as proximity to election day, poll standing, incumbency status, and the size of the 'war chest'. The present article discusses whether not only the *context*, but also the *content* of campaigns needs to be considered when analysing why and when political parties go negative. The article argues that parties enjoying ownership of campaign issues tend to employ a more positive rhetorical style than parties with less ownership. Using four Danish election campaigns as cases, this proposition is empirically supported: the degree of issue ownership is positively correlated with a positive campaign tone, controlling for a range of traditional contextual factors. The new content factor does not outperform the usual contextual suspects, but it adds nuance to the general understanding of the determinants of negativity.

## Introduction

The dynamics of negative campaigning have been widely discussed and studied, especially in American political science for the past two decades. We now know that candidates go negative when they are behind in the polls (Harrington and Hess, 1996; Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995), when they are in opposition (Kahn and Kenney, 1999: 93–7), when they have few resources, when they are Democrats (Lau and Pomper, 2001), and when election day approaches (Damore, 2002). Moreover, although candidates hesitate to initiate negativity, they are much more likely to respond negatively to negative campaigns against themselves (Damore, 2002; Lau and Pomper, 2001).

Hence, the *context* of a campaign clearly matters. But what about the *content* of the campaign? Do candidates adopt the same rhetorical strategy no matter what issue they are talking about? Numerous election studies conclude that issues play an important role in contemporary election campaigns, because voters to an increasing extent choose a party according to the party's position

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on specific issues rather than its ideological position (for example, Borre, 2001). Consequently, it becomes important for parties to choose the right issues for their campaigns, and recent research demonstrates that parties increase their chances of winning elections if they emphasize issues over which they enjoy issue ownership (Green and Hobolt, 2008). If the *content* of competing parties' campaigns (and not only their *context*) affects the tone of the parties, it may be due to different degrees of issue ownership and not because of genuine differences between specific issues.

This article argues that parties go negative when they do not enjoy issue ownership of the campaign issue, whereas they stay positive when campaigning on owned issues. This hypothesis is empirically tested on the basis of a quantitative content analysis of newspaper advertisements and letters to the editors in five major Danish newspapers during four national elections (1994–2005). Investigating if and how a party's degree of issue ownership affects the campaign tone is an important supplement to the existing literature on determinants of negativity. This research effort also promises to improve the more general understanding of party competition during election campaigns.

The article proceeds in four sections. In the first section, a range of known determinants of negativity are discussed. This section also includes a description of the strategic importance of issue ownership with the aim of suggesting why this content-related concept may affect the campaign tone. Moreover, the specific relation between the two variables is discussed. The second section offers a methodological discussion defining the core concepts of negative versus positive campaigning. This section also describes the data used and the measurements applied to both the concepts of campaign tone and issue ownership. The empirical findings are reported in the third section, followed by a summary and discussion of the results in the fourth.

## Theoretical framework: Determinants of negativity and issue ownership

Analysing the interplay between issue ownership and campaign tone requires a multiple model, including independent variables beyond the one that is of special interest in the present article. A bivariate analysis is not sufficient because the existing literature concludes that a range of contextual factors act as determinants of negativity. Therefore, the analysis needs to include both the 'usual context suspects' and the new content variable. Before discussing what issue ownership is, and why and how it may matter to campaign tone, four contextual variables are briefly described.

### *Four well-known determinants of negativity*

The existing literature points to a range of different factors when explaining why parties or candidates go negative. One of the most well-established American findings is that challengers are more negative than incumbents (for example, Fridkin and Kenney, 2004). This might very well also be the case in multiparty systems, such as the Danish one (compare Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008): one could argue that the opposition may be the more negative due to the simple fact that the official policies at any given time are formulated by the government. If government policies serve as focal points of the election campaign, the challenger will be more negative than the incumbent, as the incumbent party is most probably positively inclined towards its own policies (see also Martin, 2004).

Another substantial debate in the literature addresses the impact of poll standings (Harrington and Hess, 1996; Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995). Most studies assume that positive campaigning is used to attract voters, whereas negative campaigning is used to reduce the support of the opponent

when a candidate cannot attract more voters via positive campaigns. Hence, parties tend to go negative when they lag behind in the polls. However, in a multiparty system the possibility of forming coalitions enables even losing parties to join the government, which may render relative poll standings less relevant here. Therefore, the parties' poll standings in Danish elections need to be qualified by an evaluation of their overall chances of success, that is, the general chances of passing the threshold and gaining political influence within their own coalition. This is done on the basis of the records of political historians (Bille, 1998, 2001, 2006).

Next, American findings suggest that conservative candidates are more negative than Democrats (Lau and Pomper, 2001). This difference is under-theorized in the literature and no sound theoretical explanation is provided. Obviously, the American party dichotomy cannot be directly applied abroad, but it is indeed possible to distinguish between different government alternatives, that is, between a Social Democratic and a non-socialist (conservative or liberal) government in the Danish case.

Finally, existing studies conclude that the tone of a campaign becomes increasingly more negative as election day approaches (Damore, 2002: 672). Although American campaigns last considerably longer than Danish ones (which typically last just three weeks), it is possible that the parties in both countries tend to lay out their own proposals, policies, and pledges in the beginning of a campaign, whereas they shift to criticizing the policies of their opponents towards the end of it.

In sum, a general model of negativity must consider the following four contextual determinants alongside the new content variable (that is, issue ownership): opposition (yes or no), pressure (yes or no), Social Democratic alternative (yes or no), and days to the election (a scale).

## Issue ownership as a central aspect of campaign content

In times of declining party identification, party membership, and increasing electoral volatility, voters begin to identify parties with issues and issue positions instead of ideological stands (Franklin et al., 1992; Mair et al., 2004). Thus, a literature on 'issue voting' has emerged (Borre, 2001). When voters use issues as cues for voting, the issue competence of parties becomes important to both the parties themselves and the political scientist trying to explain the ups and downs of individual parties (Green-Pedersen, 2007).

The concept of issue ownership was first coined by Budge and Farlie (1983), who argued that a political party stands a better chance of winning elections if the election campaign is about issues that the party has strong policies on. In the subsequent quarter of a century, multiple scholars have used similar concepts. Most prominent perhaps is Petrocik (1996), who argues that the parties' main strategic considerations during election campaigns do not concern policy positions on different issues, but rather which issues to promote and how to promote them. The empirical question of whether in fact parties campaign on owned issues has recently been addressed. At least in the British case, parties actually do campaign on their 'own' issues (Green and Hobolt, 2008).

Issue ownership matters not only in the USA, but also in multiparty systems. For instance, Narud and Valen (2001) show that parties need to pick the right issues to win elections in Norway, while Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen (2004) find that the Swedish Social Democrats enjoy stronger issue ownership than do their Norwegian and Danish sister parties. This helps us understand why the Swedish Social Democrats, unlike their Danish and Norwegian equivalents, have not experienced erosion of voter support, at least until the 2006 election.

Issue ownership has been perceived as rather stable (Klingemann et al., 1994; Narud and Valen, 2001; Petrocik, 1996). But even though parties cannot engineer ownership entirely as they see fit (Walgrave and De Swert, 2007), they do try to establish new ownership of issues and abandon old

ones. A recent study even shows that issue ownership can change hands during a period as short as an election campaign (Karlsen, 2004). The present article does not aim to conclude this dispute within the literature (which may be fuelled to some extent by under-theorized differences between different political systems). It merely notes that the data at hand allow for changing ownership across different campaigns, but not within individual campaigns.

## The relation between campaign tone and issue ownership: A hypothesis

The discussion of an interplay between issue ownership and campaign tone enters virgin ground as the literature on determinants of negativity seldom considers content variables. Thus, the main hypothesis is based on the following discussion rather than a specific pre-existing theory of negativity.

Let us first consider a situation in which a party campaigns on an issue owned by itself. In this situation, the party, by definition, is believed to be the best at handling the issue in question. Now, how did the party get this reputation? Most likely it did so by laying out its record or future goals on specific issues, that is, by talking about its own policies. In fact, some scholars equate the attention given to an issue with ownership of the issue (for example, Budge et al., 2001). As described in the next section, the present study subscribes to the idea that issue ownership is defined by the voters' evaluation of different parties' ability to handle different issues. Nevertheless, it remains likely that parties have to emphasize an issue to achieve ownership of it. The next question concerns how a party is able to maintain issue ownership once it is won. If the party won ownership by focusing on its own past, present, and future policies, it is most likely preserved in the same way. Moreover, when parties, as mentioned above, do in fact benefit from focusing on their 'own' issues, it would be in their best interests to maintain the focus on them during an election.

An alternative perspective is worth considering. If issue ownerships are seen as zero-sum games, a party might have a good issue reputation simply because other parties do not. If, for instance, voters believe party A to be very bad at handling public schools, party B might automatically be seen as more competent, even without mentioning the issue in the campaign. Such logic may work better in two-party systems than in multiparty systems, since parties B, C, D, E, and F might benefit from A's perceived incompetence in the latter system. Moreover, not every issue is owned. Hence, if no other party addresses public schooling despite party A's bad reputation, the voters might end up being indifferent to the issue.

I now turn to the situation in which a party campaigns on issues owned by another party. First, from the existing literature on issue ownership we know that it is not beneficial for a party to invest time in campaigning on other parties' issues – to attract voters a party needs to campaign on its own issues. Some issues are, however, impossible to escape, either because they are highlighted by the media or because these issues are important to the voters. What would be most rational for a non-issue-owning party to do in this situation? It may stay positive in order to try to outperform the adversary on its home court and thereby conquer ownership of a new issue. The Danish Liberals did this in 2001 when they conducted a fairly positive campaign on traditional social democratic welfare issues. However, this is an inherently risky strategy because the voters, by definition, see the non-owning party as the weaker party on the specific issue. If the non-owning party cannot prove the voters wrong in their initial judgement of the different parties' issue competence, the positive strategy will not resonate well with the voters and the chances of gaining votes are limited. This is why it may in fact be more rational for a party to go negative on issues that are owned by other parties. This way the party can at least try to cast doubt about the issue-owning party's policies – and perhaps in the longer run try to conquer the issue ownership in question.

Thus, the following is the main hypothesis of the present article: parties go negative when they campaign on issues owned by other parties, whereas they stay positive when campaigning on their own issues.

## Measurement and data selection

Even though multiple studies have investigated negative campaigning, no consensus exists concerning its definition. An advantage of the definition of Lau and Pomper (2001: 73), compared with other definitions (for example, Jamieson, 1993), is that it differentiates between a dimension of evaluation and one of direction. In addition, it focuses on the latter in order to rule out evaluation, which always involves subjective judgements. In this perspective, a message is negative if it is about another candidate, no matter what the content. While it is tempting to utilize such a definition, it is problematic in a multiparty system, where coalition partners are likely to allude to each other without being negative. It is important to include the dimension of evaluation, arguing that negativity 'involves, inter alia, criticising the record of the opposing party or parties; questioning the judgement, experience and probity of opposing leaders; and generating fear about what the future might hold if the opposing party or parties were in power' (Sanders and Norris, 2005: 526). Thus, the present article defines negativity by both direction and evaluation: a campaign message is negative only when it refers to an opponent *and* when it manifestly criticizes that opponent. Positive campaign messages are defined as the residual of the negative, that is, they are messages that are not critical towards an opponent.

The empirical material analysed in the present article consists of the campaign communications of Danish parties in four national elections (in 1994, 1998, 2001, and 2005). For the purpose of exploring the interplay of issue ownership and campaign rhetoric, Denmark is an appropriate case due to its multiparty system. In such systems, the electoral competition tends to be both more multi-dimensional and more party-driven than in, for example, the USA. This makes it even more important for the parties to capture ownership. Hence, the analysis of a multiparty system, as opposed to a two-party system, is intended to yield both pronounced and nuanced results.

Studies of negative campaigning are rare outside the USA (for exceptions, see Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Maurer, 2007), but for the current purpose it has been possible to utilize data from a larger project studying the tone of Danish parties' communications (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009). Within the realm of multiparty systems, Denmark might be considered a typical case, and the results of the current analysis are thus believed to be generalizable to other, similar countries.

The present article relies on two sources of communication: parties' newspaper advertisements and letters to the editor written by leading party members (defined as ministers, party chairmen, and party spokesmen).[1] Both sources are controlled by the parties (as opposed to news stories) which is a distinct advantage when trying to understand the dynamics of the parties' and not the media's political communication during an election campaign (Asp and Esaiasson, 1996: 77–8).[2] Other sources, including written material such as press releases, campaign posters and leaflets, and the transcripts of speeches, are extremely difficult to obtain (see Norris et al., 1999: 44). Moreover, verbal sources such as television debates are costly to analyse and can be difficult to compare with written texts.

The tone and focus of the parties' campaign messages are measured using quantitative content analysis. The units of analysis are 'natural' units (that is, entire letters to the editor and newspaper advertisements), as recommended by Krippendorff (2004: 98–9). In many content analyses,

however, such units are 'too rich, or too complex to be described reliably [and it is] desirable to define units of description as the smallest units that bear the information needed in the analysis' (Krippendorff, 2004: 100). Thus, each unit of analysis consists of a number of coding units, and in the present study individual 'statements' are identified as such. Depending on how much the speaker elaborates on a specific point, a statement can consist of several sentences or just one (see the example shown in the Appendix). In total 9, 264 statements in 1,655 letters and advertisements were coded.

Every statement in the data is coded using four categories. A statement can either refer positively to the party or candidate (1) or negatively to other parties and candidates (2). In between these 'pure' forms there is a mixed category (3) and a residual category (4), used when it is impossible to determine whether a message is positive or negative.

To calculate the tone of an entire unit of analysis, the number of negative statements is subtracted from the number of positive statements and the result is divided by the total number of statements in the particular unit. In the calculation, the mixed category is not excluded, but assigned the value zero in the numerator. The residual category, however, is excluded entirely from the calculation. The result is multiplied by 100, and in this way the tone of every unit of analysis is described by an index ranging from –100 to +100 (see formula (1)). The index is referred to as the 'Rhetorical Tone Index' (RTI).[3] A coding example is provided in the Appendix.

$$RTI = 100\left(\frac{C_1 - C_2}{C_1 + C_2 + C_3}\right) \qquad (1)$$

In order to be able to analyse the impact of issue ownership, it is necessary to know which issues the parties mention in different campaigns. For this reason, every unit of analysis is described by one issue.[4] It is also necessary to know which parties own which issues. Although the concept of 'issue ownership' is widely discussed, it is somewhat fuzzy and measured in different ways (for example, Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). In Denmark, issue ownership is exclusively measured by the Danish Election Project. The project conducts surveys of a representative sample of the voter population after every national election, and respondents are asked which government alternative (a Social Democratic versus a non-socialist one) they see as the most competent at handling a list of issues. On this basis a so-called 'competence image' is computed (Andersen, 2003; Van der Brugge and Voss, 2007). Hence, a coalition 'owns' an issue when the voters see the coalition as more competent at handling the issue in question than the alternative coalition. Voters, of course, can disagree; thus, issue ownership is empirically measured by an index ranging from –100 to +100 describing the advantages of one coalition as opposed to the other. The results for the years 1994–2005 are shown in Table 1.

Because issue ownerships are measured at the coalition level, and not the party level, it is necessary to restrict the analysis to parties that are usually members of the different coalitions, that is, the Conservatives and the Liberals on one side and the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals on the other (in 1994, the Centre Democrats and the Christian Democrats are also included in the Social Democratic alternative as the two parties were members of a Social Democratic government coalition). Moreover, it is assumed that the issue ownership of each coalition is mainly driven by the coalition members themselves *and* that all parties in each coalition contribute equally to create the competence images in the voters' minds.

To compute an index of issue ownership, the information on party agendas and party issue ownership are combined: since every unit of analysis is described by one issue only, the Issue Ownership

**Table 1.** Voters' judgement of issue competences of a Non-Socialist compared to a Social Democratic government (index ranging from −100 to +100, positive values indicate an advantage of the Non-Socialist alternative), 1994–2005

| Issue | 1994 | 1998 | 2001 | 2005 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Economic problems | +28 | +6 | +17 | +23 |
| Unemployment | −31 | −32 | −16 | −18 |
| Danish interests in the EU | +20 | +17 | +13 | +19 |
| Environment | −42 | −49 | −45 | −42 |
| Law and order | +15 | +23 | +39 | +34 |
| Democratic issues | −11 | −11 | −4 | |
| Refugees/immigrants & Integration | | +6 | +25 | +21 |
| Family issues | | −42 | −16 | −27 |
| The elderly | | −27 | +4 | −25 |
| Health care | | −11 | +20 | −10 |
| Primary Schooling | | +2 | +6 | +3 |
| Globalization | +35 | | | +25 |
| Tax systems | | | | −2 |
| Balancing taxation and social security | −15 | −18 | −3 | −14 |
| International cooperation | | | +9 | +22 |
| Welfare, aggregated* | −15 | −19 | −2 | −15 |

*Note*: The balance index is computed by subtracting the proportion of the voters saying that a Social Democratic government would be best at handling a certain issue from the same proportion choosing the other alternative. A value of 0 indicates that no government alternative has ownership of the measured issue. A value of −100 means that a Social Democratic government has a complete ownership, whereas +100 indicates complete ownership by the Non-Socialist alternative. * Average of 'family issues', 'the elderly', 'health care', 'primary school' and 'balancing taxation and social security'. Sources: Danish Election Project, 2005 (v120–v133), 2001 (v37–v49), 1998 (v64–v77), and 1994 (v157–v168).

Index (IOI) of a unit equals the corresponding competence image score for the party and issue in question. Hence, the issue ownership of each unit of analysis is gauged by the same index ranging from –100 to +100 as the original index for competence image. Unfortunately, a few minor issues identified in the content analysis have no corresponding competence image score in the Danish Election Project. Such issues are not excluded from the analysis, but are assigned the IOI value of zero, that is, they are included as neutral issues. This, of course, makes the correlations a bit more conservative than if the issues were excluded, but the uncertainty that the missing ownership data introduces is better balanced this way.

## Analysis and empirical findings

Negative campaigning is indeed a part of Danish election campaigns. However, negativism is not the parties' predominant rhetorical strategy. Table 2 shows that the included parties are on average 43 per cent more positive than negative (RTI of +43) in their advertisements and letters in the four campaigns studied. The RTI average of all parties and all issues (including the 'meta' and 'general campaign' categories) is +56. Moreover, different parties seem to have different levels of negativity, the Social Democrats clearly being the most negative (RTI of +31). Finally, no clear trend over time is apparent, primarily because the 2001 campaigns of the different parties were substantially more positive than were those in the other elections. However, a firm conclusion regarding developments over time should not be drawn from only four data points. Nonetheless, the descriptive results are

**Table 2.** Average tone (RTI) in different parts of the data set, 1994–2005

|  | Tone (RTI) | N |
|---|---|---|
| Total, all parties and issues | +56 | 1,655 |
| Total, included parties and issues | +43 | 658 |
| *Parties* |  |  |
| Liberals | +50 | 239 |
| Social Democrats | +31 | 239 |
| Conservatives | +44 | 110 |
| Social Liberals | +47 | 58 |
| Christian Democrats* | +100 | 6 |
| Centre Democrats* | +89 | 6 |
| *Elections* |  |  |
| 1994 | +46 | 164 |
| 1998 | +40 | 156 |
| 2001 | +54 | 120 |
| 2005 | +36 | 218 |

*Note:* * Christian and Centre Democrats are only included in the 1994 election. Here they were members of a Social Democratic led government.

similar to findings of the few existing comparable studies of negativity outside the USA in terms of both the absolute level of negativity and the stability of this level over time (for example, Elmelund-Præstekær, 2008, 2010; Håkansson, 1999; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Schweitzer, 2010).

As argued above, both a range of well-known contextual factors and a new content factor (issue ownership) may affect the level of negativity in different parties' electoral campaigns. Hence, the analysis proceeds in two steps. First, a model including the contextual variables is presented; next a second model including the issue ownership variable is presented. The first column in Table 3 shows the first model. As expected, all of the 'usual suspects' yield significant results and display the expected signs: the opposition is 45 RTI points more negative than the government and parties under pressure are 22 points more negative than parties not under pressure. Next, the parties' letters and advertisements, on average, become 1 RTI point more negative each day closer to the election – this means that the campaigns are 21 RTI points more negative on election day then they were three weeks earlier, on the day that the election was called. Finally, Social Democratic government alternatives are 14 points more negative than non-socialist alternatives. Thus, the most liberal (in the American sense of the term) government alternative is apparently *more* negative than the more conservative alternative, in contrast to the US situation. The difference might be explained by the fact that the Liberal party displayed 'untraditional' behaviour as a challenger to the incumbent Social Democratic government in 2001: the Liberals decided to stay on (their own) message and repeat a few central pledges over and over again (Jønsson and Larsen, 2002), which rendered the party quite positive in this particular campaign. Future studies are needed, however, to determine whether this tentative explanation holds true or whether the results reflect a genuine difference in the communicative cultures of the different Danish parties.

The main question of the present article is whether issue ownership correlates positively with campaign tone – and the answer is 'yes'. From the second model presented in Table 3 it is evident that a coalition becomes .2 RTI points more positive for every index point more issue ownership it enjoys. Theoretically, this means that when every voter deems the coalition in question the most competent at handling the issue in a given letter or advertisement, this coalition will be 20 RTI

**Table 3.** Two OLS models of negativity, 1994–2005

|  | Model 1: Context | Model 2: Context + content |
|---|---|---|
| Constant | 71.4** | 71.5** |
| Opposition | −45.3** | −46.0** |
| *Pressure* | −22.4** | −22.2** |
| Days to Election | 1.0* | 1.0* |
| Social Democratic alternative | −13.8* | −15.2* |
| Issue Ownership | − | .2* |
| N | 657 | 657 |
| F | 32.7 | 26.8 |
| $R^2$ | .17 | .17 |

*Note*: Linear OLS models. Independent variable is RTI (campaign tone). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (one tailed).

points more positive than the coalition in the opposite situation. Obviously, no coalition enjoys such complete ownership – in the present data, no coalition scores higher than +/–49 on the issue ownership index. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that coalitions with strong issue ownership on a given issue conduct more positive campaigns (up to 10 RTI points) on this issue than the rival coalition.

The new content variable thus supplements the well-known context variables: when trying to explain when and why parties go negative, the degree of issue ownership matters. The new variable does not outperform the other ones, as there is still more difference in tone between incumbents and challengers than there is between issue-owning and non-issue-owning parties. This interpretation is supported by the standardized coefficients – the ownership variable displays the smallest such coefficient (not shown here). One reason why issue ownership apparently matters less than the traditional factors is probably the fact that several issues are 'shared' between the two alternative government coalitions. The Social Democratic coalition had, for instance, an advantage of only 10 IOI points on health care in the 2005 election. Thus, the variation in the variable is limited.

The relative importance of issue ownership may, however, be stronger than reported here, because the variation is deliberately reduced via the conservative method of operationalization. The Danish Election Project does not measure issue ownership for every issue on which the parties campaigned in the included elections, for instance, cultural policies, housing, and transportation are not included in the issue competence analyses. Including such unmeasured issues and assigning them an IOI value of zero introduces a downward bias in the beta coefficient of issue ownership in Model 2. How much the unmeasured issues deviate from an IOI value of zero is of course unknown, but even small differences between parties on such issues would enhance the importance of the content variable relative to the context variables.

## Summary and discussion

The present article has shown that negativity as a part of political campaigning is not confined to the USA. Moreover, the study has shown that Danish parties, like American ones, go negative when they face electoral failure, when they challenge incumbents, and when election day approaches. Also, ideology seems to matter, as Social Democratic coalitions are more negative than non-socialist ones. These results validate a range of determinants of negativity developed in the American context: the results suggest that versions of existing theories of negativity are not merely American. More studies, however, are needed to draw this conclusion, because the present

article only includes the main parties (that is, parties currently in office or likely to form future governments) and not the range of other parties that are indeed relevant in Danish politics, but are not motivated by office. When all parties are included in the analysis, the American theories enjoy less empirical support (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010).

However, the present article suggests that party *context* does not tell the whole story about the determinants of contemporary negative campaigning: the *content* of the campaigns ought to be considered as well. The empirical findings support this idea: party coalitions use a more positive tone when they campaign on issues that they own, while they go negative on issues that are owned by the alternative coalition. As an explanatory factor, issue ownership does not render the well-known contextual factors insignificant – rather, the two types of variables should be seen as complementary. This important finding adds nuance to the general understanding of negative campaigning.

While the present study makes a new contribution to our theoretical and empirical understanding of negative campaigning, it admittedly has shortcomings. Future studies need to refine and further validate the present conclusions in at least three ways. First, it is important to gauge issue ownership on a wider set of issues than was possible with the data at hand. This would improve the accuracy and probably also the relative importance of the ownership factor compared with other factors. Second, future studies should consider issue ownership measures at the party level – at least in multiparty systems, individual parties within a given coalition could differ in perceived issue competence. Moreover, ownership measures at the party level would enable the student of negativity to include more parties and thus test the present argument on a wider basis. Finally, comparative research should control for the impact of possible country-specific factors.

Such shortcomings aside, the present study offers an alternative perspective on the seminal question of why parties go negative. It has outlined both a theoretical reason why parties stay positive on home ground and empirically demonstrated that such an expectation holds firm, at least in the Danish case. It is hoped that these conclusions will encourage other scholars to consider issue ownership, or other content factors for that matter, in the quest to explore the determinants of negative campaigning in different political systems.

## Appendix

As an example, a Social Democratic newspaper advertisement (printed in *Politiken* on 25 January 2005) is coded using the coding rules described above. The advertisement contains both positive campaigning on the party's own policies [1], negative campaigning on the Liberal-led incumbent government [2], and messages that both present the party's own policies and criticize the government's policies in a comparative fashion [3]:

> Cut-backs do not work in the public primary schools. Our public primary schools should once again be among the best in the world. Our children should learn to read, do maths, and handle future problems [1]. During the rule of the bourgeois government the expenses per pupil in public primary schools have been cut by more than 1000 Danish kroner. During the same period of time the cost per pupil in the private schools increased accordingly [2]. Our children suffer the consequences of the current cut-backs. The public primary schools should be the place where the future is shaped and, therefore, they should perform better than they do today [3]. We will spend 600,000,000 Danish kroner more annually on new books, computers and renovating classrooms. The efforts will be concentrated on schools in socially deprived areas [1]. We will hire more teachers and give the teachers a better supplementary education [1]. We

will set clear goals for the public primary schools and ensure that our children learn to read and do maths [1].[5]

The RTI value of the example is +50, meaning that it is 50 per cent more positive than negative. The tone is computed using formula 1: the advertisement contains six coding units in total: four code 1, one code 2, and one code 3, yielding $100*((4–1)/6) = 50$.

## Acknowledgements

## Notes

1. The five largest Danish newspapers have been included: *Politiken*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *EkstraBladet*, and *BT*.
2. Letters to the editor are subject to the editor's professional criteria of selection – not every letter written makes it to the pages of a newspaper. Thus, letters are not completely controlled by the parties, but the letters printed are not edited by journalists and, hence, are authentic expressions of the writer. Moreover, most papers usually print letters from authors who are not affiliated with the paper (see Wahl-Jørgensen, 2004) and one could expect that editors would especially make room for letters written by party leaders.
3. An inter-coder reliability test was performed with a satisfying result. Two trained coders recoded 4 per cent of the total number of letters to editors (a random subset drawn from every party, not just the four included in this analysis). Using Krippendorff's alpha algorithm (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007), the coders' RTI values for each letter were compared, yielding an alpha value of .93.
4. The issue categories are (1) refugees/immigrants, (2) meta, (3) the labour market/unemployment, (4) taxes, (5) health, (6) the elderly, (7) the economy, (8) the environment, (9) foreign policy, (10) the European Union, (11) family/children, (12) primary school, (13) law and order, (14) welfare policies in general, (15) business policy, (16) social policies, (17) education and science, (18) housing, (19) democratic issues, (20) consumer policy, (21) culture, (22) equality issues, (23) traffic and transportation, (24) the church, and (25) unclear. The category 'unclear' is used whenever it is not clear what issue a sample unit is about. This is the case when more issues are addressed at the same time, but none of them stand out as the primary or most important one. The category is also used to code units containing very broad statements that cannot be covered by any single issue. The category 'meta' is used whenever a unit of analysis discusses politics as a 'game' rather than substantial issues. This is the case when talking about opinion polls, government formation, and the like. Since a party cannot own either an 'unclear' or a 'meta' issue, these categories are not included in the analysis. To confirm the issue coding, an inter-coder reliability test was preformed using the same data and procedures as described in note 3. The agreement of the two coders was lower for these issues than for the RTI, yielding a Krippendorff alpha value of .70, which is still acceptable. To improve this measure a number of the smallest categories were merged into other categories: the original category 'homosexuals' was merged into 'equality issues', 'animal welfare' into 'business policy', and 'structural reform' into 'democratic issues'.
5. The translation is from the following Danish text:

   Discount virker ikke i folkeskolen. Vores folkeskoler skal igen være blandt de bedste i verden. Vores børn skal både lære at læse, regne og klare problemer i fremtiden [1]. Under VK-regeringen er der blevet skåret mere end 1000 kr. ned pr. elev i folkeskolen. I samme periode er udgifterne pr. elev i privatskolerne steget med et tilsvarende beløb [2]. De nuværende nedskæringer går ud over vores børn. Folkeskolen skal være der, hvor fremtiden skabes, derfor skal den fungere bedre i dag [3]. Vi vil bruge 600 mio. kr. mere om året på nye bøger, computere og renovering af klasseværelser. Der skal især sættes ind på skoler i

socialt belastede områder [1]. Vi vil ansætte flere lærere og sikre lærerne en bedre efteruddannelse [1]. Vi vil opstille klare mål for folkeskolen, der sikrer, at vores børn lærer at læse og regne [1].

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