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# “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”: A Panel Study on the Reciprocal Effects of Negative, Dirty, and Positive Campaigning on Political Distrust

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## ABSTRACT

Negative campaigning is a central concept in political communication research. However, most conceptualizations of the term are rather broad, summarizing all kinds of negativity such as substantial criticism and offensive behaviors. In this paper, we distinguish negative, dirty, and positive campaigning. While negative campaigning refers to critical, civil, and non-disrespectful arguments, dirty campaigning, by contrast, is defined as “below-the-belt” attacks including incivility and unfair campaign methods. In a two-wave Austrian national election panel study, we tested the reciprocal effects of perceived negative, dirty, and positive campaigning on distrust in politicians. Using auto-regressive models, we found that perceived dirty campaigning positively predicted distrust in politicians over time. Furthermore, distrust in politicians led to increased perceptions of dirty campaigning over time, suggesting a reciprocal relationship. However, perceived negative and positive campaigning were unrelated to distrust in politicians. Theoretical and methodological implications of distinguishing negative, dirty, and positive campaigning are discussed.

Criticism is a central element of political campaigns. It allows political parties and candidates to emphasize unfavorable aspects of political opponents that otherwise might have been undisclosed (Lau & Pomper, 2004; Nai & Walter, 2015). Also, criticism in campaigns can provide valuable information for citizens and lead to more informed voting decisions. However, some forms of criticism can also impair citizens’ political attitudes, increase public disengagement, and eventually harm the quality of democracy (Geer, 2006; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Mutz, 2015; Van Aelst et

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al., 2017). In most extant research, criticism in campaigns has been conceptualized as negative campaigning (Haselmayer, 2019). However, negative campaigning is an umbrella term that includes substantive criticism on the one hand, and more dirty forms such as character assassinations, pejorative language, or the purposeful spreading of false information on opposing political parties or politicians on the other hand.

Given such a diverse conceptualization of the term, studies looking into the effects of negative campaigning have yielded conflicting findings (see, for instance, Lau et al., 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). In this paper, we therefore distinguish negative campaigning from dirty campaigning. We conceptualize negative campaigning as critical, civil, and non-disrespectful arguments that emphasize negative aspects of political opponents. Dirty campaigning, by contrast, is defined as impolite, disrespectful, and defamatory attacks that are taking place “below-the-belt” and can involve a wide range of unfair campaign methods. Although research suggests that negative campaigning can have relevant effects for democracy (e.g., Banda & Windett, 2016; Fridkin & Kenney, 2012), the effects of negative vs. dirty campaigning on political (dis)trust remain less clear.

Although there are studies on the effects of negative campaigning (e.g., Pinkleton et al., 2002; Toros, 2017) as well as facets of dirty campaigning (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Otto et al., 2020) on political distrust, we lack research specifically comparing the outcomes of negative vs. dirty campaigning. When it particularly comes to the association between dirty campaigning and political trust, there are three additional research gaps: First, previous work focused on single communication channels and did not investigate the comprehensive campaign context. For instance, the pioneering study by Mutz and Reeves (2005) showed that uncivil televised debates, as one facet of dirty campaigning, can significantly increase political distrust. However, as we will explain below, in a campaign context, the notion of dirty campaigning is much broader and goes beyond uncivil behavior in televised discussions. Second, research lacks panel studies to investigate the association between dirty campaigning and political trust over time. Most previous research either relied on cross-sectional designs (e.g., Ceron & Memoli, 2015), which are unable to clarify causal order, or applied experimental designs (e.g., Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Otto et al., 2020), which cannot be generalized to the entire campaign context and are limited with respect to explaining effects over time. Panel studies can, by controlling for autoregressive effects, reduce reversed causality concerns and allow researcher to draw inferences over time (Hsiao, 2014). Third, previous research has not investigated the effects of political trust as an independent variable on the perception of dirty campaigning. This is particularly important because research has shown that political trust can serve as a predictor or may even form a causal association with other variables

related to democratic outcomes (Hetherington, 1998; Hetherington & Husser, 2012; Hooghe et al., 2011).

In what follows, we addressed the research gaps in several ways: First, we investigated the association between negative vs. dirty campaigning and political distrust in a broad campaign context. To do so, we developed multi-item scales that asked voters how negative and dirty they perceived the entire campaign. Second, to examine potential reciprocal relationships, we treated these variables either as dependent or independent variable. Third, we have conducted a two-wave panel study with lagged dependent variables and controlling for autoregressive effects during the Austrian National election campaign 2019. This campaign was expected to consist of high levels of negativity. It followed a snap election announcement resulting from the “Silberstein affair” that deeply shook the Austrian political landscape and led to a highly polarized campaign with various intense attacks among political actors.

### Conceptualizing negative and dirty political campaigning

Negative campaigning is widely regarded as the use of criticism by a political actor directed at another political actor in a campaign (Haselmayer, 2019; Lau & Rovner, 2009; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014). However, most conceptualizations of the term are rather broad summarizing all kinds of negative attacks. For instance, prominent definitions of negative campaigning in the literature include “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign” (Geer, 2006, p. 23) or “talking about the opponent criticizing his or her programs, accomplishments, qualifications, and so on” (Lau & Pomper, 2001, pp. 805–806). The term negative campaigning as such comprises manifold concepts, such as *attack advertising* (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), *attack function of campaign messages* (Benoit, 2007, 2015, 2019), or *offensive campaign* (Walter, 2014).

All these conceptualizations share the notion of being inherently linked to criticism in campaigns. Yet criticism can take various forms, from scrutinizing or criticizing a political position to personal insults, uncivil behavior, or spreading false rumors. As Haselmayer (2019) argues, negative campaigning serves as an umbrella term that covers “substantive criticism, such as disagreement between two parties or candidates over a specific policy, character assassinations, pejorative language or insinuate rumors about a politician’s very private life” (p. 356). Due to the exuberant broadness of the term negative campaigning, several scholars have argued for a more advanced and fine-graded conceptual distinction between negative and dirty campaigning (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Papacharissi, 2004).

Dirty campaigning has largely been subsumed under the umbrella term of negative campaigning (e.g., Benoit, 2015; Nai & Maier, 2018; Walter, 2014) or has less commonly been regarded as a distinct concept from negative

campaigning. In the latter notion, dirty campaigning is defined as “name-calling, contempt, and derision of the opposition” (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 1) or includes attributes such as insulting language, profanity, stereotypes, or discriminative terms (Chen, 2017). One of the first and most prominent books in this research strand is *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* by Jamieson (1993). The author argues that the 1988 United States presidential election campaign advanced new advertising techniques to attain news coverage, such as using more subtle rhetoric, vivid language, or inflammation. These developments have lowered the standards of accountability for political ads regarding their degree of accuracy, logic, and informativeness. Although critical yet civil forms of political advertising prevail, the use of incivility or dirty elements in campaigns is rising. To better understand the different forms of campaign negativity, Jamieson calls for a conceptual distinction between negative and dirty campaigning. More recent literature (e.g., Geer, 2006; Mark, 2006; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014) followed up on her reasoning by arguing that negative campaigning is a vital component of campaigns and can contribute to democratic quality. Negative campaigning can substantially inform citizens about negative aspects of candidates and thus enrich their information environment to make informed political decisions. Dirty campaigning, on the contrary, aims at discrediting the political opponent rather than providing substantial information about their negative aspects.

The conceptualization of dirty campaigning mainly involves political incivility, which can either be described as communication that violates the norms of politeness in daily face-to-face interaction (Mutz, 2015; Mutz & Reeves, 2005) or as adding inflammatory and superfluous comments to a political statement (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Although both approaches regard dirty campaigning as a distinct concept, they encompass different notions of its key dimensions. On the one hand, Mutz (2015) and Mutz and Reeves (2005) view dirty campaigning as a violation of norms of politeness in interpersonal speech, most prominently featured in televised debates. On the other hand, Brooks and Geer (2007) consider it as explicitly adding contemptuous and defamatory terms to a political message. Both concepts appear to be too narrow because they only rely on specific facets of campaigns, such as interpersonal behavior in televised debates (Mutz, 2015) or explicit language in messages (Brooks & Geer, 2007). We argue that dirty campaigning needs to refer to the entire campaign context. It can apply to nonverbal behavior in televised debates, interpersonal speech, *and* explicit campaign messages, and may even go beyond this terminology. Recent research (e.g., Fridkin & Kenney, 2019; Geer, 2006; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014) suggested that dirty campaigning can also be present in other communication channels such as social networking sites (SNS), press conferences or press releases, or political ads. In addition, dirty campaigning can be reflected in unfair campaign methods, such as push polls or the illegal use of voter data for political targeting. Further unfair

campaign methods are so-called *techno-distortions* (Kaid, 2001). They include manipulative techniques in political ads such as subtle graphics and sounds, deceptive editing, basic computerized alterations, and dramatizations to fabricate real footage or to create graphics to mislead citizens. Advances in artificial intelligence also involve the alteration of the physical appearance of political candidates or their appearance at a given point in time. These so-called *deepfakes* have gained increasing prominence in campaigns. They can disguise distorted information as being factual and thus also mislead citizens (Newman et al., 2018; Venturini & Rogers, 2019). Therefore, we conceptualize dirty campaigning as a distinct concept to negative campaigning that can apply to the entire campaign context. More specifically, there are two key aspects of dirty campaigning: First, dirty campaigning can occur with respect to all acts of communication voiced by a political actor or party, and second, dirty campaigning can take place via campaign methods. Such unfair campaign methods are defined as any behavior that violates established law and undermines the functioning of democracy by, for instance, the illegal use of voter data for political targeting, voter suppression tactics, push polls, or intransparent or illegal campaign financing.

Taken together, we define negative campaigning as critical, civil, and non-disrespectful forms of communication that emphasize negative aspects of political opponents. By contrast, dirty campaigning can be understood as impolite, disrespectful, and defamatory forms of communication that are taking place below-the-belt or involve unfair campaign methods. These definitions overcome any theoretical gray zone between negative and dirty campaigning. To be clear, dirty campaigning obviously involves incivility, disrespect, and defamation, but negative campaigning doesn't necessarily need to be exactly the opposite. While negative campaigning is strongly linked to civility (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), it can cover a wide range from being very respectful to simply being non-disrespectful. Negative campaigning thus avoids being disrespectful rather than being respectful. It is also important to note that our conceptualization treats negative and dirty campaigning as perceptions, not as objective characteristics of campaigns. That is, when we look at the effects of campaigns, individual perceptions of campaign behaviors and tactics as predominantly negative or dirty matter, and not the actual amount of negative or dirty campaigning.

### **Negative as well as dirty political campaigning and political distrust**

Political trust serves as civic foundation for the legitimacy of a political system because it reflects a basic evaluative orientation that political actors are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public (Hetherington,

1998; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). Its relevance becomes particularly apparent in times of political crisis, where lower levels of political trust undermine politicians' ability to solve problems and legitimize solutions (Norris, 2011). Against the backdrop of this conceptualization, we theorize that dirty campaigning, but not negative campaigning, undermines political trust. There is already some evidence for the effects of dirty forms of campaigning on political trust: Most notable is the experimental study by Mutz and Reeves (2005) which was also published in the widely-cited book *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media* (Mutz, 2015). In this study, the participants had to watch a 20-minute TV debate between two male congressional candidates and a moderator played by hired actors in an artificial TV studio. The central manipulation was the degree of incivility in the political exchange, with participants being randomly assigned to either a civil, uncivil, or control condition. In the civil condition, the candidates adhered to interpersonal norms of civility by being polite and respectful in their own speech, but also by listening to the opponent and giving room for his own statements. In the uncivil condition, candidates inserted gratuitous attacks below-the-belt that suggested a lack of politeness and respect. Voices were raised when conflict intensified and non-verbal cues such as rolling of the eyes were added. In the control condition, participants did not watch any political television. The results indicated, compared to the control condition, a significant negative effect of incivility on political trust, but not a significant effect of civility on political trust. Although this study enhanced our knowledge about the effects of incivility, it only applied to interpersonal behavior in televised debates. In addition to the limited scope of this study, conditions simulated in the laboratory do not compare with real-life communication effects and are thus limited in their generalizability (Kinder, 2007).

We take a much broader conceptual stance of dirty campaigning, arguing that it can apply to the entire campaign. That is, dirty campaigning, regarded as a perception by individuals, goes beyond a direct interpersonal communication between two candidates in a debate and involves unfair campaign methods as well. Based on the *new video malaise theory* (Mutz, 2015; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), we theorize that dirty campaigning in the whole campaign context can decrease political trust. The new video malaise theory draws on social psychological theories of human-media interaction (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Forgette & Morris, 2006), which argue that citizens in their daily social interactions are used to oblige to interpersonal norms of mutual civility. They expect the same from political actors in their political exchanges. Its second core assumption states that televised political disagreement “emphasize[s] strong differences of opinion [...] to enhance dramatic value and attract viewers” (Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 4). The behavior of political actors can correspond to this logic to receive media attention by using incivility. Television also intensifies disagreement because audiences perceive uncivil exchanges from a very intimate and close-up perspective. Thus, televised



political disagreement is accepted if it adheres to social norms, but once it crosses the “red line” and becomes uncivil, then citizens tend to lose faith in political actors and have less political trust. This process may not just impair trust in political actors, but can also spill over to trust in democratic institutions, such as trust in parliament or government (Mutz, 2015). While the new video malaise theory is mainly bound to televised incivility, we argue, based on its first core assumption, that dirty campaigning in the entire campaign context can decrease political trust. Incivility in all campaign facets violates the social norms of mutual civility. Similarly, unfair campaign methods violate established law and norms, and are thus perceived as dishonest political methods. Thus, when politicians “go dirty,” distrust in politicians is likely to increase over time.

H1: Perceived dirty campaigning increases distrust in politicians over time.

When it comes to negative campaigning, we would not assume any negative effects on political distrust. The reason is that negative campaigning, even if it involves fundamental rejections of political arguments, is in line with socially shared norms common in a Western cultural context (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sifianou, 2012; Tyler, 2006). Civil and non-disrespectful criticism is frequently experienced in individuals’ own interpersonal encounters and is not related to issues of distrust (see also Mutz, 2015). Also, a recent meta-analysis has demonstrated that exposure to disagreement does not negatively impact political engagement (Matthes et al., 2019), a variable that is related to political trust. Yet there are some studies showing that disagreement can lead to political polarization (e.g., Suhay et al., 2018). However, such studies often conflate criticism with incivility, as, for instance, some “online negativity is overtly disrespectful and demeaning” (Suhay et al., 2018, p. 99). Also, even if negativity polarizes, this may lead to more negative evaluations of the political opponent but not to generalized distrust in politicians as a whole.

Yet research suggests that negative news merging entertainment with informational content, such as political comedy and satire, can increase political distrust and cynicism (e.g., Guggenheim et al., 2011). However, case of comedy and satire, politicians are depicted as untruthful, immoral, or uninformed, and their wrongdoings are ridiculed. This primes negative associations with politicians and leads to distrust and cynicism. Our understanding of campaign negativity, however, refers to the rejection and criticism of political arguments during a campaign. Overall, these examples demonstrate that the negativity is often used as an umbrella term, and in order to understand the effects of negativity, we need to separate negative campaigning from dirty campaigning. Thus, we generally ask:



RQ1: What is the relationship between perceived negative campaigning and distrust in politicians over time?

### Positive campaigning and reciprocal effects

So far, we have discussed negative and dirty campaigning as main drivers of campaign effects. Yet there is another aspect that has received scholarly attention: positive campaigning, which can be defined as “talking about one’s own accomplishments, qualifications, programs, etc.” (Lau & Pomper, 2001, p. 806). Positive campaigning strongly makes use of positive emotional appeals, such as enthusiasm, pride, or hope (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Weber, 2013). According to the *affective intelligence theory*, emotions play an important role for individuals to make political judgments and electoral decisions, especially under uncertain conditions with limited information available (Brader, 2006; Marcus et al., 2011; Neuman et al., 2007). Research has shown that positive emotions in campaigns can have stimulating effects on both specific and diffuse political support (Lecheler et al., 2015; Marquart et al., 2019).

We predict that positive campaigning reduces political distrust. This can be explained by *affective priming theory*, according to which “positive mood should activate the general node for positive affect which, in turn, should activate positively valenced concepts” (Kühne et al., 2011, p. 490). In other words, when individuals are exposed to positive campaign messages, positive emotions such as enthusiasm should be activated (Brader, 2006). Then, when judging the trustworthiness of politicians, positive considerations are more likely to be activated in memory, leading to a positive effect on trust. That is, because positive campaigning primes positive emotional appeals that serve as primes in further judgments, we expect it to decrease political distrust.

H2: Perceived positive campaigning decreases distrust in politicians over time.

The nature of relationships between perceptions of dirty, negative, and positive campaigning and distrust in politicians may not be one-directional, but instead reciprocal. Research has also shown that political trust can serve as an independent variable and predict political attitudes such as specific policy support or government satisfaction (Hetherington, 1998; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). As the *trust-as-heuristic thesis* states, political trust may function as a motivational basis for evaluations of political outcomes (Hetherington, 2004; Hetherington & Globetti, 2002; Rudolph, 2017). Citizens tend to use cognitive shortcuts or “rules of thumb for judgment” (Kunda, 1999, p. 56), so-called *heuristic processing* (Chaiken & Ledgerwood,

2012), to overcome the perceived complexity and impenetrability of politics and to make reliable political inferences. As such, political trust can operate as a heuristic, primarily for specific policy evaluations (Hetherington & Husser, 2012; Rudolph & Evans, 2005). Easton (1975) contended in his seminal work that political trust can be related to more diffuse forms of political support. Thus, it may function as a heuristic for more “fundamental [evaluations] directed to basic aspects of the [political] system” (p. 437). We therefore argue that diffuse support can also provoke heuristic evaluations of the conflict culture in politics. The conflict culture builds one of the cornerstones of political discourse in democratic political systems (Lijphart, 1999; Rokkan, 1999). Thus, when political trust is low, it may function as a heuristic for negative evaluations of the conflict culture in politics, characterized by high levels of offending disputes, attacks below-the-belt, and personal dislike between politicians. We therefore hypothesize that distrust in politicians is positively associated with perceived dirty campaigning over time, suggesting a reciprocal relationship.

H3: Distrust in politicians increases perceived dirty campaigning over time.

Yet for negative and positive campaigning, the available body of evidence doesn't allow a prediction as to whether both perceptions are influenced by distrust in politicians. One could speculate that distrust in politicians leads to increased perceptions of positive campaigning. The reason may be that distrusting individuals perceive politicians as exaggerating successes and downplaying weaknesses. That is, to distrust politicians could mean that politicians are not perceived to be self-critical, i.e., they may always present themselves in a positive light, no matter how negative their actual performance is. Therefore, if individuals distrust politicians, they may expect that politicians will overemphasize positive performances in their campaigns. In short, distrust may lead to the perception that politicians sweep their weaknesses under the carpet, leading to overly positive self-presentations. As for negative campaigning, there are no substantial grounds to derive expectations. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to look for such reciprocal effects in order to make statements about potential reinforcing spirals. Therefore, and given the lack of prior work, we formulate a research question:

RQ2: How does distrust in politicians affect (a) perceived negative and (b) perceived positive campaigning over time?

## Method

We conducted a two-wave online panel survey which took place during the campaign period of the 2019 Austrian National election. Panel surveys are well-suited to investigate campaign contexts because they allow to analyze stability and change on the individual level during a campaign period (Hsiao, 2014). The participants of this study were recruited by Dynata, a professional polling company. Altogether, 1105 participants fully completed the survey questionnaire in wave one, which took place from July 24 to August 6, 2019. The data collection for the second wave took place before the Austrian National election on September 29, 2019 and was completed on September 21. The time interval of six weeks between the two panel waves appears adequate to account for the intensive campaign phase of an election. 564 participants finished the survey during the second wave, which implies a retention rate of 51% between wave one and wave two. The study followed all ethical guidelines proposed by WAPOR (2011).<sup>1</sup>

To ensure the quality of our data, we chose a threshold of more than 10 minutes as necessary completion time of the 25-minute-long survey, resulting in a final sample of  $N = 524$ . We used a quota sample based on the distribution of age (ranging from 18 to 81 years,  $M = 49.40$ ,  $SD = 15.28$ ), gender (49.4% of the participants were female), and education in Austria. Participants' education level was not fully in line with the quota, but heterogeneous with 49.2% of participants who held a high school diploma and 22.7% who finished higher education. We compared the valid cases that only answered wave one to the valid cases that took part in both waves. With regard to age, respondents that completed both waves were significantly older ( $M = 49.40$ ,  $SD = 15.28$ ) as compared to respondents that only completed the first wave ( $M = 44.80$ ,  $SD = 16.37$ ),  $t(1033) = -4.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . There was no systematic difference in respondents' gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1035) = 3.68$ ,  $p = .055$ , or education  $\chi^2(2, N = 1035) = 3.68$ ,  $p = .159$ . Data are available at [https://osf.io/zgu9v/?view\\_only=b0054b162543460aae2190b7d337032f](https://osf.io/zgu9v/?view_only=b0054b162543460aae2190b7d337032f).

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<sup>1</sup>At the time of the study, there was no IRB board for standard research at the Department of Communication, University of Vienna. However, the ethical conduct was ensured by several steps. Individuals signed an informed consent form before their participation in each survey wave which informed them about the purpose of this study and all their rights regarding their data and participation, such as the right to end the study at any point, the full anonymization of their responses, or their right to withdraw the consent for the usage of parts or the entirety of their data. Participants could contact the researchers at any time to request additional information or withdraw their consent. Since the data collection was conducted by the market research institute Dynata, there was an additional external screening of the questionnaire to ensure full compliance with the GDPR. This procedure ensured that no data is collected that can make respondents identifiable and that participants can refrain from answering sensitive questions, e.g., in regard to their political affiliation.

## Measures

If not stated differently, we employed a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) for the measurements of all variables.

### Perceived dirty campaigning

Participants' perception of dirty campaigning was based on the conceptualization of Brooks and Geer (2007) and Mutz and Reeves (2005), with measures for unfair campaign methods being added. Participants were asked how strongly they agreed with the following statements regarding the current election campaign: "The parties are using dishonest methods in the campaign"; "The parties are using smear campaigns against the political opponents"; "The electoral campaign is taking place 'below-the-belt'"; "The candidates are getting personally vilified" (T1:  $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ; T2:  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ).

### Perceived negative campaigning

Perceived negative campaigning was measured with three statements: "The parties engage with each other in a very critical but respectful way"; "The parties emphasize the negative aspects of their political opponents but do so in an objective way"; "The parties attack each other but do not go 'below-the-belt'" (T1:  $\alpha = .66$ ,  $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ; T2:  $\alpha = .71$ ,  $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

### Perceived positive campaigning

Measures for perceived positive campaigning included three statements that were based on the conceptualization of Lau and Pomper (2001, 2004): "The parties emphasize their own advantages and successes"; "The parties focus on presenting themselves in a positive way"; "The main focus in the campaigns of the parties constitutes the emphasis on their own strengths" (T1:  $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ; T2:  $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ).

### Distrust in politicians

The measures of distrust in politicians were based on the conceptual distinction of evaluations of regime performance as a form of diffuse political support by Norris (2011) and on similar measures by Craig et al. (1990). The items included three statements: "Politicians in Austria rarely keep their promises made to the public"; "Politicians in Austria care more about their party strategies than about actual topics"; "Politicians in Austria are dishonest to their voters" (T1:  $\alpha = .74$ ,  $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ; T2:  $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ).

### Control variables

We controlled for participants' *demographics* (i.e., *age*, *gender*, *education level*) as well as for *political interest*, *political knowledge*, and *political participation*

(see the supplemental Appendix for complete details). This is important to rule out engagement related constructs as potential confounds. For instance, perceptions of negative campaigning may be related to increased political knowledge or interest, and this may, in turn, affect distrust in politicians. We also controlled for *party preferences* because preferences for a certain political party may differently affect both perceptions of negative, dirty, and positive campaigning as well as distrust in politicians (see supplementary data for complete details).

### Data analysis

We ran OLS regression models (model 1:  $R^2_{Adj} = .38$ ,  $F(15, 508) = 22.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ; model 2:  $R^2_{Adj} = .31$ ,  $F(15, 508) = 16.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ; model 3:  $R^2_{Adj} = .20$ ,  $F(15, 508) = 10.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ; model 4:  $R^2_{Adj} = .26$ ,  $F(15, 508) = 12.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with lagged dependent variables and controlling for autoregressive associations.<sup>2</sup> This procedure allows us to compare individuals with the same score of the dependent variables at T1 and explain changes in the dependent variable from T1 to T2.

### Results

Table 1 depicts all findings. For hypothesis 1, we theorized that perceived dirty campaigning increases distrust in politicians over time. Confirming H1, the findings showed a significant positive effect of perceived dirty campaigning at T1 on distrust in politicians at T2 ( $b = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = .028$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.17]). As displayed in Figure 1, every 1 unit increase in perceived dirty campaigning at T1 increases the predicted value for distrust in politicians at T2 by 0.09 units.

RQ1 asked about the relationship between perceived negative campaigning and distrust in politicians over time. We observed no significant effect

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<sup>2</sup>We have performed robustness tests for multicollinearity, model specification error, and heteroscedasticity. For multicollinearity, we calculated the variance inflation factor (VIF) for all independent and control variables in each regression model (Thompson et al., 2017). No VIF-value above 3 was reported. For model specification error, we applied Ramsey's regression equation specification error test (RESET; see Ramsey, 1969). In none of our regression models a specification error was confirmed (model 1:  $F(3, 505) = 0.66$ ,  $p = .577$ ; model 2:  $F(3, 505) = 0.38$ ,  $p = .77$ ; model 3:  $F(3, 505) = 0.34$ ,  $p = .79$ ; model 4:  $F(3, 505) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .122$ ). For heteroscedasticity, we performed White's heteroskedasticity test (White, 1980). Model 1,  $\chi^2(133, N = 524) = 155.45$ ,  $p = .089$ , verified the null hypothesis and confirmed homoscedasticity. Model 2,  $\chi^2(133, N = 524) = 162.53$ ,  $p = .042$ , model 3,  $\chi^2(133, N = 524) = 175.17$ ,  $p = .008$ , and model 4,  $\chi^2(133, N = 524) = 168.74$ ,  $p = .02$ , falsified the null hypothesis and thus confirmed heteroskedasticity. To address this issue for the regression models 2 to 4, we specified robust standard errors.

**Table 1.** Predicting distrust in politicians and perceived dirty, negative, and positive campaigning.

	Distrust in Politicians (T2)	Dirty Campaigning (T2)	Negative Campaigning (T2)	Positive Campaigning (T2)
<b>Independent Variables (T1)</b>				
Distrust in Politicians	0.54*** (0.04) [0.46, 0.62]	0.20*** (0.04) [0.12, 0.29]	-0.00 (0.05) [-0.10, 0.09]	0.01 (0.05) [-0.09, 0.11]
Dirty Campaigning	0.09* (0.04) [0.01, 0.17]	0.43*** (0.05) [0.34, 0.52]	-0.17*** (0.05) [-0.26, -0.08]	0.06 (0.05) [-0.04, 0.16]
Negative Campaigning	-0.02 (0.04) [-0.09, 0.06]	-0.09* (0.05) [-0.18, -0.01]	0.35*** (0.05) [0.26, 0.45]	-0.02 (0.05) [-0.12, 0.08]
Positive Campaigning	0.01 (0.03) [-0.05, 0.08]	0.04 (0.04) [-0.03, 0.11]	0.01 (0.04) [-0.06, 0.09]	0.43*** (0.05) [0.34, 0.52]
<b>Control Variables (T1)</b>				
Political Knowledge	(0.03) [-0.08, 0.03]	(0.03) [-0.05, 0.07]	(0.03) [0.00, 0.13]	(0.04) [-0.05, 0.09]
Political Participation	-0.02 (0.03) [-0.08, 0.03]	-0.01 (0.03) [-0.06, 0.04]	-0.08** (0.03) [-0.14, -0.02]	-0.01 (0.03) [-0.07, 0.06]
ÖVP	-0.01 (0.02) [-0.05, 0.03]	0.03 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.07]	0.03 (0.03) [-0.02, 0.08]	0.03 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.07]
SPÖ	-0.05*** (0.01) [-0.08, -0.02]	0.01 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.05]	0.02 (0.02) [-0.01, 0.06]	-0.02 (0.02) [-0.05, 0.02]
FPÖ	-0.02 (0.02) [-0.05, 0.01]	-0.01 (0.02) [-0.04, 0.03]	0.01 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.05]	-0.02 (0.02) [-0.05, 0.02]
Greens	0.01 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.04]	0.01 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.05]	0.01 (0.02) [-0.03, 0.04]	-0.01 (0.02) [-0.04, 0.03]
NEOS	-0.00 (0.02) [-0.03, 0.03]	0.02 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.06]	-0.01 (0.02) [-0.05, 0.02]	-0.00 (0.02) [-0.05, 0.04]
Age	0.00 (0.02) [-0.03, 0.03]	-0.01 (0.02) [-0.05, 0.02]	0.00 (0.02) [-0.03, 0.04]	0.02 (0.02) [-0.02, 0.06]
Female	0.01 (0.00) [-0.00, 0.01]	-0.00 (0.00) [-0.01, 0.01]	-0.01 (0.00) [-0.01, 0.00]	0.01** (0.00) [0.01, 0.02]
	-0.06 (0.09) [-0.24, 0.11]	-0.04 (0.10) [-0.23, 0.15]	0.03 (0.11) [-0.18, 0.23]	-0.03 (0.11) [-0.26, 0.19]

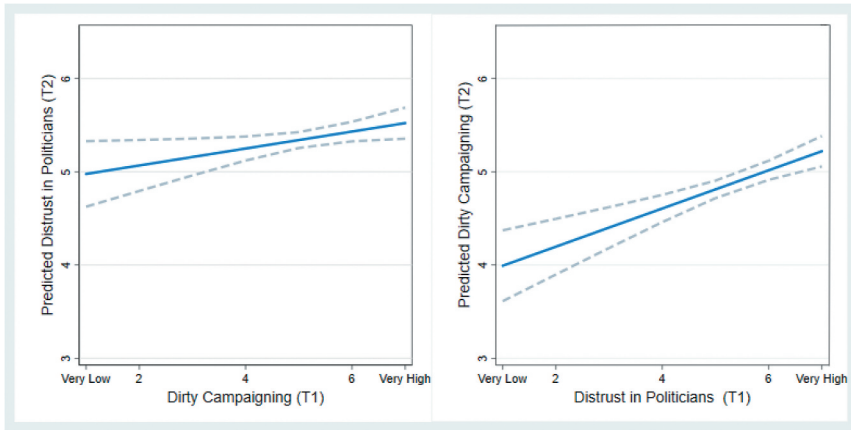
(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Distrust in Politicians (T2)	Dirty Campaigning (T2)	Negative Campaigning (T2)	Positive Campaigning (T2)
High Education	-0.09 (0.09) [-0.27, 0.09]	0.08 (0.10) [-0.11, 0.27]	-0.03 (0.11) [-0.24, 0.17]	-0.18 (0.12) [-0.41, 0.05]
Constant	2.46*** (0.46) [1.56, 3.35]	1.43** (0.50) [0.44, 2.41]	3.22*** (0.52) [2.20, 4.24]	2.24*** (0.57) [1.11, 3.36]
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.38	0.31	0.20	0.26
F	22.32	16.08	10.19	12.28
N	524	524	524	524

Standard errors in parentheses. 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Robust standard errors specified for regression models 2,3, and 4. Prefix "Perceived" omitted for variables "Positive Campaigning", "Negative Campaigning", and "Dirty Campaigning". Prefix "Party Preference" omitted for variables with party labels. ÖVP: Austrian People's Party. SPÖ: Social Democratic Party of Austria. FPÖ: Freedom Party of Austria. NEOS: The New Austria and Liberal Forum. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .





**Figure 1.** Predicted over-time effect of perceived dirty campaigning on distrust in politicians (Left Graph) and of distrust in politicians on perceived dirty campaigning (Right Graph).

*Note.* 95% Confidence intervals in dashed lines. Figure based on results of OLS regression models of Table 1. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2.

of perceived negative campaigning at T1 on distrust in politicians at T2 ( $b = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = .648$ , 95% CI  $[-0.09, 0.06]$ ).

Hypotheses 2 expected that perceived positive campaigning decreases distrust in politicians over time. H2 was rejected because the findings indicated no significant relationship between perceived positive campaigning at T1 and distrust in politicians at T2 ( $b = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p = .669$ , 95% CI  $[-0.05, 0.08]$ ).

For reciprocal effects, hypothesis 3 predicted that distrust in politicians increases perceived dirty campaigning over time. The results confirmed H3, showing a significant positive effect estimate of distrust in politicians at T1 on perceived dirty campaigning at T2 ( $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[0.12, 0.29]$ ). Figure 1 demonstrates that every 1 unit increase in distrust in politicians at T1 increases the predicted value for perceived dirty campaigning at T2 by 0.20 units.

For RQ2, we asked how distrust in politicians affects (a) perceived negative and (b) perceived positive campaigning over time. Our findings show neither a significant relationship between distrust in politicians at T1 and perceived negative campaigning at T2 ( $b = -0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = .921$ , 95% CI  $[-0.10, 0.09]$ ) nor between distrust in politicians at T1 and perceived positive campaigning at T2 ( $b = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = .823$ , 95% CI  $[-0.09, 0.11]$ ).

### **Additional analysis**

The findings also revealed a significant negative reciprocal association between perceived dirty campaigning at T1 and perceived negative campaigning at T2 ( $b = -0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.26, -0.08]) as well as vice versa ( $b = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = .038$ , 95% CI [-0.18, -0.01]). Interestingly, political interest at T1 positively predicted perceived negative campaigning at T2 ( $b = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p = .043$ , 95% CI [0.00, 0.13]), whereas political knowledge at T1 negatively predicted perceived negative campaigning at T2 ( $b = -0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95% CI [-0.14, -0.02]). Party preference for the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) at T1 had a significant negative effect on distrust in politicians at T2 ( $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $p = < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.08, -0.02]) and age at T1 had a significant positive effect on perceived positive campaigning at T2 ( $b = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.02]).

### **Discussion**

Negative campaigning has been treated as an umbrella term in the literature, summarizing diverse campaign behaviors such as substantive criticism, character assassinations, pejorative language, or the purposeful spreading of false information (Benoit, 2015; Haselmayer, 2019; Nai & Walter, 2015). In this paper, we attempted to conceptually separate dirty from negative and positive campaigning. We conceptualized dirty campaigning as campaign communication between political actors that includes uncivil criticism, such as impoliteness, disrespect, and defamation, or unfair political methods. According to our conceptualization and on the semantic level, negative campaigning statements are civil because criticism is uttered in a constructive manner. On the normative level, dirty campaigning is socially rejected and perceived as negative action, while negative campaigning is socially accepted and perceived as positive action. The main distinction between positive compared to negative and dirty campaigning takes place on the semantic and the directional level. Positive campaigning involves statements in which political actors positively emphasize their own achievements (Lau & Pomper, 2001), whereas negative campaigning encompasses civil and dirty campaigning encompasses uncivil criticism. Positive campaigning also involves only one political actor, while negative and dirty campaigning are always directed against another political actor. Positive and negative campaigning, however, may share similarities on the normative level. Both constitute forms of campaign communication that are socially accepted and thus perceived as a positive action. Confirming our reasoning, the correlation coefficient between perceived positive and

perceived negative campaigning indicated a weak significant positive correlation (T1:  $r = .10$ ,  $p = .02$ ; T2:  $r = .09$ ,  $p = .045$ ).

We argued that these three facets of political campaigning should lead to different outcomes in terms of distrust in politicians. In fact, the findings of a two-wave panel study using autoregressive models suggest a reciprocal relationship between perceptions of dirty campaigning and distrust in politicians. Although we lack the data to demonstrate more complex over-time relationships, the findings are suggestive of a “vicious circle”: People who perceive political campaigns during an election period as dirty are more likely to decrease in their assessment of trust in politicians. Yet if individuals distrust politicians, they are more likely to perceive campaigns to be dirty compared to individuals who are more trustful in politicians. This finding is important because political trust serves as a legitimacy foundation of representative politics in a democratic political system (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2011). As our findings show, dirty campaigning has the potential to undermine this legitimacy foundation. This can have important consequences. For instance, in times of crisis, citizens may be unwilling to support the proposed crisis handling because they consider political actions generally ineffective. Thus, political trust is a fragile political good that can be impaired by dirty campaigning.

Interestingly, there were no effects whatsoever regarding the relationship of positive as well as negative campaigning and distrust in politicians. These findings suggest that substantial criticism as well as the stressing of positive achievements are perceived as normal and to-be-expected behaviors during political campaigns (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Also, in interpersonal communication, one could argue that negative communication patterns (i.e., substantial criticism or having an argument with someone) are not automatically perceived as inadequate or as indicative of violation of norms. In other words, during times of national election, it belongs to the nature of democratic campaigns that parties praise themselves or criticize their opponents (Lau & Pomper, 2004). We would like to stress that, in theoretical terms, such null findings are as important as observing significant relationships. It is important to note that the autoregressive effects were controlled in all models. Thus, we cannot argue that the findings are due to semantic similarities in the items: These were basically controlled for by the autoregressive effect. It is also important to note that we statistically controlled party preferences and various matters for campaign involvement.

The findings confirm our key theoretical argument that negative and dirty campaigning are two distinct concepts. We contribute to the previous literature by showing that negative campaigning cannot serve as an umbrella term that subsumes dirty campaigning. Also, our conceptualization of dirty campaigning is multi-faceted because it goes beyond the incivility concept (Jamieson, 1993; Mutz, 2015) and encompasses the use of unfair campaign

methods, such as techno-distortions, deepfakes, or voter suppression tactics (Kaid, 2001; Newman et al., 2018). Thus, our findings show that dirty campaigning as a broader and multi-faceted concept has the potential to undermine trust in politicians. Our study supports the basic assumption of the new video malaise theory that citizens expect from political actors in their daily exchanges to oblige to interpersonal norms of civility (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Dirty campaigning violates these norms and thus can impair the reputation of political actors and increase distrust in them. Our conceptualization of dirty campaigning can also provide a better understanding of this theory for the entire campaign context. The findings indicate that the violation of such norms not only applies to interpersonal speech or televised incivility (Mutz, 2015). It also involves explicit political statements (Brooks & Geer, 2007) and all forms of communication channels, such as SNS, political ads, press conferences, or press releases.

This study also lends support to the trust-as-heuristic thesis (Hetherington, 2004; Rudolph, 2017). Distrust in politicians appears to function as a motivational basis for evaluations of political outcomes. Citizens use such heuristics as cognitive shortcuts to overcome the perceived complexity of politics and to make reliable political inferences. As such, our findings show that high distrust in politicians may work as heuristic for negative evaluations of the political conflict culture, characterized by high levels of perceived dirty campaigning. Our findings also speak against affective priming as a theoretical account to explain distrust in politicians (Brader, 2006; Kühne et al., 2011). One may speculate that the substantial impressions that individuals get about campaigns are more important for their trust judgments compared to the activation potential of negative and positive considerations in memory. Affective priming, as a process, may be traceable in laboratory experiments, but be less relevant in real-world campaigns that evolve over time.

We also observed significant, reciprocal negative over-time relationships between dirty and negative campaigning. That is, respondents who perceived dirty aspects of campaigns were less likely to observe the substantial exchange of arguments, and vice versa. This makes sense, given that dirty campaigning actually renders a substantial and respectful exchange of arguments impossible. That is, if one political side goes dirty, this may change the course of the campaign of both sides. It also signals a lack of sincere interest in discussing with one's opponent.

Political interest was found to be positively related to perceived negative campaigning. It may be that those who are interested in politics are more likely to expose themselves to campaign content in which a critical exchange of arguments takes place. Paradoxically, we observed the opposite effect for political knowledge as a predictor of perceived negative campaigning. One may speculate that political interest is more likely to lead to motivated processing of

campaign information, as compared to political knowledge. This can, unfortunately, not be clarified with the present data, and additional empirical evidence is needed to corroborate this claim. Party preference for the ÖVP decreased distrust in politicians over time. This finding may be related to the very high approval ratings of the frontrunner of the ÖVP, Sebastian Kurz, among voters with ÖVP preferences which can spill over to increase trust in politicians in general. Finally, age increased perceived positive campaigning over time. Older citizens may have more positive attitudes toward politics than younger citizens and as such may also perceive the style of campaigns to be more positive (Goerres, 2007).

### **Limitations**

There are some important limitations. We have two panel waves only, which does not allow us to test more complex dynamic relationships. Replicating our findings with more than two panel waves is thus warranted. Also, as in all survey research, we measured perceptions as opposed to actual behavior. The underlying logic is that only perceptions matter for trust outcomes. If there is a dirty campaign that respondents perceive as unproblematic, then effects on trust judgments are arguably unlikely. We also have not distinguished between dirty campaigning in different communication channels and instead focused on dirty campaigning as a general perception of campaigns. Such a distinction would be beneficial to test the second core assumption of the new video malaise theory. Regardless, our findings should be replicated with different designs, such as experiments that could help to unravel the underlying mechanisms.

Future research should also strive to develop a more fine-grained understanding of dirty campaigning, and potentially empirically distinguish impolite, disrespectful, and defamatory attacks from unfair campaign methods. A potential experiment could investigate how the effects of different subdimensions of dirty campaigning on party evaluations and political attitudes vary regarding different targets. For instance, dirty campaigning by a center-left political party against a center-right political party could evoke different reactions and legitimacy concerns than used against a right-wing political party. Future experimental or survey research could also measure the effects of dirty and negative campaigning on emotional reactions toward campaigns. Further research could also explore citizens-related perceptions and definitions of dirty, negative, and positive campaigning and compare them with established concepts in the literature. The latter research avenue was recently pursued in a survey-based study by Lipsitz and Geer (2017) but could also benefit from more explorative methodological approaches, such as focus group discussions.

## Conclusion

In modern political campaigns around the world, we find evidence of “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” and these different facets of campaigns can greatly differ in their effects on citizens. This paper made the case for distinguishing dirty from negative and positive campaigning. We demonstrated that dirty, but not negative and positive campaigning was positively and reciprocally related to distrust in politicians. These findings suggest that fears regarding the harmful democratic effects of negative campaigning may be overrated, at least when it comes to trust in politicians. At the same time, the recent trend to go dirty in political campaigns may backfire because perceptions of dirty campaigning can decrease trust in politicians which arguably has negative consequences for the functioning of representative democracy as a whole.

## Data availability statement

Data are available from the authors upon request.

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