CURRENT POLITICAL PHENOMENA (30481)

Going Negative in Political Campaigns

Tommaso Nannicini (Bocconi University)
Persuasive communication

Persuasion is a key to success in business, personal career, fund-raising, and… politics

Persuasive communication matters not only for its factual content, but also for its tone/attitude

Key decision in competitive persuasion (DellaVigna & Gentzkow 2010) is whether to run aggressive campaign against rivals or focus on self-promotion

✓ Negative vs positive campaigning in politics
Negative campaigning

First example of negative electoral ad in US Presidential campaign: 1964 “Daisy Spot” aired (only once) by Lyndon B. Johnson against Barry Goldwater

Since then, negative campaigning has enormously increased (maybe reaching a new peak in 2016 election)

Conventional wisdom among practitioners: Negative ads capture voters attention → It pays to go negative

But is it just instinctive (and short-lived) reaction? Or do voters extract information (and update their beliefs) based on the tone of the campaign? How?
Empirical studies on going negative

Do negative electoral ads increase turnout and/or affect swing voters (vs positive electoral ads)?

Ansolabehere et al. (1994): 2 survey experiments in 3 electoral races in California → (One) negative ad reduces voting intentions by 5 percent

Arceneaux and Nickerson (2010): 2 field experiments (canvassing) in Minnesota & Los Angeles → No effect

Studies using observational or survey data and content analysis → No (de-mobilizing) effect

See references at the end of the slides
How to classify empirical studies / 1

Econometric strategies:
- Survey data (multivariate correlations)
- Survey experiments
- Survey experiments in the field
- Field experiments (partisan vs nonpartisan)

Treatment tools:
- Flyer/hanger
- Mailer
- Phone call
- Video ad
- Canvassing
How to classify empirical studies / 2

Timing:
- Independent of real campaign
- Before real campaign
- Right before real campaign

Outcomes:
- Self-declared (instantaneous) reaction
- Self-declared voting intention
- Self-declared retrospective vote
- Observed vote
- Beliefs
Potential effects:
- No effect
- Positive/negative effect on receiver of the attack
- Positive/negative effect on the sender of the attack
- Positive/negative effect on third parties
- No average treatment effect, but heterogeneous effects
We study the *differential response of male and female voters* to negative vs positive campaigning in Italy

**Study 1: Survey experiment (in the field)**
In the 2011 municipal election in Milan, we randomized negative vs positive (vs no) campaign by the main (male) opponent using 4 different campaigning tools

**Study 2: Event study**
In the same election, we use sudden attack by (female) incumbent against (male) opponent during a TV show
Study 3: Field experiment (canvassing RCT)

In the 2015 municipal election in Cava de’ Tirreni, we randomized negative vs. positive (vs. no) campaign by one of the (male) opponents
**Study 1: Survey experiment**

- **Field context:** 2011 municipal election in Milan
- **Treatment:** Positive vs negative electoral campaign by the opponent (same campaign by the incumbent)
- **Electoral campaign tools:** We randomize (i) video interview with the candidate; (ii) campaign slogan; (iii) open letter; (iv) video ad endorsed by candidate
- **Online sample** of actual eligible voters, from 1,536 individuals in 1st survey to 1,140 in the 4th
- **Four surveys:** (1) pre-treatment information; (2) 1st wave of political ads; (3) 2nd wave of political ads; (4) post-treatment electoral survey
Experiment setup

Survey I
Mar 28/Apr 4
Sample size: 1,536 individuals
to obtain personal information & political and social attitudes

Randomization

Positive Treatment
Negative Treatment
Control Group

Survey II
Apr 26/May 2

Survey III
May 6/May 12

Elections
May 14-15
Pisapia 48 % Moratti 41,6%

Survey IV
May 16/ May 23

Run-off Elections (May 29-30) Pisapia becomes Major of Milano with 55 % of the votes
Informational treatments

Individuals in the treatment groups watch 4 electoral campaign items, in a positive vs negative tone by the opponent, and same (real-world) tone by the incumbent

- **Item 1** - 100-second video interview (2\(^{nd}\) survey)
- **Item 2** - Campaign slogan (2\(^{nd}\) survey)
- **Item 3** - Letter to voters (3\(^{rd}\) survey)
- **Item 4** - 60-second endorsed video ad (3\(^{rd}\) survey)

For each electoral campaign item by the opponent, same issues, same format, and same setting (available online)
Positive campaign slogan

PISAPIA SINDACO

= MENO TRAFFICO  PIÚ VERDE

CAMBIARE MILANO  SI PUÒ.
5 ANNI DI MORATTI

= 

PIÚ TRAFFICO   MENO VERDE
Cambiare Milano

SI PUÒ.
Empirical strategy

\[ Y_i = \alpha_1 POS_i + \alpha_2 NEG_i + \beta_1 POS_i \times FEMALE_i + \beta_2 NEG_i \times FEMALE_i + \delta FEMALE_i + \varepsilon_i \]

- (H1) Treatment effect of positive vs. no campaign for females: \( \alpha_1 + \beta_1 = 0 \)
- (H2) Treatment effect of negative vs. no campaign for females: \( \alpha_2 + \beta_2 = 0 \)
- (H3) Treatment effect of positive vs. negative campaign for males: \( \alpha_1 - \alpha_2 = 0 \)
- (H4) Treatment effect of positive vs. negative campaign for females:
  \[(\alpha_1 + \beta_1) - (\alpha_2 + \beta_2) = 0\]
- (H5) Differential treatment effect of positive vs. negative campaign between males and females: \( \beta_1 - \beta_2 = 0 \)
- (H6) Treatment effect of any campaign vs. no campaign for males: \( \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 = 0 \)
- (H7) Treatment effect of any campaign vs. no campaign for females:
  \[(\alpha_1 + \beta_1) + (\alpha_2 + \beta_2) = 0\]
- (H8) Differential treatment effect of any campaign vs. no campaign between males and females: \( \beta_1 + \beta_2 = 0 \)
Validity checklist

✓ Covariate balance tests
✓ Covariate balance tests with gender interaction
✓ Covariate balance tests by gender strata
✓ Include attrition rate among covariates

✓ Same beliefs for males/females → Incumbent’s campaign perceived as more negative in the treatment group associated with negative messages

✓ Full HP testing in the paper
Positive vs negative, 2nd survey
Positive vs negative, 3rd survey

Graphs showing the comparison between males and females in Agree with Incumbent's Letter, Agree with Opponent's Letter, Trust Incumbent's Video, and Trust Opponent's Video, highlighting gender differences.
Positive vs negative, first round

- Incumbent's Vote Share: Gender difference = -0.106*
- Opponent's Vote Share: Gender difference = 0.125**
- Others' Vote Share: Gender difference = -0.018
- Turnout Rate: Gender difference = 0.034
Positive vs negative, runoff
## Overall empirical results, first round

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Turnout rate</th>
<th>Opponent’s vote share</th>
<th>Incumbent’s vote share</th>
<th>Others’ vote share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive campaign ($\alpha_1$)</strong></td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>-0.110*</td>
<td>0.127**</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.043]</td>
<td>[0.059]</td>
<td>[0.054]</td>
<td>[0.063]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative campaign ($\alpha_2$)</strong></td>
<td>0.082**</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
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<td>[0.037]</td>
<td>[0.069]</td>
<td>[0.061]</td>
<td>[0.054]</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Positive campaign × Female ($\beta_1$)</strong></td>
<td>-0.080</td>
<td>0.190**</td>
<td>-0.207***</td>
<td>0.018</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.051]</td>
<td>[0.080]</td>
<td>[0.075]</td>
<td>[0.070]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative campaign × Female ($\beta_2$)</strong></td>
<td>-0.114**</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.049]</td>
<td>[0.083]</td>
<td>[0.077]</td>
<td>[0.065]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>-0.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.040]</td>
<td>[0.071]</td>
<td>[0.057]</td>
<td>[0.052]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| P-value $H1$: $\alpha_1 + \beta_1 = 0$ | 0.068* | 0.154 | 0.119 | 0.994 |
| P-value $H2$: $\alpha_2 + \beta_2 = 0$ | 0.289 | 0.851 | 0.982 | 0.770 |
| P-value $H3$: $\alpha_1 - \alpha_2 = 0$ | 0.092* | 0.435 | 0.619 | 0.876 |
| P-value $H4$: $\alpha_1 + \beta_1 - (\alpha_2 + \beta_2) = 0$ | 0.556 | 0.062* | 0.074* | 0.776 |
| P-value $H5$: $\beta_1 - \beta_2 = 0$ | 0.365 | 0.035** | 0.076* | 0.785 |
| P-value $H6$: $\alpha_1 + \alpha_2 = 0$ | 0.137 | 0.132 | 0.033** | 0.694 |
| P-value $H7$: $\alpha_1 + \beta_1 + \alpha_2 + \beta_2 = 0$ | 0.102 | 0.460 | 0.342 | 0.870 |
| P-value $H8$: $\beta_1 + \beta_2 = 0$ | 0.043** | 0.104 | 0.034** | 0.656 |

| Obs. | 1,140 | 912    | 912    | 912    |
Channels

• To analyze potential channels, which may drive gender differences, we add interaction terms with:
  – Age
  – College education
  – Left-wing political orientation
  – Low interest in politics

• Introduction of these additional explanatory variables (and of respective interaction terms) does not eliminate gender effect

• But what about gender identification with the candidate?
Study 2: Event study

- Moratti ran largely negative campaign (according to 75% of control group) while Pisapia largely positive
- On May 11th during SKY TV debate, Moratti accused Pisapia of links to terrorists in his youth
- We exploit answers to 3rd survey (which was running) plus Twitter data (content analysis with 54 positive vs 54 negative stems)
Negative vs positive, Sky TV

![Bar charts showing gender differences in responses to Incumbent's and Opponent's letters and videos.]
Negative vs positive, Twitter
Study 3: Field experiment

- Field experiment in 2015 in Cava de’ Tirreni
- Cava: Town with 46k voters and 55 electoral precincts, 40km south of Naples. May 31st 2015
- Background: Center-right incumbent, two main opponents from center-left and civic list; all males
- Canvassing done by 20 volunteers (aged 18-25) from May 10th to May 29th
- Negative campaigning in 18 precincts (around 15,500 voters), positive campaigning in 18 precincts, 19 precincts in the control group
Canvassing map
Canvassing by volunteers
Experimental design

- **Canvassing**: (i) flyers in all treated precincts; (ii) buzz intercom for personal communication; (iii) speech at their home by canvassers, if allowed in

- **Treatment**: Positive vs negative electoral messages by civic-list opponent
  - We *bargained* the text with the candidate as this was big part of his true campaign
  - But we didn’t tell him the location of treatment groups

- **Campaign tools** that we randomized: (i) flyers; (ii) hangers; (iii) message by the canvassers

- **Two phone surveys before and after the election**: Sample of around 1,100 eligible voters in 1st survey; 857 in the 2nd
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAVA CI APPARTIENE</th>
<th>CAVA CI APPARTIENE</th>
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<tr>
<td>METTIAMOCI IN GIOCO</td>
<td>RIPRENDIAMOCELA INSIEME</td>
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</table>

**Nei prossimi 5 anni con Lamberti:**
- PIÙ ASCOLTO E DIALOGO COI CITTADINI
- PIÙ COMPETENZA E TRASPARENZA
- PIÙ SERVIZI OSPEDALIERI E TERRITORIALI

**Negli ultimi 5 anni con Galdi:**
- TROPPA VECCHIA POLITICA
- TROPPI SPRECHI E TROPPE TASSE COMUNALI
- TROPPI DEBITI SULLE SPALLE DEI CITTADINI
Volunteers in action
Empirical strategy

\[ Y_i = \alpha_1 POS_i + \alpha_2 NEG_i + \beta_1 POS_i \times FEMALE_i + \beta_2 NEG_i \times FEMALE_i + \delta FEMALE_i + \varepsilon_i \]

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Validity checklist

✓ Covariate balance tests at the polling place level
✓ Covariate balance tests at the individual (survey) level
✓ Covariate balance tests with gender interaction
✓ Covariate balance tests by gender strata
✓ Include attrition rate among covariates

✓ Incumbent’s campaign perceived as more negative in the treatment group associated with negative messages and no treatment effects on beliefs about valence and ideology of main candidates
Positive vs negative, full sample

- Incumbent's Vote Share: Gender difference = -0.104
- Opponent's Vote Share: Gender difference = 0.125*
- Others' Vote Share: Gender difference = -0.005
- Turnout Rate: Gender difference = -0.075
Positive vs negative, canvassed sample
Overall empirical results, canvassed

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<td>0.041</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
<td>-0.144</td>
<td>0.166</td>
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<tr>
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<td>[0.074]</td>
<td>[0.031]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive campaign $\times$ Female ($\beta_1$)</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>0.159**</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>-0.122</td>
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<td>[0.083]</td>
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<td>[0.125]</td>
<td>[0.152]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.053]</td>
<td>[0.041]</td>
<td>[0.096]</td>
<td>[0.100]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P$-value $H1$: $\alpha_1 + \beta_1 = 0$</td>
<td>0.628</td>
<td>0.060*</td>
<td>0.014**</td>
<td>0.622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P$-value $H2$: $\alpha_2 + \beta_2 = 0$</td>
<td>0.757</td>
<td>0.345</td>
<td>0.073*</td>
<td>0.094*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P$-value $H3$: $\alpha_1 - \alpha_2 = 0$</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td>0.015**</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>0.649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P$-value $H4$: $\alpha_1 + \beta_1 - (\alpha_2 + \beta_2) = 0$</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>0.372</td>
<td>0.618</td>
<td>0.338</td>
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<tr>
<td>$P$-value $H5$: $\beta_1 - \beta_2 = 0$</td>
<td>0.963</td>
<td>0.021**</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0.334</td>
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<tr>
<td>$P$-value $H6$: $\alpha_1 + \alpha_2 = 0$</td>
<td>0.480</td>
<td>0.211</td>
<td>0.035**</td>
<td>0.199</td>
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<td>$P$-value $H7$: $\alpha_1 + \beta_1 + \alpha_2 + \beta_2 = 0$</td>
<td>0.615</td>
<td>0.059*</td>
<td>0.011**</td>
<td>1.183</td>
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<tr>
<td>$P$-value $H8$: $\beta_1 + \beta_2 = 0$</td>
<td>0.389</td>
<td>0.659</td>
<td>0.677</td>
<td>0.739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
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Channels

• To analyze potential channels, which may drive gender differences, we add interaction terms with:
  – Age
  – College education
  – Left-wing political orientation
  – Competition vs cooperation

• Introduction of these additional explanatory variables (and of respective interaction terms) does not eliminate gender effect

• But competition/cooperation measured in very direct and naïve way
What do we get from these 3 studies?

• Positive vs negative affects male/female voters differently
  – Going negative pays off with males but backfires with females
  – And these patterns are not explained by gender differences in observable characteristics
• Results robust to gender combination of sender/receiver:
  – Male against female candidate (Milan – survey experiment)
  – Female against male candidate (Milan – event study)
  – Male against male candidate (Cava – field experiment)
• Similar results in 3 identification frameworks
• Similar results with different campaign tools
Galasso, Nannicini, and Nunnari  
(work in progress)

- Positive spillovers from negative campaigning
- Setting: field experiment (Canvassing in Cava)
- Outcomes: true vote shares at precinct level + self-declared individual votes in the post-election survey
- Effects: negative campaign harms both the sender of the attack and the receiver (incumbent mayor), favoring a third candidate (the main challenger)
- Potential channels: strategic voting vs beliefs updating (backfiring of negative campaign)
- To disentangle between the two…
Welcome to Castel Gufo

• (Fake) Castel Gufo
  – It’s a quite, medium size city located in the center of Italy
  – Its local economy is based on tourism and small business

• Local elections are about to take place in Castel Gufo
  – With a first-past-the-post electoral system
  – Between the (male) incumbent and a (male) opponent
  – We expect a tight race

• During the incumbent’s term in office, no major event took place. The hottest local debate is about the city center being closed to local traffic to benefit tourism
Meet the candidates

The incumbent

The opponent
Positive

Negative
References


References (cont’d)


• Rush (2012), *Optimization at the Obama campaign: a/b testing*.