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

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Abstract

Focusing on the 2019 European Parliament campaign, we investigate parties' engagement in negative campaigning on Facebook and how it is influenced by parties' ideology and their status as governing versus opposition party at the national level. Manual coding of 8,132 Facebook posts of parties from twelve European countries shows that negative posts are less prominent than positive and neutral ones. We also prove that negative posts attract more shares than positive, neutral, and balanced posts, which further increases their prominence on the platform. Hence, users and algorithms are driving negative campaign communication on Facebook to a greater extent than parties.

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

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Patterns of Negative Campaigning during the 2019 European Election:

Political parties' Facebook posts and users' sharing behaviour across twelve countries

Negative campaigning is one of the most used and debated communication strategies in electoral campaigning (Haselmayer, 2019; Richardson, 2001). Political parties resort to it to get voters' support (Russmann, 2017; Nai, 2020) while demobilizing and depressing their opponent's voter base (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004). Negative messages are considered to be more memorable for voters (Papp & Patkós, 2019) and can gain high media attention (Maier & Nai, 2020). Previous research suggests that, on balance, negative campaigning seems more likely to appeal to and mobilize a party's most loyal supporters rather than its opponents (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Meffert et al., 2006) and to persuade neutral voters if the negative message resonates, thereby promoting polarization or party system fragmentation (Lee et al., 2014; Weeks, 2015). However, negative campaigning has also unintended effects: at the party level, electoral preferences for parties engaging in negative campaigning can be weakened through, for instance, the backlash effect (Ceron & D'Adda, 2016; Walter & van der Eijk, 2019); at the societal level, negative messages can reduce trust in politics, potentially leading to disengagement of citizens in democratic processes (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Papp & Patkós, 2019).

Previous research showed notable differences in the degree, types and effects of negative messages between a broad range of communication channels—election manifestos, political advertisements, campaign posters, press releases, televised election debates, news coverage, websites (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Russmann, 2017; Geer 2006; Holtz-Bacha, 2001; Johnston & Kaid, 2002; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Lau & Pomper 2004; Schweitzer, 2010). Therefore, it is surprising that research about negative campaigning on social media platforms, such as Facebook, is still limited (Haselmayer, 2019; for exceptions see Auter & Fine, 2016; Russmann, 2018, 2018c; Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Heiss et al., 2019). This research must be added by analyses of the specifics of negative campaigning on these platforms, especially in light of the debates on their alleged toxic nature and consequences of negative political narratives (Kim & Kim, 2019; Ziegele et al., 2014).

Moreover, the previous U.S. centric perspective of research on negative campaigning (e.g., Geer, 2006; Haynes & Rhine, 1998; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Lau & Pomper, 2004) has meanwhile weakened through a number of studies on negative campaigning in European multiparty-systems (e.g., Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Russmann, 2017). However, with a few exceptions, comparative studies on the role of negative campaigning in multiple countries (Maier & Nai, 2020; Nai, 2020; Papp & Patkós, 2019; Valli & Nai, 2020; Walter et al., 2014)

or in the European Parliament election (Ceron & Curini, 2018; Raycheva & Simunas, 2017; Schweitzer, 2010) are scarce. Therefore, we still know surprisingly little about the differences and structural influences across countries which can be drivers for the use of negative campaigning by political parties.

Our study contributes to closing these gaps by investigating how parties from 12 countries have used Facebook for negative campaigning in the 2019 European election campaign. More specifically, we investigate to what extent political parties used negative compared to positive, neutral, and balanced campaigning strategies, and how often users shared negative compared to non-negative messages. We further explore how these patterns are affected by two party characteristics: (1) party´s role in government or opposition at the national level and (2) their ideological standpoint. Our international comparative content analysis is the first to investigate negative campaigning on Facebook in such a broad range of countries and in a common political election contest. Our approach has the potential for identifying and systematizing structural influences across countries and shared elements of negative campaigning in European parties' election campaigns on Facebook. Further, our analysis of a heterogeneous set of European countries in a single election contest increases the social significance and generalizability of the results compared to previous studies (Riffe et al., 1998).

We examine Facebook since it has become the most important social media platform for political news across Europe (Newman et al., 2020), and political actors meanwhile use it as one of their central communication channel in electoral campaigns (Magin et al., 2017). Moreover, the analysis of Facebook messages allows to reveal the strategic intention of political parties since these messages can reach voters unaffected by any journalistic selection criteria and reflect how political actors position themselves and how they want to be seen by the public. Altogether, our study allows us to advance on prior research and make theoretical contributions to how political actors make use of Facebook's affordances for campaigning negatively as well as whether user engagement contributes to a climate of hate and polarization on the platform. We take up this and other implications of our results in the concluding section.

Negative campaigning on Facebook as a strategy

"Negative campaigning takes a variety of forms" (Haselmayer, 2019, p. 356). Following previous research (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Geer, 2006) we define it as a campaign strategy used by political actors to attack political opponents by criticizing their

behaviour, ideologies, policy positions, set of values, or personal qualities. Exaggerations and negative emotions such as fear, envy, blame and anger are considered a key aspect of negative campaigning (Raycheva & Suminas, 2017). Negative campaigning aims at gaining voters' support by downgrading their attitudes towards the political opponents (Haynes & Rhine, 1998), decreasing the utility that they expect by supporting the opponents, and/or reinforcing and strengthening extant negative associations voters have with the opponents (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Meffert et al., 2006). However, it cannot be taken for granted that these hopes of the political actors will necessarily be fulfilled.

Negative messages can be distinguished from positive, balanced, and neutral ones. Positive messages refer to positively talking about and encouraging a party or politician, as well as highlighting, supporting and applauding a party's or politician's success, qualifications, accomplishments, and campaign tactics (Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Lau & Pomper, 2004). In digital communication, this "positive campaigning" has been used to "stress the effectiveness of hope-driven and positive content [...] [and] to elicit a positive emotional reaction from the user base, with the ultimate aim of maximizing motivation and engagement" (Gerbaudo et al., 2019). In balanced messages, negative as well as positive statements are used in about equal shares. That is, the sender both criticizes or attacks but also supports and applauds in the same message (Richardson, 2001). Last, neutral messages include neither positive nor negative statements and have a rather informative character without intentionally eliciting any emotional response.

Facebook provides political actors with strategic affordances for negative campaigning which makes it a worthwhile strategy to use on the platform due to three reasons: first, political actors' negative messages can bypass the filter of the news media and directly reach users through Facebook posts. Journalists often frame negative messages in a particular way, focusing on their strategic role rather than their substance (Pedersen, 2014), and giving them context by supplementing them with opponents' reactions or by interpreting and criticizing them. Second, Facebook users are not only highly receptive to negative messages (Bene, 2017a; Heiss et al., 2019), but also often express negative and critical positions on the platform themselves (Bene, 2017b; Ziegele et al., 2014). Consequently, negative campaigning fits well the overall atmosphere of this communication environment. The third reason is related to the attention-grabbing character of negative messages on Facebook: the main challenge for political actors on Facebook is to compete for users' attention alongside the multitude of personal and entertaining content appearing on their newsfeed. Negativity is a viable strategy in this context of information overload as users are more likely to pay attention

to negative content (Meffert et al., 2006; Soroka, 2014). Therefore, we hypothesize with *H1: Political parties used more negative Facebook posts compared to (H1a) balanced, (H1b) positive, and (H1c) neutral Facebook posts in the 2019 European election campaign.*

Recent studies (Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Heiss et al., 2019) call for a more balanced understanding of the relationship between message characteristics, emotions, and user engagement. The direct, organic communication of parties is, however, only one part of a campaign on Facebook as user engagement largely affects the way how voters perceive the campaign. In fact, the dissemination logic of Facebook is virality (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), where followers can make content visible for their friends by engaging with them (i.e., liking or sharing it). Additionally, the number of interactions with individual posts is one of the most important factors for Facebook's newsfeed algorithm and may cause a popularity bias: Highly engaged-with and already highly visible posts become even more visible compared to less engaged ones ("Matthew effect"; Bucher, 2012) – and a high number of shares is particularly efficient in this respect. According to Bossetta and colleagues (2018) shares are discursive acts and constitute a certain degree of political engagement on Facebook, which positively affects the algorithmic driven ranking and "organic" spreading of content across the platform. But what goes viral depends on the content: in private settings, studies found a "positivity bias" in users' self-disclosure and in feedback processes (Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017), and news articles on Facebook were more likely to go viral if positive (Berger & Milkman, 2012). However, research on content published by political actors shows that users are more likely to engage with negative posts than with neutral or positive content (Bene, 2017a; Ceron & D'Adda, 2016; Heiss et al., 2019). This phenomenon can be explained by psychological and sociological factors. The psychological approach argues that negative content triggers stronger psychophysiological reactions (Shoemaker, 1996) alongside greater attention (Meffert et al., 2006; Soroka, 2014) resulting in higher levels of cognitive involvement (Lau, Sigelman & Rover, 2007) that may lead to action (Heiss et al., 2019). The sociological explanation highlights that engaging with negative content may enable users to express political opinions in a way that does not require positive identification with existing political actors, which is generally avoided in front of the wide and heterogeneous network of Facebook friends (Bene, 2017b). From the perspective of political actors, this engagement-triggering effect of negativity may lead to a preference of negative posts in their Facebook campaigns, leading to our second hypothesis (H2): *Negative Facebook posts were more often shared than (H2a) balanced, (H2b) positive, and (H2c) neutral posts in the 2019 European election campaign.*

Party characteristics as determining factors of negative campaigning

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

(1) Role in national parliaments. Previous studies show that challenger parties are more likely to go negative than incumbents (e.g., Auter & Fine, 2016; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Nai, 2020; Russmann, 2017). Geer (2006, p. 110) notes that a challenger is "serving its role as a critic of those in power" by going negative to make the voters aware of the incumbent's weaknesses. Challengers need to convince the voters of the advantages of themselves being in office, and the past actions of incumbents offer much scope for attack. In addition, when going negative leads to a backlash effect, challengers have less to lose than incumbents (Walter et al., 2014). However, our current understanding of these dynamics comes from studies of negative campaigning in national contexts. European election campaigns differ significantly from national ones for two reasons: first, in contrast to national

parliaments, there is no formal government and opposition in the European Parliament. Instead, governing coalitions tend to form on an issue-by-issue basis. Second, research has consistently shown that European elections are second-order elections in which campaigning parties focus more on national issues and constellations than on European ones (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Therefore, we assume that the government/opposition divide at the national level matters more than European conflict lines for each party's level of negativity in the European election campaign and hypothesize: *H3: Parties in opposition in the national parliament used negative campaigning in their Facebook posts to a greater extent than political parties in government at the national level in the 2019 European election campaign.*

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

(2) Ideology. Ideology is a key aspect in political parties' strategy and therefore is also expected to drive negativity. Parties with more extreme ideological views also take more extreme positions in their campaigns. Nai (2018) found that the ideological distance between political parties fosters negative messages, because when political parties disagree on key issues they are more likely to criticize each other. In that regard, studies found differences along parties' ideological lines (Lau & Pomper, 2004), with candidates and parties far from the ideological centre (particularly far-right ones: Nai, 2020; Valli & Nai, 2020), more likely to use negative campaigning (Maier & Nai, 2020; Walter, 2014; Walter et al., 2014). Consequently, we hypothesize: *H4: The further a party is ideologically away from the political centre, the more negative were its Facebook posts in the 2019 European election campaign.*

Furthermore, the frequency with which users share negative posts might vary according to the parties' ideological standpoint. Some studies show that users tend to engage more with posts that align to their ideological worldview (e.g., Garrett, 2009). However, it is still unclear to what extent the sharing of posts is determined by its overall ideological position. This leads to our final research question: *RQ2: How did the political party's ideology of left, centre and right determine how often its negative posts were shared in the 2019 European election campaign?*

Method

Sample and data collection

To test our hypotheses and answer our research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of political parties' Facebook posts during the 2019 European election campaign. Altogether, 8,132 Facebook posts of parties, which reached at least 5% of the votes during the 2019 European election campaign in 12 countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and UK) were coded. We chose these 12 countries because they cover 82% of the European population and their parties represent a majority of the EP´s seats (540 of 751) before the 2019 EP election. Further justification is given by their systematically balanced selection regarding important structural dimensions (e.g., political and media systems, influence on the European level, geographic regions, citizens´ attitudes towards the EU). Taken together, our country selection was driven by our effort to give robust insight into the European election campaign as a whole.

All posts of the selected parties were centrally saved at a daily interval in the month leading up to the elections (28 April to 26 May 2019, UK: 25 April to 23 May, Ireland: 26 April to 24 May) using the API-based software "Facepager" (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). The posts were coded separately in each country. Conducting a cross-national content analysis faces several methodological challenges, which we approached with the following steps. (see for a comprehensive discussion Rössler, 2008; Rössler, 2012; Lauf & Peter, 2001): First, to reduce a coder bias due to language skills, 29 coders (1 to 5 in each country) were trained on a joint coding scheme in English. Second, to address different coding capacities in the countries, random samples were drawn ensuring a proportional distribution of days and parties in Denmark, France, Poland, Sweden, and the UK (Table 1). Third, to test for reliability, a random sample of 50 English posts from European parties and groups was drawn to allow a comparison of coding where no country-specific background knowledge was necessary. The Holsti's CR values of all categories used in the current analysis show a

common understanding (all Holsti ≥ 0.7; for the coefficients see Table A1). Although the Holsti coefficient is considered too liberal in single country studies (Rössler, 2012), the complexity of our cross-national content analyses, the use of binary variables, and the careful selection, preparation and training of coders justify our decision to perform reliability testing for intercoder agreement based on the Holsti coefficient.

[**Table 1** about here]

Measurement

Sentiment of the posts. The overall impression of all post elements (texts, pictures and videos) was manually coded in terms of *(1) positive* and *(2) negative statements/emotions* (see Table A1 for details). Both variables were coded several times, once for each potential target of positive or negative statements/emotions (e.g. the party itself and other parties as assigned to by the European party families, the EU). All these variables were coded binary indicating whether a content criteria was present (=1) or absent (=0) (see Table A1 for a full description of the variables).

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

Party ideology. To analyse negative campaigning by parties depending on ideological positions, we used the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey–CHES (Bakker et al., 2020), positioning European political parties by various factors. We used the 'lrgen' variable, which positions each political party in terms of its overall ideological stance from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'extreme left' and 10 'extreme right'. For categorization of "left", "centre" and "right" parties, lowest parties in the lowest quartile of CHES 'lrgen' variable were categorized as "left", parties in the highest quartile were categorized as "right" and parties in the two quartiles in between were categorized as "centre".

Findings

Negative campaigning on Facebook

Across the 12 countries, 18% of all posts were coded as negative, while 26% were positive, 47% neutral, and nearly 9% balanced. Thus, in line with *H1a*, political parties in fact used more negative than balanced posts, but contrary to *H1b* and *H1c*, they used less negative compared to positive and neutral posts. Figure 1 provides a more detailed picture by presenting the use of posts with different sentiments by European party groups. It shows significant but very weak associations between party group and the sentiments of campaign

messages ($\chi(27) = 756.74$, p < .001, V = 0.18). Negative messages were dominating only in the posts of Non-Inscrits (NI) party members; NEW parties (that were not present in the European Parliament before the 2019 election) used more negative than positive posts; all other parties posted neutral (ALDE, ECR, ENF, EPP, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL, NEW, S&D) and positive (EFDD) messages more frequently than negative posts.[10]

[Figure 1 about here]

The analysis of all posts and its shares provides significant evidence that, in line with *H2b* and *H2c,* users shared posts with a negative sentiment more often than positive or neutral posts (Figure 2). However, differences between posts with negative sentiment and balanced posts were not significant (Kruskal-Wallis test, H(3) = 560.14, p < .001; Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in all other comparisons: p < .001), which is why *H2a* is rejected. To control for different engagement levels on different party profiles, z-standardization within individual parties was used. A more detailed analysis of the posts' shares separated by European party groups reveals significant differences of the sharing behaviour between each of the groups in relation to the posts´ sentiment (Figure 3). Kruskal-Wallis tests show that the posts' sentiments significantly affect how often a post is shared (in each case p < .05; see test statistics for each European party group in Figure 3). Negative posts published by all party groups were shared more often than neutral, positive and balanced posts. The only exception are negative posts by EFDD (*Mdn* = -0.2061), ENF (*Mdn* = -0.0915), and EPP (*Mdn* = -0.2363), where balanced posts were shared overall more frequently by Facebook users, although not significantly in all comparisons. Taken together, *H2* is confirmed by our data.

[Figures 2 & 3 about here]

Party characteristics as determining factors of negative campaigning

1) Role in national parliaments. In the next step, we compare how party characteristics influence parties' use of negative campaigning, starting with a party's roles in the national parliaments. The number of negative posts yields first evidence for our assumption that opposition parties used negative campaigning (N = 1,182) in their Facebook posts to a greater extent than governing parties (N = 299) (*H3*). Table 2 shows the share of negative statements by status of parties on national level (government vs. opposition) in comparison to neutral, balanced and positive statements. The associations are significant but weak ($\chi(3)$=221.48, p<.001, V=0.17). Parties in opposition at the national level use negative statements in nearly 22% of posts compared to only 11% in the case of governing parties. Relatedly, positive posts

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

were more common in the case of governing (34%) compared to opposition parties (22%). The use of neutral and balanced posts does not differ dependent on the parties' role in the national parliaments. Altogether, *H3* is supported by our data.

[**Table 2** about here]

Regarding RQ1, the analysis indicates that negative posts are shared significantly more often (*Mdn* = -0.1643) than balanced (*Mdn* = -0.2443), positive (*Mdn* = -0.2758) and neutral posts (*Mdn* = -0.3354) if they were posted by parties in national opposition (Kruskal-Wallis test, *H*(3) = 207.4, p < .001; Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in each comparison p < .05) (see Figure 4). In contrast, this is not the case for posts from national governing parties Here, users shared balanced posts significantly more frequently (*Mdn* = -0.0595) than negative (*Mdn* = -0.1538), positive (*Mdn* = -0.2694) and neutral ones (*Mdn* = -0.2748) (Kruskal-Wallis test, *H*(3) = 85.08, p < .001; Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in each comparison p < .05 except for the comparison of neutral and positive posts of ruling parties).

[**Figure 4** about here]

2) Ideology. To test *H4*, we analyse how the parties' positions on the ideological spectrum influence the negativity of their Facebook posts. With the median as a measure of central tendency for both balance of sentiment (mean value of the balance of negative/positive posts) and the position of the party in terms of its overall ideological stance (Figure 5), the analysis shows noticeable differences between political deviation from the theoretical centre and negativity. Centrist parties, such as national parties affiliated with EPP or ALDE, used mostly positive sentiments in their electoral communication. The majority of political actors associated with the right-wing ECR group primarily used balanced communication in their campaigning. However, far-right parties belonging to EFDD (British Brexit Party and German Alternative für Deutschland) and ENF (French Rassemblement National and Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) clearly show that the further a party is ideologically away from the political centre, the more negative is its campaign, confirming *H4*. Looking at the left side of the political spectrum reveals comparable results. The main centre-left party group, S&D, with the majority of parties arranged around a single ideological axis, demonstrate a rather balanced style of communication. The sentiment of actors associated with Green/EFA also did not show any relationship with ideological differences. However, far-left parties affiliated with GUE/NGL (especially German LINKE, Swedish Vänsterpartiet) and new political parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum (Polish Wiosna and French La France Insoumise) are more likely to go negative.

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

[Figure 5 about here].

Finally, to answer *RQ2*, we investigate if the parties' ideological position influences how often their posts are shared. Figure 6 reveals differences between the most shared posts of different sentiments by parties with different ideological stances. For negative posts, we do not find significant differences in terms of the overall share value for negative posts published by parties of different ideology (Kruskall-Wallis test for negative sentiment: $H(2) = 0.11$, p > .05). This result indicates that regardless of the ideological stance of a party, negative campaigning can get more shares and therefore reach a broader audience. However, a comparison of the unstandardized median share values reveals a significant difference for negative posts published by the parties of different ideologies (Kruskall-Wallis test for negative sentiment: $H(2) = 85.48$, p < .001) and significant divergence in terms of sharing and the parties' ideological stance (Wilcoxon rank sum tests, in each comparison p < .05). Facebook users shared negative posts of right-wing parties more often (*Mdn* = 175) than negative posts from left (*Mdn* = 104) and centre parties (*Mdn* = 77.5).

[Figure 6 about here]

Discussion and Conclusion

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

Negative campaigning is clearly present, but not dominant on parties' Facebook pages in the 2019 European election; positive and neutral posts were more frequent than negative ones (*H1* rejected). Hence, negative campaigning in the twelve European countries of our study differs from the U.S. where negative campaigning is heavily used across all available communication channels (e.g., Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Kaid & Johnston, 1991).

Differences in how political actors draw on media channels´ affordances for negative campaigning can be attributed to differing media and political systems between Europe and the U.S. as well as differing political cultures (Nai, 2020). Future research on negative campaigning should widen its scope and include new geographical contexts. For instance, positive campaigning might be more prevalent in Asian cultures with its more collective view of society than in Western societies that focus more strongly on individualism (Blondel & Inoguchi, 2002). Further, political parties in differing countries might favour other channels for negative campaigning (Fowler et al., 2020). Our codebook proved to be suitable for research across different countries providing a basis for future comparisons, also beyond Europe.

Moreover, the findings imply that the type of election plays a role in the use of negative, positive, and neutral messages. European elections are second-order elections with lower voter turnout than national elections, indicating a lower interest amongst voters for European elections than for national elections. By advancing the second-order literature, we argue that parties seem to try attracting their users' interest on Facebook by spreading positive messages to evoke positive emotions to increase users' engagement and motivation (Gerbaudo et al., 2019). In comparison to that, parties in national elections use Facebook rather to go negative (e.g., Auter & Fine, 2016; Joathan, 2019; Steffan & Venema, 2020). The scope beyond national elections in this study and the investigated differences to negative campaigning in national elections show that findings from one type of election are not necessarily transferable to other elections or non-election contexts. Regional and local elections as well as non-election times should also become the object of future studies.

The study shows that Facebook users' exposure to more or less negativity is dependent on the parties they and/or their friends follow. Consistent with the literature (Walter, 2014; Walter et al., 2014), parties located on the ideological extremes are more likely to use a negative or offensive strategy (*H4* confirmed). This applies to both far right and far-left parties. Similarly (and perhaps because most ideologically extreme parties fall into this category), parties in opposition at the national level are more inclined to adopt a negative campaigning strategy (*H3* confirmed). Particularly Non-Inscrits MEPs without a connection to a political group and new parties not present in the European Parliament before the 2019 election were going negative on Facebook. Hence, the main campaign strategy of these small, non-established parties was obviously to grasp the media and voter attention by going negative. We do not find governmental parties to eschew negativity; rather, their communication represents a mix of negative and positive content, while positive messages are

rather infrequent for opposition parties. In sum, these findings confirm that party characteristics are important for explaining negative campaigning (Magin et al., 2017; Kaid & Johnston, 1991; Walter et al., 2014).

Our study provides evidence that "going negative" works in terms of engaging users. Negative posts get significantly higher levels of shares than positive or neutral posts, while there are no differences to balanced posts (*H2* rejected). This result is in line with previous studies (Bene, 2017a; Heiss et al., 2019) as well as with evidence that supporters find negative messages more compelling (Meffert et al., 2006; Weeks, 2015). This increases the probability that Facebook users with broad networks of politically active users will be exposed to negative content – both due to users' sharing behavior and the Facebook news feed algorithm, which rewards post interaction with a greater visibility (popularity bias). Thus, our study advances previous literature in the field by showing that users and algorithms are driving negative campaign communication on Facebook to a greater extent than parties, and thereby, contributing to social media's reputation as an uncivil space. At the societal level, this finding indicates that even when parties are not overly negative in their communication strategies, the greater interactions with negative posts mean that the campaign might *feel* more negative in its tone than it actually is. Unintended, but negative effects of this might be boosting citizens' disenchantment with politics and reducing their trust in politics, potentially leading to disengagement of citizens in democratic processes (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Papp & Patkós, 2019).

Particularly, opposition parties benefit from adopting a negative campaigning strategy, because their negative posts were shared more often than those of national governing parties (*RQ1*). Similarly, right-wing parties benefit from their highly mobilised, far-right party networks, which find their party's messages (particularly the negative and balanced ones) more appealing and increase their visibility by sharing them, and make their arguments thus more prominent in the election campaign (*RQ2*).

A limitation of the findings on user engagement is that we only investigated how negative campaigning affects the number of shares. From a strategic perspective, the shares are more important than likes and comments since they increase parties' visibility on Facebook to a particular extent. However, restricting our analysis to shares means that we cannot determine the full spectrum of how users engage with negative messages on social media. This should be explored by future research. Furthermore, in the context of Facebook data, the possibility of social bots influencing the analysed Facebook communication needs to be addressed. During the coding of the sampled material, there were no signs of social bots.

Moreover, our focus is on the pure quantitative number of shares per post, because these are an indicator for visibility. In other words, we are interested in the visibility; independent of it was caused by shares of real users or of bots.

Parties' decision to go negative is a tactical choice that is influenced by structural and situational conditions in different (electoral) contexts. This study has widened the scope of research on negative campaigning, but as outlined above, more research is necessary. Negative campaigning can have serious implications for democratic societies since it may contribute to political apathy and political polarization (Lee et al., 2014; Weeks, 2015). Therefore, research needs to focus to a greater extent on the online context examining negative campaigning on other prominent social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, where parties fully control their communication and directly talk to citizens.

Authors declares no conflict of interest.

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Tables and figures

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

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

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

** Of national parties.

*** In the Italian sample, Lega alone posted 3234 posts. To reduce bias, a sample of 20% of the posts from Lega was drawn (while holding the share of posts per day constant). For all other Italian parties, the full sample was coded.
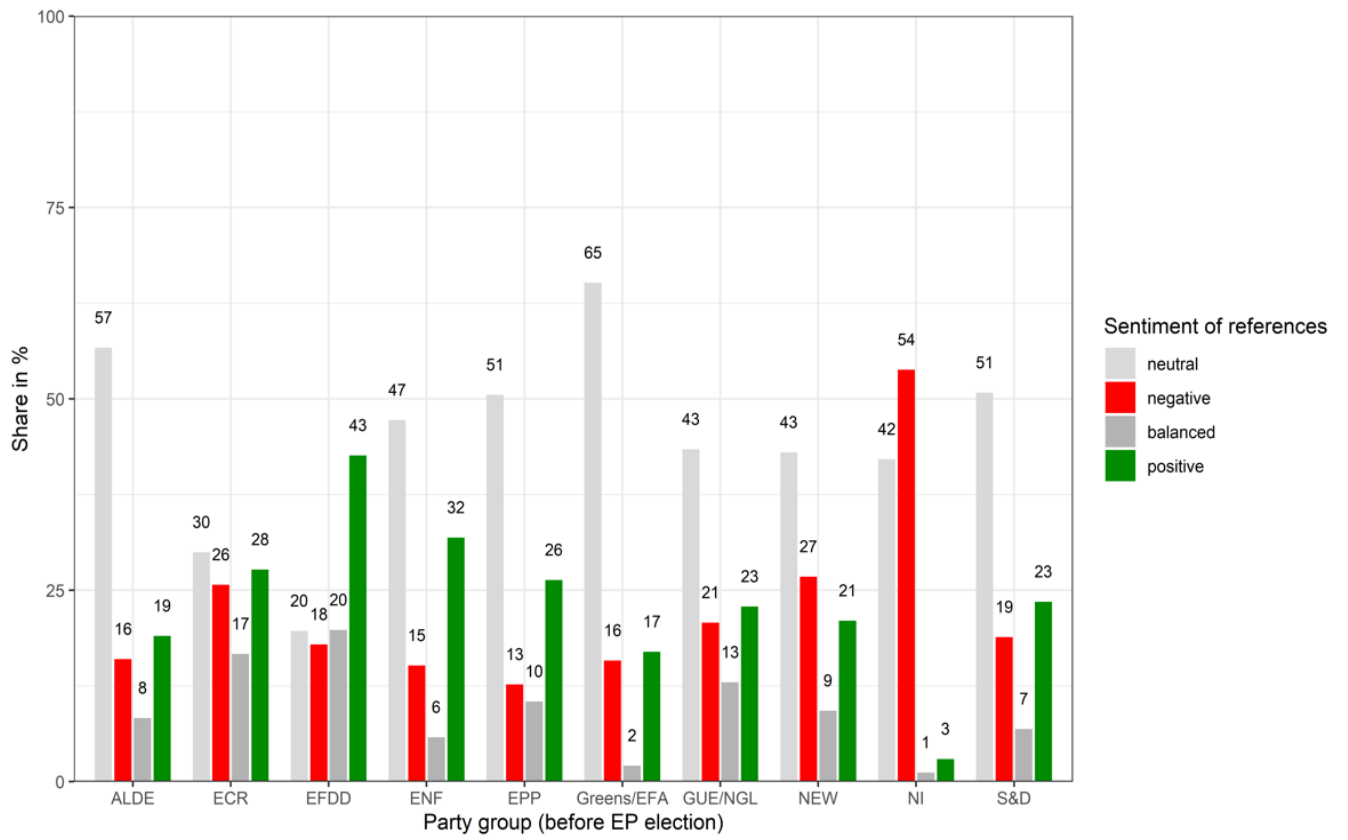
Table 2. Sentiment of references to political actors by status of party on national level (in %).

	Opposition parties (n = 5441) in %	**Governmental parties (n = 2712) in %**
neutral	47	46
negative	22	11
balanced	9	9
positive	22	34
Total	*100*	*100*

Note: 8,153 coded posts. Chi-square = 221.48, df = 3, p = 0.001, V = 0.17

Figure 1. Sentiment of reference to political actors in Facebook posts by European party groups.

Note: 8153 coded posts. Chi-square = 756.74, df = 27, p < .001, V =0.18

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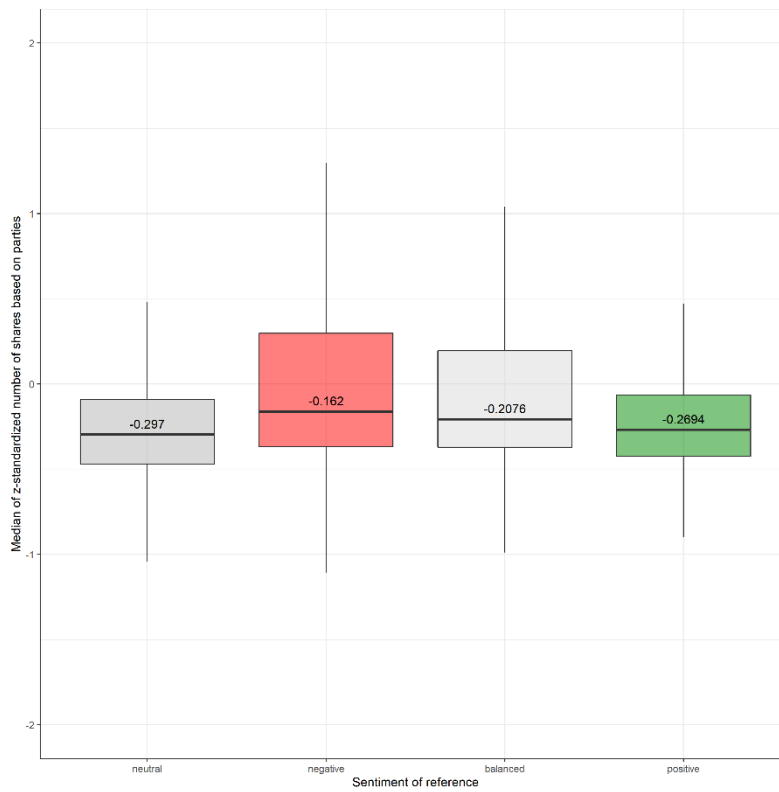

Note: N(neutral)=3822, N(negative)=1481, N(balanced)=764, N(positive)=2086; Kruskal-Wallis test: chi-squared = 560.14, df = 3, p-value < .001. Pairwise comparison using Wilcoxon rank sum test: balanced-negative: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .001. Due to the highly skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is the reason that the median is negative for each category of sentiment.

Figure 3. Median post shares differentiated between sentiments of references to other political actors by European party groups.
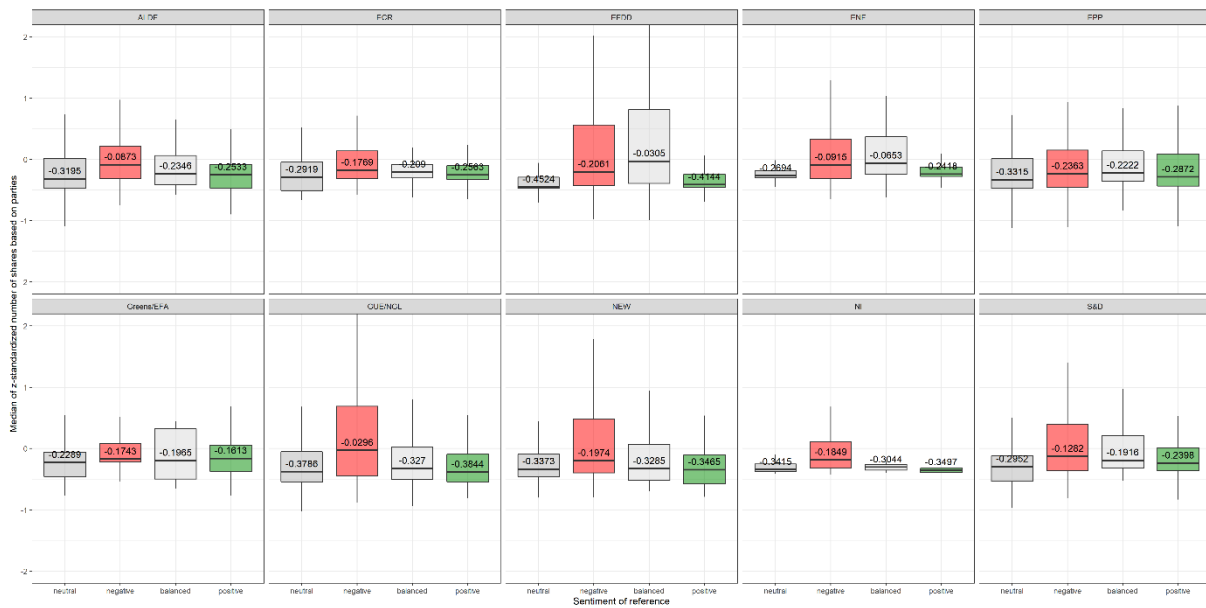
Note: Results of Kruskal-Wallis tests and pairwise comparisons using Wilcoxon rank sum tests: **ALDE**: chi-squared = 27.03, df = 3, p-value < .001. Neutral-negative, negative-positive: p < .001, all other comparisons: p > .05. **ECR**: chi-squared = 11.107, df = 3, p < .05. Neutral-negative: p <.05, all other comparisons: p > .05. **EFDD**: chi-squared = 99.14, df = 3, p < .001. Neutral-positive: p < .01, negative-balanced: p >.05, all other comparisons: p < .001. **ENF**: chi-squared = 69.46, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced: p >.05, all other comparisons: p < .001. **EPP**: chi-squared = 18.4, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced, balanced-positive, negative-positive: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .01. **Greens/EFA**: chi-squared = 14.86, df = 3, p < .01. Negative-neutral: p < .001, all other comparisons: p > .05. **GUE/NGL**: chi-squared = 20.36, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced: p < .05, neutral-balanced, balanced-positive, neutral-positive: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .001. **NEW**: chi-squared = 23.65, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced: p < .05, neutral-balanced, balanced-positive, neutral-positive: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .001. **NI**: chi-squared = 27.16, df = 3, p < .001. Neutral-negative: p < .001, all other comparisons: p > .05. **S&D**: chi-squared = 104.79, df = 3, p < .001. Negative-balanced, balanced-positive: p > .05, negative-positive: p < .01, all other comparisons: p < .001. Due to the highly skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is the reason that the median is negative for each category of sentiment.

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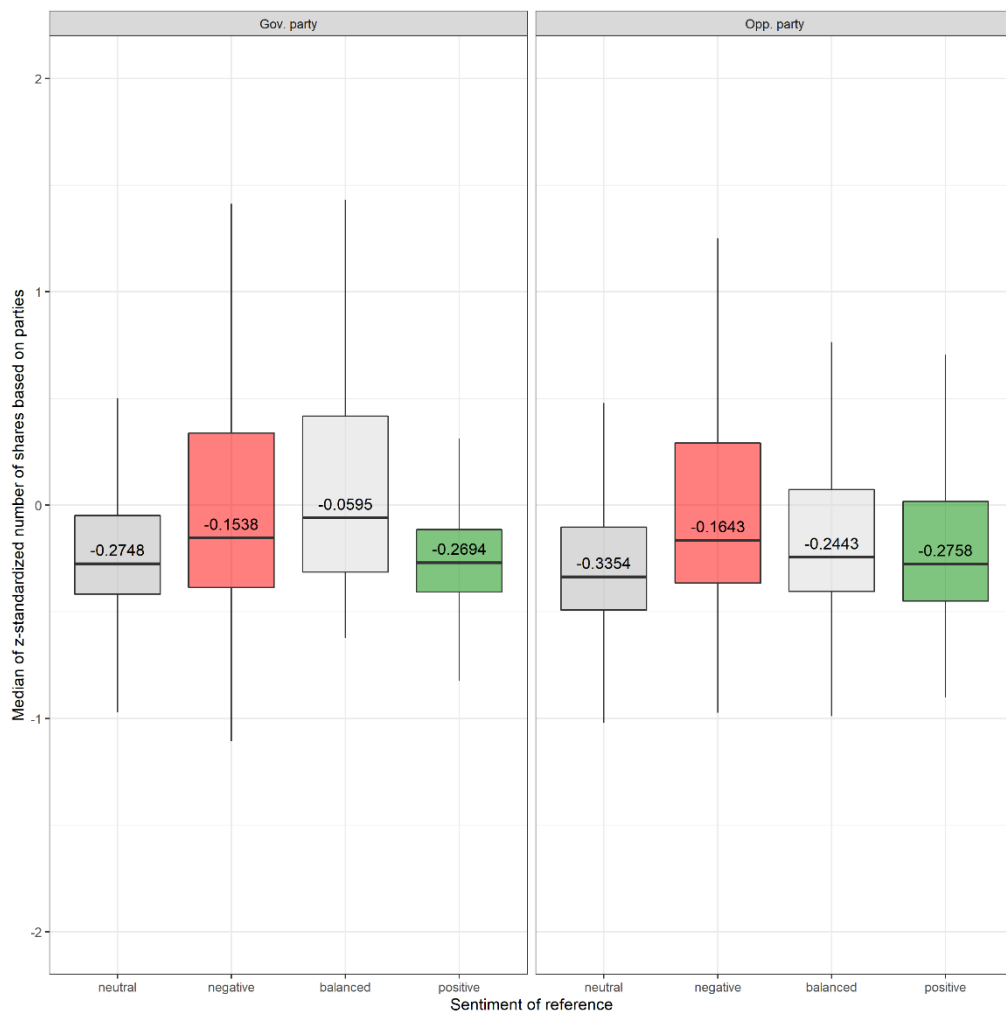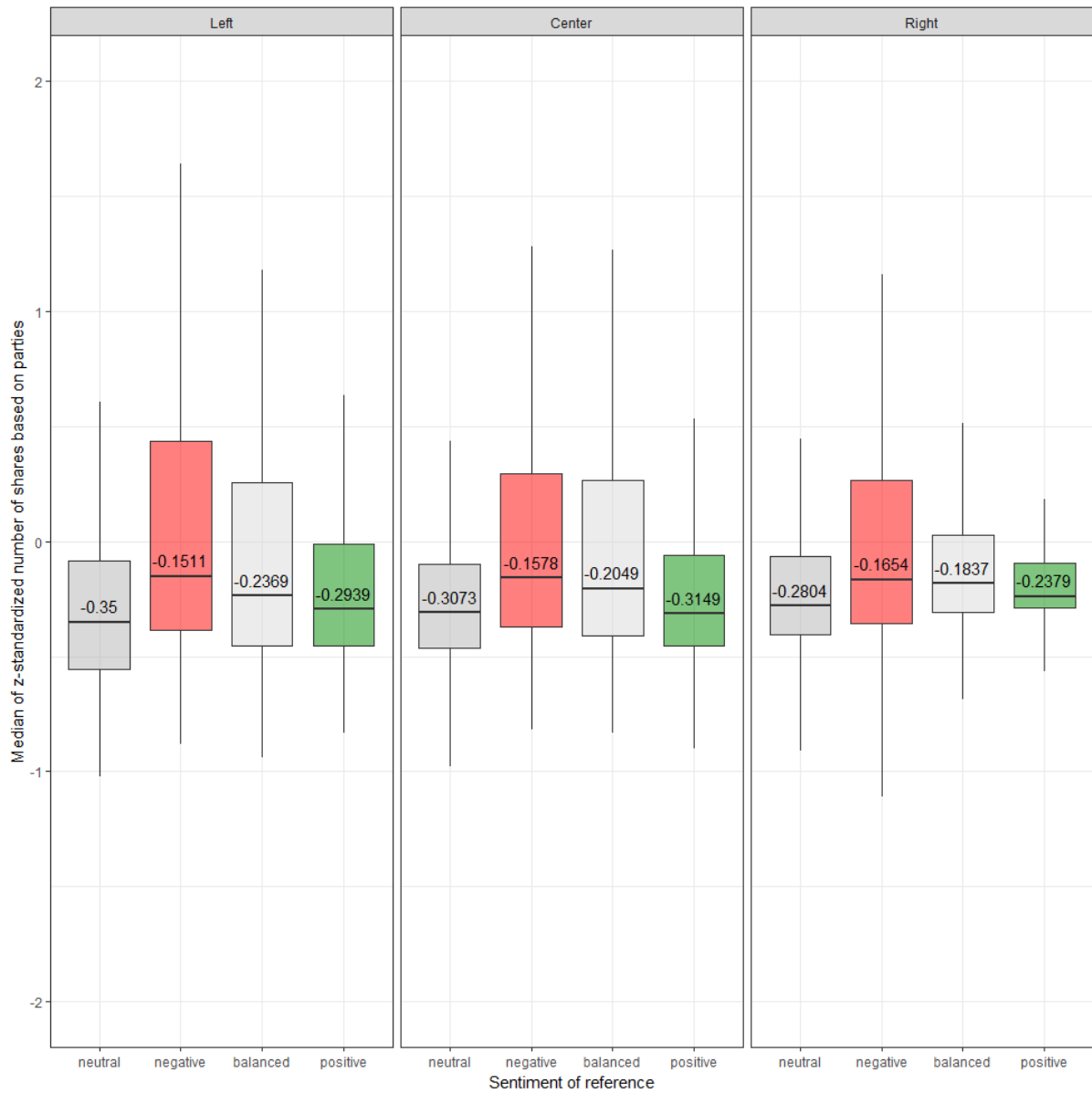

Note: **Opp. party**: Kruskal-Wallis test: chi-squared = 207.4, df = 3, p-value < .001. Pairwise comparison using Wilcoxon rank sum test: balanced-positive: p < .05, all other comparisons: p < .001. **Gov. party**: Kruskal-Wallis test: chi-squared = 85.08 df = 3, p-value < .001. Pairwise comparison using Wilcoxon rank sum test: negative-balanced: p < .05, neutral-positive: p > .05, all other comparisons: p < .001. Due to the highly skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is the reason that the median is negative for each category of sentiment.

Figure 5. Overall balance of sentiments of references in parties' Facebook posts (without neutral posts).
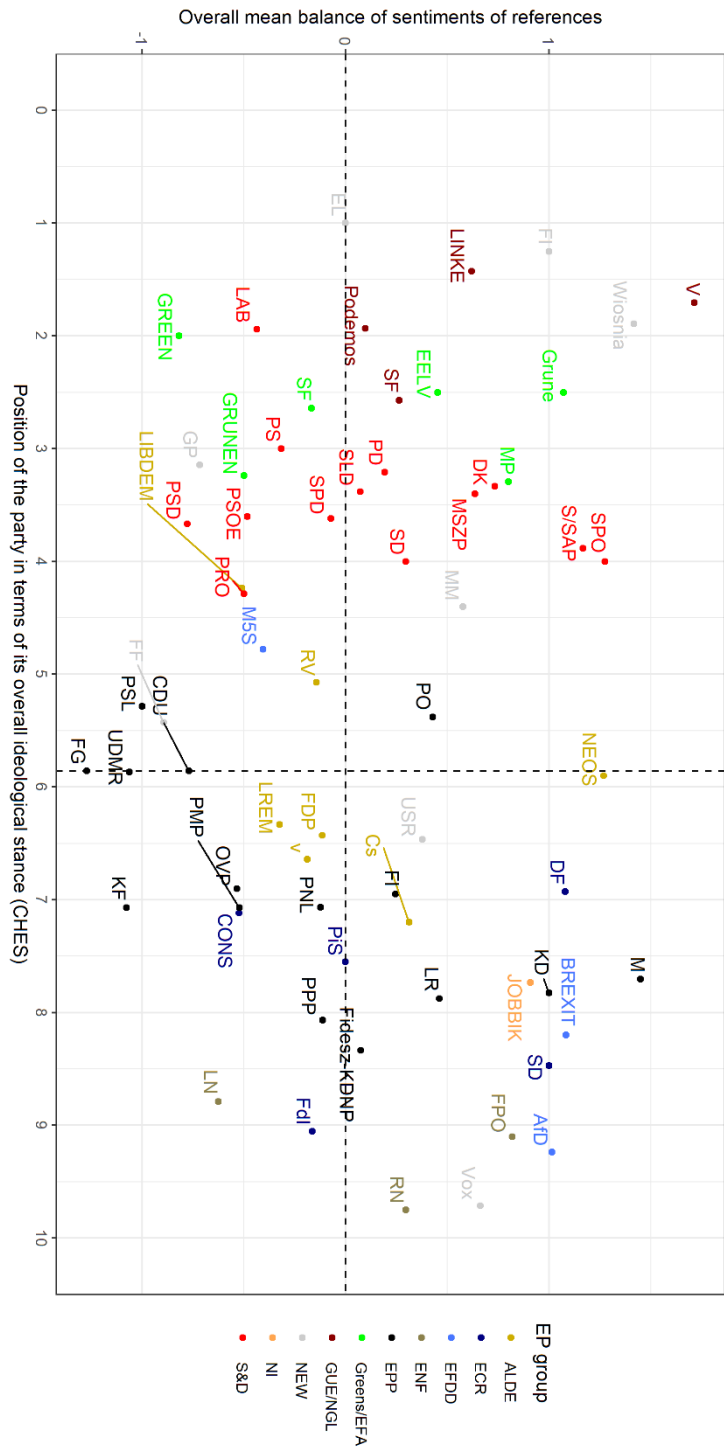
Note: Colours represent party groups before European Parliamentary elections of 2019; dashed lines represent median values for both indicators. Overall balance = mean value of the balance of negative posts - positive posts per party. Pearson correlation between political deviation from the theoretical centre (lrgen 5) and negativity: Spearman's rho = .36, p < .01.

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

Note: Kruskal-Wallis test for negative sentiment: chi-squared = 0.11, df = 2, p-value > .05. Due to the highly

skewed distribution there are less cases above the mean number of shares (=positive z) than below that (=negative z), this is

the reason that the median is negative for each category of sentiment.

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

Variable	Coding Scheme	Holsti	Brennan & Prediger's κ
Target actors of negative statements of emotions	Coded when negative statements or emotions are addressed to a specific target actor. By target actors we mean either specific persons, such as politicians; or organized groups of people, such as parties; or terms, that refer to a group of people with certain characteristics that distinguish them from others, e.g. journalists or refugees; or state bodies, e.g. the European Parliament. A target actor is to be coded if he/she/it is addressed explicitly by a negative statement or emotion.	Mean = 0.99 (Min = 0.94, Max = 0.99)	Mean = 0.95 (Min = 0.81, Max = 0.98)
Target actors of positive statements and emotions	Coded when positive statements or emotions are addressed to a specific target actor. By target actors we mean either specific persons, such as politicians; or organized groups of people, such as parties; or terms, that refer to a group of people with certain characteristics that distinguish them from others, e.g. journalists or refugees; or state bodies, e.g. the European Parliament. A target actor is to be coded if he/she/it is addressed explicitly by a positive statement or emotion.	Mean = 0.97 (Min = 0.90, Max = 1.00)	Mean = 0.86 (Min = 0.65, Max = 0.98)

The list of figures:

Figure 1. Sentiment of reference to political actors in Facebook posts by European party groups.

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

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

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

Figure 5. Overall balance of sentiments of references in parties' Facebook posts (without neutral posts).

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