

“DARK” CAMPAIGNING—EXPLORING ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN
ELECTION CANDIDATES’ AVERSIVE PERSONALITY AND THEIR USE
OF CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION

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von Mona Dian

geboren am [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]

Erstgutachter: Prof. Dr. Jürgen Maier

Zweitgutachter: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alessandro Nai

Drittgutachter: JProf. Dr. Christian von Sikorski

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Zusammenfassung

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Eine effektive Wahlkampfkommunikation ist für Kandidierende unverzichtbar, um die Wählerschaft und andere Akteure sowohl von den eigenen Qualifikationen und Vorhaben als auch von den Schattenseiten der politischen Konkurrenz zu überzeugen. Zwei zentrale Kommunikationsstrategien, die je nach Person unterschiedlich oft verwendet werden, stellen Positive Campaigning und Negative Campaigning dar. Um ein Bild über systematische Zusammenhänge mit den Nutzungsunterschieden zu gewinnen, fokussierte sich die Forschung bis jetzt vor allem auf soziodemographische und politische Merkmale und Kontextfaktoren. Neuere Erkenntnisse legen allerdings nahe, dass auch die Persönlichkeit der Kandidierenden—insbesondere die aversive („dunkle“) Persönlichkeit—mit deren Wahlkampfkommunikation zusammenhängt: Kandidierende mit einer aversiven Persönlichkeit tendieren eher zur Nutzung von Negative Campaigning (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020). Die vorliegende Dissertation erweitert das Wissen über den Zusammenhang zwischen aversiver Persönlichkeit und Negative Campaigning und berücksichtigt dabei auch die andere Seite der Kampagnenkommunikation, und zwar Positive Campaigning. In drei Artikeln werden die folgenden Forschungsfragen bearbeitet: 1. Besteht der Zusammenhang zwischen der aversiven Persönlichkeit von Kandidierenden und der Nutzung von Negative Campaigning über Basis-Persönlichkeitsmerkmale, v.a. Ehrlichkeit-Bescheidenheit und Verträglichkeit, hinaus? 2. Wird der Zusammenhang zwischen der aversiven Persönlichkeit von Kandidierenden und Negative Campaigning durch Rational-Choice-Prozesse wie die Wahrnehmung von Nutzen und Kosten mediiert? 3. Hängt die aversive Persönlichkeit von Kandidierenden mit der Nutzung von Positive Campaigning zusammen? Die Beantwortung der Fragen erfolgt durch empirische Analysen mithilfe eines innovativen Datensatzes, der Selbstberichte über die Persönlichkeit und die Wahlkampfkommunikation von deutschen Landtagskandidierenden enthält. Die Hauptergebnisse zeigen, dass 1. der Zusammenhang zwischen aversiver Persönlichkeit und Negative Campaigning trotz der Kontrolle von Basis-Persönlichkeitsmerkmalen weiterhin besteht, 2. eine Mediation des Zusammenhangs vor allem über Faktoren in Verbindung mit dem wahrgenommenen Nutzen von Negative Campaigning stattfindet, und ebenfalls, 3. dass die aversive Persönlichkeit positiv mit Positive Campaigning zusammenhängt, obwohl hier die erklärte Varianz gering ausfällt. Abschließend werden grundlegende Limitationen diskutiert, mögliche Implikationen für die Kampagnenarbeit und für die Forschung vorgestellt sowie Anknüpfungspunkte für zukünftige wissenschaftliche Fragestellungen aufgezeigt.

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List of Articles

The articles of the publication-based dissertation are:

Article 1

Dian, M., Maier, J., & Oschatz, C. (2023). Negative campaigning is “dark”—Not just disagreeable or dishonest: Results from German candidates’ self-reports. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 203, Article 112014. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.112014>¹

Article 2

Dian, M. (2024). A different “dark” rationality? Testing the mediation between aversive personality and negative campaigning through perceived benefits and costs.

Article 3

Dian, M. (2024). “Dark” positivity: Do candidates with a more aversive personality use positive campaigning more often? *Party Politics*, 0(0), 1-12.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688241234516>²

¹ This article was published in *Personality and Individual Differences*, 203, November 30, 2022, Dian, M., Negative campaigning is “dark”—Not just disagreeable or dishonest: Results from German candidates’ self-reports, Article 112014, © Elsevier Ltd., 2022.

² The final version of this paper has been published in *Party Politics*, 0/0, February 19, 2024 by Sage Publications Ltd, All rights reserved. © M. Dian, 2024. It is available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/PPQ>. License: CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

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1 Introduction

Campaign communication is much more than the attempt of political candidates or parties to attract voters. For the candidates, it is the effort to build and worsen reputations, to demonstrate likability and authority, and to motivate the electorate to vote for someone or to discourage them from it. Beyond the candidates, campaign communication sets the political climate as friendly or harsh, and it supports or hinders coalitions. Benoit (2017) identified three types of campaign communication: Acclaiming, attacking, and defending. While acclaiming is basically advertising and herein called positive campaigning, attacking means pointing out another person's disadvantages (e.g., Benoit, 2017). In the following, this is called negative campaigning and is understood as "any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign" (Geer, 2006, p. 23).

Candidates campaign differently, and empirical research about possible determinants of campaign communication is key to understand who tends to use which type of campaigning. While this research is generally very sparse when it comes to possible determinants of positive campaigning, the determinants of negative campaigning have often been studied in terms of sociodemographic, political, and contextual characteristics (see Haselmayer, 2019 for a review). More recent studies extended the potential determinants of campaign communication by adding another factor at the candidate level: It was found that personality traits (e.g., Maier & Nai, 2023; Nai, 2019), and especially "dark" (aversive) personality traits (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020), are connected with the candidates' use of negative campaigning.

Negative campaigning attracts attention: Candidates who use a negative tone and fear appeals get greater media coverage (Maier & Nai, 2020). However, using negative campaigning is not always beneficial. Negative campaigning is suspected of having detrimental effects on democratic functioning such as demobilizing voters and decreasing political efficacy (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; but there could also be a mobilizing effect, see Martin, 2004), and more complicated coalition-building (Walter et al., 2014). Negative campaigning can also have undesired consequences for candidates who use it, meaning that it can lead to backlash effects, i.e., harm the person who issued the attack (Garramone, 1984; e.g., Roese & Sande, 1993). Considering the consequences of negative campaign communication and the thin knowledge base about positive campaign communication, a better and more holistic understanding of the associated characteristics at the candidate level is needed. Knowing more about which candidates have a higher tendency to use one or the other could not only help to tailor campaigns to fit the candidates but also to advise candidates in a more targeted way on how to shape their

campaign communication. Additionally, knowing whether aversive personality is associated with the way political candidates communicate is a complementary puzzle piece and one step further toward a more complete theoretical foundation regarding campaign communication.

Learning more about aversive personality and its connection to campaign communication is the aim of this dissertation. This research is based on a data set in which candidates provide first-hand information about their personality, campaigning, and more—as the data set is part of a larger research project which was funded by the German Research Foundation.³ This kind of data is innovative: It includes information also on lesser-known candidates which would rarely be possible when external personality assessments would be used. Also, the data set does not rely on content analyses which often have to be limited to available material from a specific medium. When candidates are asked directly, negative campaigning can be regarded more globally. This new data set offers the opportunity for larger-scale research about the candidates' personality traits and how they link to campaigning.

After reviewing previous research about campaigning, aversive personality, and their connection, three main research questions are going to be derived: 1. Is the candidates' aversive personality associated with the use of negative campaigning beyond basic personality traits, especially honesty-humility and agreeableness? 2. Is the association between candidates' aversive personality and negative campaigning mediated via rational choice processes, such as the perception regarding benefits and costs? 3. Is the candidates' aversive personality associated with the use of positive campaigning? Based on this foundation, the three articles answering these research questions are going to be presented. The contributions, limitations, and possible implications of this research are going to be discussed, concluding with ideas for further research.

2 State of Research and Research Questions

Although research on the relationship between aversive personality and campaign communication is still in its beginnings and has thus not been undertaken too extensively, both topics were taken up in separate strands of literature which lay the ground for this dissertation. This chapter starts with a description of the types of campaign communication and their purpose. It then summarizes the state of knowledge about possible drivers of campaign communication. To pave the way for understanding research about the role of aversive personality as a possible determinant of campaign communication, different concepts of

³ see p. 15 for information on funding

aversive personality are introduced and previous research on the connection of aversive personality to the political context is presented.

2.1 Types and Purposes of Campaign Communication and Known Drivers

In the functional theory of political campaign discourse, Benoit (2017) states that messages that are transmitted in election campaigns are “*functional*, or means to an end” (p. 196). He describes voting as a comparative act in which candidates want to be perceived as preferable over others, in which candidates highlight how they differ from their opponents, and in which messages are communicated to the voters who then learn about the candidates. This can be done in different ways: Positive campaigning, or acclaiming, is when candidates self-advertise by emphasizing their strengths, skills, and good characteristics (Benoit, 2017). The message’s content focuses on attributes of the candidate who sends it. On the other hand, negative campaigning, or attacking, concerns candidates who oppose the sending candidate. Negative campaigning informs about the opponent’s weak points and disadvantages (Benoit, 2017). Defenses refute or respond to negative campaigning coming from an opposing candidate (Benoit, 2017). Thus, defenses are reactive: Another person must have started the chain of communication. The purpose of these three kinds of campaign communication is to make candidates more preferable, and this is done by either increasing their own preferability with positive campaigning, decreasing the opponents’ preferability with negative campaigning, or reducing the costs caused by others with defenses (Benoit, 2017).

When previous research had asked which factors are linked with differences in campaign communication, the focus was usually on the context in which the candidates find themselves or on sociodemographic and political characteristics. Starting with sociodemographic characteristics, campaign communication differs by the gender of candidates. Research about gender effects on the use of positive campaigning is, however, rare and the results are conflicting. While there are findings that female candidates use positive campaigning less (Panagopoulos, 2004), there are also findings that women report their campaigns to be more positive than men do (Coffé et al., 2023). Regarding negative campaigning, researchers using Western-European samples either find almost no systematic gender differences (Walter, 2013; after excluding the British Conservative Party under Thatcher) or a tendency of men to attack more than women (Ennsler-Jedenastik et al., 2017; Maier & Nai, 2023).

Turning towards political characteristics and the context, challengers use less positive campaigning and incumbents more (Benoit, 2014; Vafeiadis et al., 2018) which can happen because incumbents have more experience and examples from office they can base their acclaims on (e.g., Benoit, 2017). As the campaign is then focused on the incumbent's positive promises and achievements which challengers usually cannot come up with for themselves, challengers resort to criticizing the incumbent's claims (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). In multiparty-systems, a similar dynamic shows in that members of the government tend to attack less (Maier & Jansen, 2017), opposition parties go more negative than governing parties (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008), and candidates running for governing parties go less negative than those running for opposition parties (Maier & Nai, 2023). The political ideology of candidates is also associated with their negative campaigning. For example, negative campaigning is more likely in Republican candidates (Lau & Pomper, 2001), and far-right candidates are more likely to go negative (Nai, 2020). Additionally, it shows that an extreme (left or right) ideology comes with a tendency to use negative campaigning (Maier & Nai, 2023; Nai, 2020). An explanation might be that ideologically extreme parties and candidates are less likely to be part of a coalition after the election (Nai, 2020). If future coalitions are likely, however, parties have reasons to refrain from negative rhetoric against their partner for the sake of good collaboration after the election (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008).

Although these sociodemographic and political characteristics and context factors are part of the various factors associated with campaign communication, they are not all-encompassing. Research has recently recognized the potential of individual differences, such as personality, as additional underlying factors of campaign communication. A concept of personality that particularly stands out in (negative) campaigning research is aversive personality (see, e.g., Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020).

2.2 Concepts of Aversive Personality

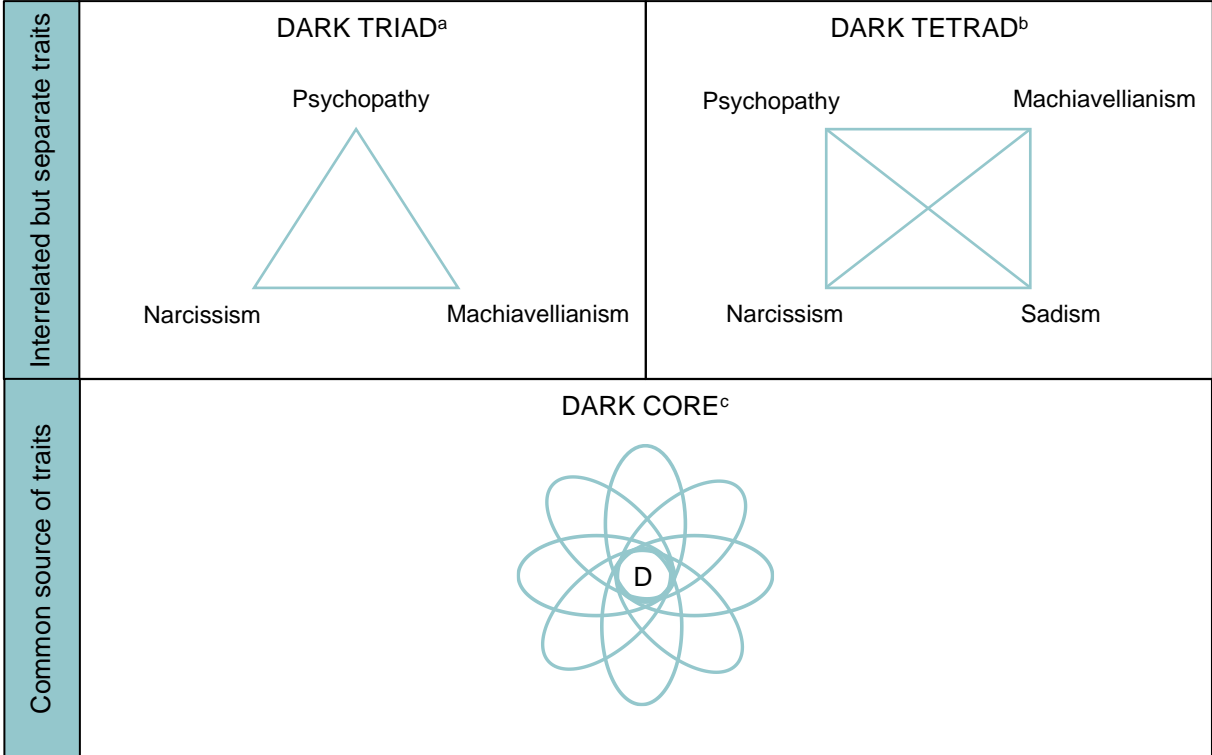
People with an aversive personality, often called “dark” personality, tend to behave in a socially malicious manner but their personality is non-pathological or -clinical (e.g., Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Individuals can possess any degree of aversive personality from low to high levels.

Aversive personality was conceptualized in different ways that can be sorted into broadly two directions (see also Figure 1). The first is based on the view that the various aversive traits are interrelated but separate. A well-known example of this kind of concept is

the Dark Triad with the traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissism is characterized by feeling and being authoritarian, exhibitionistic, superior to others, vain, exploitative, entitled, and self-sufficient (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissists aim to maintain this grandiose view of themselves through strategies of self-enhancement and self-protection (Back et al., 2013). Machiavellianism, derived from a study of Niccolò Machiavelli by Christie and Geis (1970), can be boiled down to “(a) manipulateness, (b) callous affect, and (c) a strategic-calculating orientation” (Jones & Paulhus, 2014, p. 29). Subclinical psychopathy expresses itself as arrogance, deception, impulsive and irresponsible behavior, and a shallow affective experience (LeBreton et al., 2006) that also shows in a lack of feeling empathy (e.g., Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). The Dark Tetrad extends the Dark Triad by adding the trait everyday sadism that comes with the motivation to harm innocent others (Buckels et al., 2013; Chabrol et al., 2009).

Figure 1

Selected Concepts of Aversive Personality



Note. ^a see Paulhus & Williams (2002, p. 559), ^b see Chabrol et al. (2009, p. 737), ^c see Moshagen et al. (2018) and Moshagen et al. (n.d.)

But because aversive personality traits are interrelated, though not equivalent (Furnham et al., 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), the idea behind more recent concepts of personality is that all aversive traits are rooted in a common source, the “dark core” (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 661). It reflects “the general tendency to maximize one’s individual utility—disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—, accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications” (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 657). The single aversive traits have their own flavors and are manifestations of the dark core which itself entails the aversive parts of the traits (Bader et al., 2023) and underlies all aversive traits (Moshagen et al., 2018). The concept of the dark core also provides opportunities from a practical standpoint: If aversive personality in general is the focus of research, as opposed to three to four specific aversive traits (i.e., the Dark Triad or Tetrad) there is potential for one scale for the whole dark core instead of an item battery per trait (see, e.g., the PEAPS by Maier, Oschatz, et al. (2023), described in Chapter 3.2.1).

2.3 Aversive Personality and Campaign Communication

Aversive personality was often researched in the context of corporate life and leadership, where power and success matter (see, e.g., Furtner et al., 2017; M. B. Smith et al., 2018). Being a politician is also a type of leadership and research points towards the fact that individuals with a certain personality are drawn to such positions. People with high Machiavellianism and narcissism believe that they are qualified for a political career, think about running for office and believe in their success (Blais & Pruyers, 2017; Peterson & Palmer, 2022). If having an aversive personality makes striving for a political career more likely, people with that personality may try harder to reach this goal. This could mean also embracing the risky campaign strategies, e.g., negative campaigning, aside from the less risky ones, e.g., positive campaigning.

Indeed, it was found that personality and communication are related (de Vries et al., 2013). People with an aversive personality are more likely to communicate in a negative and aggressive way in everyday life (e.g., Horan et al., 2015; Sumner et al., 2012) and bully others (e.g., Goodboy & Martin, 2015). These communicative tendencies also show in the context of political communication; people with an aversive personality tend to use negative campaigning: Nai et al. (2019) used an expert survey in which the personality and campaigning of candidates from elections worldwide were assessed. They found that among the Dark Triad traits, psychopathy is related to campaigning more negatively and harshly. A second expert survey study also shows the relationship between psychopathy and negative campaigning and adds that

psychopathy is associated with more likely character attacks and fear appeals (Nai, 2019). Furthermore, Nai and Maier (2020) used expert assessments of personality and campaign tone information from various sources from the 2018 U.S. Senate Midterm elections. When aversive traits are treated separately, only psychopathy is related to negativity on Twitter but not narcissism and Machiavellianism. Using the dark core as a measure of aversive personality, there is a relationship with Twitter negativity. When campaign negativity is assessed by experts, candidates with higher scores on psychopathy and the dark core are more likely to use more negativity in general.

As can be seen, these studies offer a novel view on negative campaigning as being related to individual differences in personality traits that were previously shown to play a role in the context of leadership: aversive personality traits. By that, they lay the ground for new research questions and for exploring the associations between election candidates' aversive personality and their use of campaign communication.

2.4 Derivation and Connection of Research Questions

From the literature review, it becomes clear that researchers have just begun to explore the role of factors other than sociodemographic or political characteristics in campaign communication. Regarding individual differences between candidates, aversive personality seems to go particularly well with harsh communication and, thereby, “going negative”. However, research that studies the association between aversive personality and negative campaigning in more detail and takes a look under its surface is lacking. Furthermore, as with other characteristics than aversive personality, considerably more attention was paid to associations with negative than with positive campaigning. As a consequence, it is unclear if having an aversive personality might be related to the use of the latter campaigning strategy. In the following, three research questions are derived from previous research and built upon each other to address these gaps.

The *first research question* sets the basis for the dissertation by establishing whether aversive personality is an important personality concept in the association with negative campaigning: *Is the candidates' aversive personality associated with the use of negative campaigning beyond basic personality traits, especially honesty-humility and agreeableness?* The reason why the role of aversive personality as a potential determinant of negative campaigning is called into question becomes clear when looking at two different strands of research. The first strand shows that the personality of candidates matters when they go

negative, which is the case for aversive personality (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020) but also for basic personality traits (e.g., Maier & Nai, 2023; Nai, 2019): Candidates with an aversive personality tend to use negative campaigning more extensively, and also basic personality traits are linked with the use of negative campaigning. The second strand of previous literature discusses whether the concept of aversive personality, especially the dark core, is unique or if the longer researched basic personality traits entail this part of personality already, making aversive personality a repetitive concept (Horsten et al., 2021; e.g., Rose et al., 2023; Vize et al., 2021). For the explanation of negative campaigning, this opens up the question of whether the level of aversive personality of candidates really is associated with the use of negative campaigning beyond basic personality traits. This provides the topic of the first article in this dissertation.

The second research question directly connects with the first article. If it is really the candidates' aversive personality that plays an important role when it comes to their use of negative campaigning, and this role cannot be entirely replaced by basic personality traits, what are the underlying mechanisms? A hint about how aversive personality could be associated with negative campaigning is given by the fact that negative campaigning was often explained using rational choice approaches. Examples of this are Lau and Pomper (2004) who state that negative campaigning is "largely a rational course of action for political candidates" (p. 38) and Skaperdas and Grofman (1995) who explain that negative campaigning is used when it offers a relative gain over other candidates despite possible backlash effects. This means that in general, candidates should be more likely to go negative when benefits exceed costs (Walter & Nai, 2015). If the perceived benefits and costs of negative campaigning differed by aversive personality, this could result in the previously detected differences in the use of negative campaigning. The *second research question* is thus: *Is the association between candidates' aversive personality and negative campaigning mediated via rational choice processes, such as the perception regarding benefits and costs?*

The first two research questions concern negative campaigning as does most research on the determinants of campaign communication. This makes sense because going negative can be risky for the candidates who use it (e.g., Roese & Sande, 1993; Walter & van der Eijk, 2019) and, in the bigger picture, for democratic functioning (Ansolabehere et al., 1994). But the most widely used type of campaign communication, namely positive campaigning or acclaims (e.g., Benoit, 2017; Brazeal & Benoit, 2001; Hansen & Pedersen, 2008; Stein & Benoit, 2021), is much less researched. However, positive campaigning has some advantages: It is low-risk because its content is positive (Wicks et al., 2011) and usually supported by voters (Reinemann

& Maurer, 2005). Although it is thinkable that the candidates' aversive personality may not only be associated with negative but also positive campaigning, this possible connection was not researched, yet. Aversive personality has two sides: Caring less about harming others when reaching personal goals (Moshagen, Zettler, & Hilbig, 2020), and the need for attention (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Nevicka et al., 2011) with a tendency to overestimate oneself (Jain & Bearden, 2011; O'Reilly & Hall, 2021; M. B. Smith et al., 2018). While the first side is theorized to be responsible for the tendency to campaign negatively, the second side could increase the candidates' use of positive campaigning. This leads to the *third research question*, and at the same time topic for the third article: *Is the candidates' aversive personality associated with the use of positive campaigning?*

Filling these research gaps requires information about the personality and campaigning of political candidates, as well as their perceptions of their own campaigning and the connected benefits and risks. To ensure that the results are not only applicable to a very specific subgroup of political candidates, it is necessary that as many candidates as possible are sampled. This calls for large-scale self-report data from candidates. A project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) obtained such information from political elites in Germany. The resulting innovative data set sets the basis for exploring the research questions posed in this dissertation. Main aspects of the project and the dataset are introduced in the next chapter. Thereafter, the three articles (one for each research question) working with this data set are summarized.

3 Design of the German Research Foundation Project Data

The dissertation uses data from the DFG-funded project “Negative Campaigning in German Elections: Measurement, Dynamics, and Determinants”.⁴ The project focuses on gaining knowledge on the determinants of negative campaigning. To do so, data about rational choice processes, values, attitudes, personality, and many other possible determinants as well as the proposed outcome, campaign communication, were collected. Additionally, for the purpose of data linkage, the candidates' campaign communication on social media was captured using machine learning, and contextual variables were gathered using information provided by

⁴ Funding from the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) was acquired by Jürgen Maier, Corinna Oschatz, and Sebastian Stier (project number 441574527). All articles in this dissertation are part of the project and were thus supported by funding from the DFG.

the state and constituency returning officers (in German: “Landeswahlleiter” and “Kreiswahlleiter”).⁵

3.1 Main Dataset and Sampling

Data are part of the ongoing project and were collected from the candidates running in the state elections from 2021 to the present. The goal is to cover all state elections up to Hamburg 2025. At the moment, the data set includes the state elections of Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in 2021, Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Lower Saxony in 2022, as well as Bremen, the Berlin re-election, Bavaria, and Hesse in 2023.⁶ In most of these federal states, elections follow the principle of personalized proportional representation, often also called mixed-member proportional representation (see Zicht (1999) for more details about the German electoral systems). In this system, people decide for a constituency candidate in the first vote and for a party in the second vote. Approximately half of the seats of the state parliament are filled with the winning constituency candidates and the other half with candidates from the party lists. Parties need to reach at least 5% of votes⁷ to be represented in the parliaments. The articles of the dissertation each use a subset of the main data set. The subsets include the data that was collected until the time at which the analyses were undertaken.

Before each election, the state and constituency returning officers publish candidate lists. While a full sample of all candidates from these lists was drawn in 2021, only candidates from the most relevant parties were part of the sample in the years after. This included the traditionally relevant parties CDU/CSU (Christian Democrats / Christian Social Union), SPD (Social Democrats), AfD (Alternative for Germany), GRÜNE (Alliance 90/The Greens), DIE LINKE (Left Party), and FDP (Liberal Democrats), as well as other parties that were part of the respective state parliament or reached more than 5% in the polls.

After the candidates’ publicly available contact information was researched they were invited to participate in the survey on the day after the election. Candidates with an available email address were sent an email with a personal link to the online questionnaire. If no email address was found, postal invitations were sent to candidates with an available postal address.

⁵ The overall project and data linkage have been approved by an institutional review board prior to the data collection (GESIS ethics committee, 27 November 2020, reference number 2020–6).

⁶ Surveys for Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg 2024 have just left the field phase and datasets are currently being prepared. They are not part of the data used in this dissertation.

⁷ or, among the state elections included in this dissertation, win at least one constituency in Berlin or Schleswig-Holstein

This was in most cases either their personal address or the address of their party's local or state office. The postal invitations included a paper and pencil questionnaire and a free return envelope but also the link and password to the online questionnaire in case candidates preferred to reply online. The questionnaires were in the field for approximately two months, and candidates who had not participated yet were remembered twice, to increase participation. While most questions were posed in every state election, some items were only present for a period of time and then replaced by new items.

3.2 Measurement of Aversive Personality and Campaign Communication

The candidates' aversive personality as well as their negative and positive campaign communication were measured in the main data set. While details that are specific to the articles are presented later (see Chapter 4), aversive personality and campaign communication are key measures that appear in every article of the dissertation and are described below.

3.2.1 Aversive Personality

Aversive personality is used as the main independent variable in all three articles of the dissertation.⁸ Capturing aversive personality in a sample of political elites is challenging. Usually, item batteries for aversive personality are lengthy and use a very direct item wording which could decrease participation. The Political Elites Aversive Personality Scale (PEAPS), which was specifically designed to be used in political elite samples, addresses these challenges by limiting the number of items and by using less harsh item wordings (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023). The short scale is based on the idea of the dark core (e.g., Moshagen et al., 2018; see Chapter 2.2 for more details about the dark core) and consists of six items that are combined into one measure for aversive personality (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023): i. There have been times when I was willing to suffer some small harm so that I could punish someone else who deserved it (spitefulness), ii. It's wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later (Machiavellianism), iii. There are things you should hide from other people to preserve your reputation (Machiavellianism), iv. I insist on getting the respect I deserve (narcissism), v. I want my rivals to fail (narcissism (rivalry-supremacy)), and vi. People who mess with me always regret it (psychopathy) (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023). In the survey

⁸ The use of directional terms such as independent variable and outcome variable is based on theoretical assumptions. Causal directions cannot be proven with the present cross-sectional main dataset.

belonging to the main dataset, candidates were asked to rate themselves on these items on a scale from 1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “fully agree”. The PEAPS is stable over time in a longitudinal design, as it has a moderate to good test-retest reliability (Maier et al., 2024).

3.2.2 Campaign Communication

Positive and negative campaign communication are the main outcome variables in the analyses of the articles presented in this dissertation. The overarching interest is how often candidates use the respective communication strategy by degree of aversive personality. Thereby, it can be seen how much candidates with a more aversive personality contribute to the overall use of the campaigning strategy. This is done by asking candidates to report how often they use negative or positive campaigning instead of estimating the percentage of the respective campaigning strategy in their total campaign communication. The reason is that the share in percent does not tell how much the candidate contributes to the overall use of a campaigning strategy: To illustrate this in a simplified example, if candidate A simultaneously uses positive and negative campaigning often and candidate B simultaneously uses both strategies seldom, this could mean a 50:50 share in both cases. However, in comparison to other candidates, candidate A contributes—with their use of negative campaigning—much more than candidate B to the overall negative political climate regarding campaign communication and takes the risks of undesired consequences more often than candidate B. The measure of how often negative, or respectively positive, campaigning is used is thereby the utilized operationalization.

The specific question posed to capture positive campaigning is “If you think back to your own election campaign. How often have you promoted your own policy, i.e., presented your political achievements, political plans, political positions, or your own person in a positive way?” To measure negative campaigning, candidates were asked “How often did you attack the political opponent, that is, criticizing other parties or candidates?” Answers to both questions were given on a scale from 1 “never” to 5 “very often”.

The questions used are purposely designed to capture a general form of negative, or positive, campaigning regardless of the context or medium in which it is expressed. The idea is to assess the candidate’s overall frequency of negative or positive campaigning.

4 Presentation of the Articles

The demonstrated research gaps are addressed in this dissertation by three articles, with the help of the project's dataset and the described main measures. While details (e.g., about the variables and the analytical procedures) find their place in the articles, the focus now lies on summarizing the essence of the articles in the next three subchapters. Also, the discussion sections are reserved for explaining in more detail the limitations specific to the articles while limitations that are common to all articles are only briefly mentioned and are addressed instead in the General Discussion and Conclusion (Chapter 5).

4.1 Article 1: Negative Campaigning Is “Dark”—Not Just Disagreeable or Dishonest: Results From German Candidates’ Self-Reports

The first article of the dissertation was created in cooperation with the coauthors Prof. Dr. Jürgen Maier and Ass. Prof. Dr. Corinna Oschatz. It is published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* which is the official journal of the International Society for the Study of Individual Differences. The journal publishes articles that provide insights about personality structures and other individual differences, as well as how these develop and apply practically, including behavior (Elsevier B.V., 2024b). The journal currently has an impact factor of 3.5 and a CiteScore of 8.5. It ranks in Q1 in the category “Psychology, Social” (WoS Research Team, 2024b). All articles in this journal undergo double-blind peer review (Elsevier B.V., 2024a).

4.1.1 Literature and Theory

This article finds its place in the dissertation by aiming to answer the *first research question*: Is the candidates' aversive personality associated with the use of negative campaigning beyond basic personality traits, especially honesty-humility and agreeableness?

This question arises because the HEXACO traits honesty-humility and agreeableness stand out with their similarity to aversive personality and could thus be competitors of aversive personality's association with negative campaigning. A look at the traits' descriptions helps to better understand why. Low scorers on the agreeableness scale are described as “ill-tempered, quarrelsome, stubborn, choleric” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 154) and high scorers as “patient, tolerant, peaceful, mild, agreeable, lenient, gentle” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 154). While individuals with low honesty-humility are “sly, greedy, pretentious, hypocritical, boastful,

pompous”, those who score high on this trait are “sincere, honest, faithful/loyal, modest/unassuming, fair-minded” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 154). The socially problematic characteristics of low scorers show parallels to aversive personality traits.

An additional parallel is that honesty-humility and agreeableness may also be associated with negative campaigning. It was found that candidates who report low agreeableness are significantly more likely to go negative (e.g., Maier & Nai, 2023; Nai, 2019).⁹ While the possible link between honesty-humility and negative campaigning has not been researched so far, the description of the trait in itself together with a correlation with verbal aggressiveness (de Vries et al., 2013) are indications that this link could exist.

H1. The higher the candidates' self-reported level of agreeableness, the less often they use negative campaigning.

H2. The higher the candidates' self-reported level of honesty-humility, the less often they use negative campaigning.

The expectations regarding the association between aversive personality and communication follow a similar logic. Individuals with an aversive personality aim to maximize their own utility while provoking or not caring that others are harmed (Moshagen et al., 2018). They communicate aggressively (e.g., Horan et al., 2015; Sumner et al., 2012) which also shows when the outcome is negative campaigning: It was found that an aversive personality of candidates comes with a tendency to go negative (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020).

H3. The higher the candidates' self-reported level of aversive personality, the more often they use negative campaigning.

As can be seen, low honesty-humility, low agreeableness, and high aversive personality share both, socially malicious tendencies and the potential to increase negative campaigning of candidates. Additionally, honesty-humility and agreeableness are strongly related to aversive personality (e.g., McLarnon & Tarraf, 2021; Muris et al., 2017; Stead et al., 2012). Going further, the dark core was suspected to measure the same construct as low agreeableness and it was tested whether this might also be the case regarding low honesty-humility (Hodson et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2023; Vize et al., 2021). But Moshagen et al. (2020) explain that the dark

⁹ Some articles were not yet published in print by the time of the publication of this dissertation's articles (e.g., they were *online first*), but they were published in print later on. For these articles, the years of publication were updated. Thus, the years differ between the references in the dissertation's article and the synopsis.

core is functionally different from agreeableness and is associated with behaviors beyond. Regarding honesty-humility, Horsten et al. (2021) find that the trait is functionally and nomologically distinct from the dark core and has its own relationship to some criterion measures. Derived from this literature, aversive personality does not seem to be the same as low honesty-humility and low agreeableness, and thus, a relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning beyond these basic personality traits is expected.

H4. The relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning remains when controlling for HEXACO traits.

4.1.2 Method

The hypotheses are tested using a subset of the DFG project's main data set. It comprises a survey among candidates from six German state elections (2021: Baden- Wuerttemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Berlin; 2022: Saarland). 3,842 candidates were successfully invited and 1,673 (43.5 %) responded. 1,414 candidates remain after deleting cases with nonresponse at the relevant variables and with deviations from a speed index (Leiner, 2019). 33 % are female and the age ranges between 18 and 83 years ($M = 45.31$, $SD = 13.75$). The candidates belonged to the CDU (11 %), SPD (12 %), GRÜNE (12 %), DIE LINKE (9 %), FDP (11 %), AfD (5 %), and other parties (40 %).

The main variables of interest were aversive personality, operationalized as a mean score of the six PEAPS items (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023; see Chapter 3.2.1; $M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.70$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.67$), negative campaigning (see Chapter 3.2.2; $M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.04$), and basic personality traits. The latter were measured using a German translation of the Brief HEXACO Inventory (BHI; de Vries, 2013; Twardawski et al., 2021). A mean score based on the facet items that represent each trait was calculated. Answers to the facet items ranged from 1 "do not agree at all" to 5 "fully agree".

The analysis starts by reviewing the correlations between basic and aversive personality traits with negative campaigning. Then, ordered logistic regression models are estimated step by step to see whether the association between aversive personality and negative campaigning decreases with the addition of agreeableness and honesty-humility to the model. The remaining HEXACO traits complete the model as control variables. The model fit is compared between the models thereafter.

4.1.3 Results

Honesty-humility and agreeableness are significantly and negatively correlated with both, negative campaigning and aversive personality. This makes these two basic personality traits likely competitors to aversive personality in its relationship with the use of negative campaigning: If the correlations with aversive personality are due to a similarity of the traits, and only the similar part influences the use of negative campaigning, aversive personality would not explain negative campaigning beyond honesty-humility and agreeableness. To test whether this is the case, stepwise ordered logistic regressions are run. When only basic personality traits are included in the model, agreeableness and honesty-humility are negatively and significantly related to negative campaigning (support for *H1* and *H2*). In the model with only aversive personality, aversive personality is positively and significantly associated with negative campaigning (support for *H3*). When aversive personality and basic personality traits are included in the same model, i.e., the coefficient of aversive personality is controlled for the influences of basic personality traits, the association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is somewhat lower but still significant (support for *H4*). Furthermore, the significant association between agreeableness and negative campaigning remains while the coefficient of honesty-humility is no longer significant. Although the pseudo-R² is low in all models, showing that other measures besides personality must be associated with negative campaigning, it is highest in the model which combines basic and aversive personality traits. A likelihood ratio test implicates that the addition of aversive personality traits to the model with only basic personality traits increases model fit significantly. The results are robust when including further context and background variables or using different model specifications.

4.1.4 Discussion

The article strengthens the case that candidates with a more aversive personality use negative campaigning more often. More importantly, this association holds when basic personality traits like honesty-humility and agreeableness are controlled for. Thereby, we react to the previously expressed doubts that aversive personality (and especially the dark core) may be no other concept than honesty-humility and agreeableness in reverse: We show that although aversive personality is in fact correlated with honesty-humility and agreeableness, its relationship with negative campaigning goes beyond these basic personality traits.

Aversive personality may be special because socially malicious behavior, i.e., reducing the utility of others to maximize one's own, can be intended and enjoyed (Moshagen et al., 2018). For individuals with low honesty-humility, harming others is only a by-product, and the lack of empathy is outside of the scope of honesty-humility (Horsten et al., 2021). Additionally, individuals with an aversive personality justify their actions (Moshagen et al., 2018) which is not part of the constructs of low agreeableness or low honesty-humility. Aversive personality thus includes the lack of empathy, justification of actions, and enjoying others' disutility which may connect this type of personality to negative campaigning beyond low honesty-humility and agreeableness. To test whether this assumption actually holds empirically is subject to future research.

This study has limitations as it is based on cross-sectional data that does not allow testing for causality, the results might depend on the context of state elections in the German multiparty system, and self-report scales are used which are always imperfect measures of personality due to the possibility of social desirability bias (see Chapter 5 for limitations that apply to all articles of the dissertation). Furthermore, short scales are often of lower reliability which especially concerns the BHI (de Vries, 2013; Julian et al., 2022) as a measure of basic personality traits. However, according to de Vries (2013, p. 877), the low alpha reliabilities of the BHI do "not seem to have major validity repercussions" and the BHI is short and broad in content at the same time. Shortness is especially practical when sampling (political) elites who are often limited in time resources. The results of this article should nevertheless be interpreted while having these limits in mind.

In conclusion, the article provides insights that the connection between the aversive personality of candidates and their use of negative campaigning is not overridden by low agreeableness and honesty-humility, although previous literature suggested these personality concepts to be highly similar or identical. We can therefore say that negative campaigning is "dark"—not just disagreeable or dishonest.

4.2 Article 2: A Different "Dark" Rationality? Testing the Mediation Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning Through Perceived Benefits and Costs

The second article is single-authored. It addresses mechanisms that may underlie the link between personality, i.e., aversive personality, and political behavior, i.e., negative campaigning.

4.2.1 Literature and Theory

Since the first article has shown that the candidates' aversive personality is not merely substitutable by basic personality traits in the relationship with negative campaigning, it is time to take a look under the surface of this connection. The second article thus belongs to the *second research question*: Is the association between candidates' aversive personality and negative campaigning mediated via rational choice processes, such as the perception regarding benefits and costs?

According to Quackenbush (2004), rational behavior means that individuals act in line with their preferences. To have such preferences, they need to consider the behavioral consequences. These can have any value from negative to positive (e.g., Hirsh et al., 2018), so they can be costly or beneficial. In addition to the value, the probability that the consequence occurs is of importance, as stated by rational choice-based approaches like subjective expected utility (SEU) theory (e.g., Savage, 1954; Schoemaker, 1982). People choose the action with the highest SEU, which is "defined as the sum of the utilities for each behavioral consequence, multiplied by the subjective probability of each consequence" (Opp, 1986, p. 89). Rational choice approaches also found their way into negative campaigning research. Negative campaigning was described as being "largely a rational course of action for political candidates" (Lau & Pomper, 2004, p. 38). The strategy is, in theory, likely to be used when benefits exceed costs (e.g., Walter & Nai, 2015) and when a relative gain over the opponents is expected (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995).

Previous research indicates that people with an aversive personality might perceive benefits and costs differently. First, remember that the dark core, as one of the concepts of aversive personality, is "the general tendency to maximize one's individual utility—disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—, accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications" (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 657). Therefore, people with a more aversive personality may regard different behavioral consequences as benefits and costs than others. For example, harming others and behaving socially problematic may not be considered as costly by them as it is by others, or it may even be seen as a benefit (Moshagen, Zettler, & Hilbig, 2020). Literature about the specific aversive traits underlines that they might also assign more or less value than others to some behavioral outcomes. Money, power, and status are the goals of Machiavellians (Furtner & Baldegger, 2016), attention and self-validation of narcissists (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), and social status of affective-interpersonal psychopaths who on the contrary do not value communal goals that much (Ojanen & Findley-

Van Nostrand, 2019). Empirically, some aversive personality traits were associated with higher risk-taking in health (Konc et al., 2022), finances and gambling (Sekścińska & Rudzinska-Wojciechowska, 2020), and other risk measures (Malesza & Ostaszewski, 2016; Stanwix & Walker, 2021).

The hypotheses combine the assumption that perceptions of benefits and costs differ by aversive personality with the finding that candidates with an aversive personality have a higher tendency to use negative campaigning, a behavior that was in part explained using rational choice logic (Lau & Pomper, 2004; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; Walter & Nai, 2015). Furthermore, based on expectancy-value theories like SEU theory, the hypotheses take not only the probability and magnitude of benefits and costs into account but also their multiplication, that is, the expected utility and disutility.

H1. The more aversive the candidates' personality the more often they use negative campaigning.

H2. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the perceived probability of benefits as well as by the magnitude of benefits.

H3. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the perceived probability of costs as well as by the magnitude of costs.

H4. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the expected utility.

H5. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the expected disutility.

4.2.2 Method

A subset of the DFG project's data with candidates who ran for nine state parliaments in Germany in 2021 (Berlin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), 2022 (Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony), and 2023 (Bremen, Bavaria, Hesse) is used to test the expectations. 5,344 candidates were contacted successfully, and 2,177 (40.7%) of them filled in the questionnaire at least partially. Candidates who rushed through the online questionnaire according to a speed index (Leiner, 2019) and candidates with missing values on the variables aversive personality or negative campaigning were excluded which resulted in a sample of 1,843 candidates. 38.1% of the sample were female and the age ranged between 18 and 86 years ($M = 46.08$, $SD = 13.57$). 15.1% belonged to the party CDU/CSU, 16.1% to SPD,

18.0% to GRÜNE, 14.1% to FDP, 13.0% to DIE LINKE, 8.0% to AfD, and 15.7% to other parties.

The main variables of interest were negative campaigning ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.99$; see Chapter 3.2.2), aversive personality operationalized as the mean score of the six PEAPS items (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023; $M = 2.56$, $SD = 0.70$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.67$; see Chapter 3.2.1), and perceptions of benefits and costs, i.e., their magnitude and probability. The perceived magnitude of benefits, respectively costs, of negative campaigning was measured by asking: "In your opinion, how big are the advantages [disadvantages] associated with attacking the political opponent?" Responses were given on a scale from 1 "no advantages [disadvantages] at all" to 5 "very big advantages [disadvantages]" (magnitude of benefits: $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.07$; magnitude of costs: $M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.97$). Among participants who saw at least some advantages or disadvantages, the perceived probability of benefits, respectively costs, was measured by asking: "How likely do you think it is that the advantages [disadvantages] will occur in the event of an attack on the political opponent?" Answers were provided on a scale from 1 "very unlikely" to 5 "very likely" with a midpoint labeled "partly/partly" (probability of benefits: $M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.75$; probability of costs: $M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.77$).¹⁰ The expected utility scale is a multiplication of the probability and magnitude of benefits ($M = 9.28$, $SD = 4.32$), and the expected disutility scale of the probability and magnitude of costs ($M = 9.89$, $SD = 4.33$).

To analyze the data, a series of mediation models using Hayes' PROCESS procedure (Hayes, 2018) for SPSS version 4.3.1 (IBM Corp, 2023) are run. Model 4 (Hayes, 2018, p. 585) is specified with the control variables gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbency, and membership in a governing party. To hold the respective other hypothesized benefit or cost mediator constant, parallel mediation models are calculated. As usual for mediation models, the hypothesized independent variable (aversive personality) is additionally held constant in the relationship between the mediators and the hypothesized dependent variable (use of negative campaigning). The first model tests for the mediation via the probability of benefits and costs, the second model via the magnitude of benefits and costs, and the third model via the expected utility and expected disutility. Bootstrapped unstandardized regression coefficients with 5,000 iterations are used for the indirect effects, and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals are reported. Robustness checks finalize the analysis.

¹⁰ Participants responded on a scale from 1 to 7 in the postal questionnaires in 2021, while the scale in the online questionnaires ranged from 1 to 5. The scale from 1 to 5 was used in both modes thereafter. To combine the scales, responses on the scale from 1 to 7 were re-scaled into the scale from 1 to 5 using the formula $\text{new value} = ((4/6 * \text{old value}) - (4/6)) + 1$. This results in 9 scale points.

4.2.3 Results

In all models, the candidates' aversive personality is positively associated with their use of negative campaigning. Also common to all models is that the positive and significant relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning remains when the mediators are accounted for.

The mediation models show that the candidates' aversive personality is positively related to the perception of benefits regarding negative campaigning: The higher the aversive personality, the higher the perceived probability and magnitude of benefits, and the higher the expected utility. Also, the higher these three benefit measures, the more often candidates use negative campaigning. With 95% confidence, there is a positive mediation between aversive personality and negative campaigning through these benefit measures.

Regarding the cost measures, the candidates' aversive personality is not significantly associated with the perceived probability of costs or the expected disutility of negative campaigning. The higher the perceived probability of costs or the expected disutility, the less often candidates use negative campaigning. As zero is included in the confidence intervals of the specific indirect effects, there is no sufficient evidence for mediation through the probability of costs or the expected disutility. The picture concerning the role of the magnitude of costs changes a bit. Aversive personality is negatively associated with the magnitude of costs, which in turn is negatively associated with the use of negative campaigning. With 95% confidence, the magnitude of costs mediates the association between the candidates' aversive personality and negative campaigning. However, the specific indirect effect of the magnitude of costs is very low and turns out to be unstable in the robustness check: In a model with the four potential mediators at once (i.e., the probabilities and magnitudes of benefits and costs) there is no sufficient evidence for a mediation via the magnitude of costs while the specific indirect associations via the benefit measures remain. A follow-up model points to the interpretation that this is due to losing category 1 of the magnitude measures because of the filter. Nevertheless, if the mediation via the magnitude of benefits is stable and via the magnitude of costs is not, the latter mediation is not robust.

Apart from that, the question arises if the mediation via the expected utility depends on whether a low or high disutility is anticipated, and vice versa. Therefore, the respondents were divided into a group with below-median (i.e., low) (dis)utility and above-or-equal-median (i.e., high) (dis)utility. Neither among candidates who expected a low nor among candidates who expected a high utility, there is sufficient evidence for mediation via the expected disutility.

The perceived utility, however, mediates the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning among both, low and high disutility candidates.

4.2.4 Discussion

In previous research, it was found that candidates with a more aversive personality tend to use negative campaign communication (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020). As rational choice processes were often assumed to be a driver of negative campaigning (Lau & Pomper, 2004; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; Walter & Nai, 2015), it was tested whether the connection between aversive personality and negative campaigning is mediated by differing perceptions of benefits and costs. The results of several parallel mediation models once again show that aversive personality is positively associated with the candidates' use of negative campaigning (support for *H1*). This association is mediated via the perceived probability, magnitude, and expected utility of negative campaigning (support for *H2* and *H4*). There is no sufficient evidence for mediation through the perceived probability of costs, the expected disutility, and also not through the perceived magnitude of costs because the latter mediation was not stable in the robustness check (no support for *H3* and *H5*). All mediations are not particularly strong which is in line with literature assuming that various other mechanisms than rational choice can be at play (see Maier, Stier, & Oschatz, 2023).

All in all, benefit measures played a more important role than cost measures. The fact that candidates differ more by aversive personality in benefit than cost measures is in line with a higher reward focus (Lakey et al., 2008) and higher anticipated benefits from risky behavior (Foster et al., 2009) shown by narcissists. However, it requires further research to test if these possible explanations can be transferred from the case of narcissism to a combined measure of aversive personality like the PEAPS.

Some limitations that apply to all articles of the dissertation (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion) must be considered: First, self-reports, especially of personality (e.g., Schumacher & Zettler, 2019), can be biased by social desirability. Second, the context of state elections in the German multiparty-system could affect the results. Third, the dataset is cross-sectional and the results cannot be interpreted causally. That personality traits were present before rational choice considerations regarding negative campaigning, and that these considerations happened before using negative campaigning is a theoretical assumption that cannot be proven in this article.

Notwithstanding, the article is an important step toward a better understanding of mechanisms that may underlie the connection between aversive personality and negative campaigning. The result that perceived beneficial consequences mediate this association opens up possibilities to adjust the use of negative campaigning by reality-checking the expectation of positive consequences. This can also lower the risk of unintended negative consequences when candidates behave too boldly. Further research may explore if such interventions could be fruitful. Furthermore, because the mediations are not very strong other possible mechanisms beyond rational choice such as impulsive or spontaneous behavior should be explored. What cannot be meaningfully done with the PEAPS but is also worth investigating is whether the single aversive traits are differently associated with negative campaigning via the benefit and cost measures.

4.3 Article 3: “Dark” Positivity: Do Candidates With a More Aversive Personality Use Positive Campaigning More Often?

The third article of the dissertation is single-authored. It is published in the journal *Party Politics*. The journal deals with research on political parties and their role in the political system, including electoral and campaign strategies. At this moment, the journal’s impact factor is 2.4 and the CiteScore is 5.5 (SAGE Publications, 2024a). *Party Politics* is ranked in Q1 in the category “Political Science” (WoS Research Team, 2024a). Submitted articles go through a double-anonymized peer review process (SAGE Publications, 2024b).

4.3.1 Literature and Theory

After the first and second articles of this dissertation have provided new insights about the role of candidates’ aversive personality in their use of negative campaigning, it is time to get both sides of campaigning covered. To provide a more complete picture of aversive personality in campaign communication, I turn to positive campaigning in this article. It addresses the *third research question*: Is the candidates’ aversive personality associated with the use of positive campaigning?

There are hints that individuals with more aversive personality traits present themselves in a positive light. First, people with aversive personality traits tend to overestimate themselves (Jain & Bearden, 2011; O’Reilly & Hall, 2021; M. B. Smith et al., 2018). They evaluate themselves better than others even though this perceived superiority cannot be confirmed using

more objective measures (Gabriel et al., 1994; Guedes, 2017; Jain & Bearden, 2011; Robins & John, 1997). Also in the political context, people with an aversive personality are confident. Machiavellians and narcissists believe in their qualifications for, and success in, a political career (Blais & Pruysers, 2017; Peterson & Palmer, 2022). In general, Dark Triad traits are connected to political ambition (Peterson & Palmer, 2021).

Second, people with an aversive personality want to be admired and need attention (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Nevicka et al., 2011). Individuals with high Narcissism think that they are superior (Brummelman et al., 2016), special, and unique (Emmons, 1987) while psychopathy is associated with grandiosity and arrogance (Hare et al., 2000; Mathieu et al., 2020). Self-promotion could reflect these personal features and beliefs. Additionally, self-promotion has a strategic side which may fit to Machiavellianism. Machiavellians strive for money, power, and status (Furtner & Baldegger, 2016), and by promoting their strengths they can demonstrate their dominance and abilities (Furtner et al., 2017; Sherry et al., 2006). Also high-functioning psychopathic individuals can show themselves as leaders (Palmen et al., 2018) and as charming, skilled, and charismatic (Babiak et al., 2010; Mathieu et al., 2020). Empirically, it turns out that individuals with aversive traits self-present and show off on social media and in social networks (Abell & Brewer, 2014; Bergman et al., 2011; Carpenter, 2012; Fox & Rooney, 2015; McCain et al., 2016; Palmer et al., 2016). Also in political positions, people with an aversive personality seem to create a convincing image. Narcissism was positively connected with charismatic leadership and presidential performance, and the latter was the case for fearlessly dominant psychopaths as well (Deluga, 1997; Lilienfeld et al., 2012). Narcissistic politicians were also considered by experts to have a higher overall greatness and public persuasiveness (Watts et al., 2013).

Taking this information together, it shows that people with an aversive personality are more drawn towards political careers and more convinced that they would be skilled, in general and for political tasks. Both speaks for using more positive campaigning to promote their perceived suitability or superiority to potential voters. Also, the very definition of the dark core, in which all single aversive traits are rooted, includes utility maximization at the expense of others (Moshagen et al., 2018). By using positive campaigning, candidates can get higher chances for influential positions, a better reputation, and a higher status than others, which fits the goal of maximizing utility at the expense of others. For these reasons, the expectation is that the candidates' aversive personality is associated with positive campaigning.

H1. The higher the self-reported aversive personality of candidates, the more often they use positive campaigning.

4.3.2 Method

The analyses are based on a subset of the DFG project's data with candidates who ran for ten state parliaments in Germany in 2021 (Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), 2022 (Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony), and 2023 (Bremen). Of the 5,755 successfully contacted candidates, 42.7% ($N = 2,456$) at least answered the questionnaire partially. After excluding all candidates who did not report their use of positive campaigning and who rushed through the online questionnaire according to the speed index of Leiner (2019), 2,133 candidates remain. They belonged to the parties CDU (13.4%), SPD (13.5%), AfD (6.7%), FDP (11.8%), DIE LINKE (11.1%), GRÜNE (15.5%), and other parties (28.1%). 34.6% were female, and the age ranged between 18 and 87 years ($M = 45.92$; $SD = 13.70$).

The main variables of interest were the candidates' use of positive campaigning ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.94$; see Chapter 3.2.2) and aversive personality ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.70$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.67$) which was modeled as a latent variable using the six items of the PEAPS (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023; see Chapter 3.2.1).

The indicators of aversive personality and the measure for positive campaigning are ordered categorical endogenous variables and positive campaigning is skewed to the right. To handle these variables, structural equation models (SEM) are run using a weighted least square estimator (WLSMV) that estimates model parameters via diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS; see Muthén, 1984).

The analysis begins with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the latent variable aversive personality and continues with two SEM that test the relationship between aversive personality and positive campaigning. While the first SEM is run without control variables, the second SEM includes the candidates' incumbency, membership in a governing party, political ideology, extremism, age, and gender. The last steps of the analysis are robustness checks and an exploratory test of how aversive personality is associated with a high or low use of both, positive and negative campaigning.

4.3.3 Results

The CFA shows that all six indicators adequately load on aversive personality. In both SEMs, with and without control variables, the association between the aversive personality of candidates and the use of positive campaigning is positive and significant. Regarding the

political and sociodemographic control variables, membership in a governing party, gender, age, political ideology, and extremism are not significantly related to positive campaigning. However, incumbents use significantly more positive campaigning than other candidates. The low R^2 in the SEMs indicates a low association between aversive personality and positive campaigning. But the association holds when robustness checks, such as the addition of dummies for the elections, the candidates' perceived chance to win, and party membership, or replacing the latent variable aversive personality with a mean score, are run.

Additional exploratory models with a binary dependent variable show that candidates with a more aversive personality are more likely to use both kinds of campaigning, positive and negative, often or very often. Vice versa, they are less likely to use both kinds of campaigning never or seldomly.

4.3.4 Discussion

This article complements previous research by showing that a more aversive personality also is associated with more positive campaigning, and not only more negative campaigning as shown by previous literature (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020). Furthermore, it is one out of only a few attempts to gain more empirical knowledge on characteristics connected with positive campaigning.

The main result was that the higher the aversive personality of candidates, the more positive campaigning they use (support for *H1*). Although the share of explained variance and thus supposedly the magnitude of the effect of personality are rather low, the association is stable in the presence of political and sociodemographic control variables and in the robustness checks. These results fit previous observations that people with an aversive personality see themselves in a positive light, also regarding their suitability for political positions (e.g., Blais & Pruyers, 2017; Peterson & Palmer, 2021). Furthermore, by using negative and positive campaigning more often than others, people with an aversive personality engage in behaviors that could maximize their own utility while decreasing the utility of others in the electoral competition. Whether the utility is indeed maximized by using more positive campaigning is a question for future research.

Some limitations have to be kept in mind, and most of them concern all articles in this dissertation (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion). First, the generalizability of the results to other contexts than German state elections is yet to be tested. Second, the self-reports of aversive personality and positive campaigning may be subject to bias and rationalization

processes. Third, cross-sectional associations are not equal to causality although it is logical that at least the personality was present before people became candidates and used positive campaigning. Lastly, the positive coefficient of aversive personality could also mean that candidates with a low aversive personality avoid positive campaigning.

The article opens up possibilities for new research on the determinants of positive campaigning. For example, more can be learned about the stability and generalizability of the results. It could also be explored in the future if the association between aversive personality and positive campaigning depends on the message's content, i.e., whether it focuses on the person or on an issue. By taking a first step to a more complete picture of the role of personality in political campaigning, this study adds knowledge about the positive side to what is already known about the negative side of campaign communication.

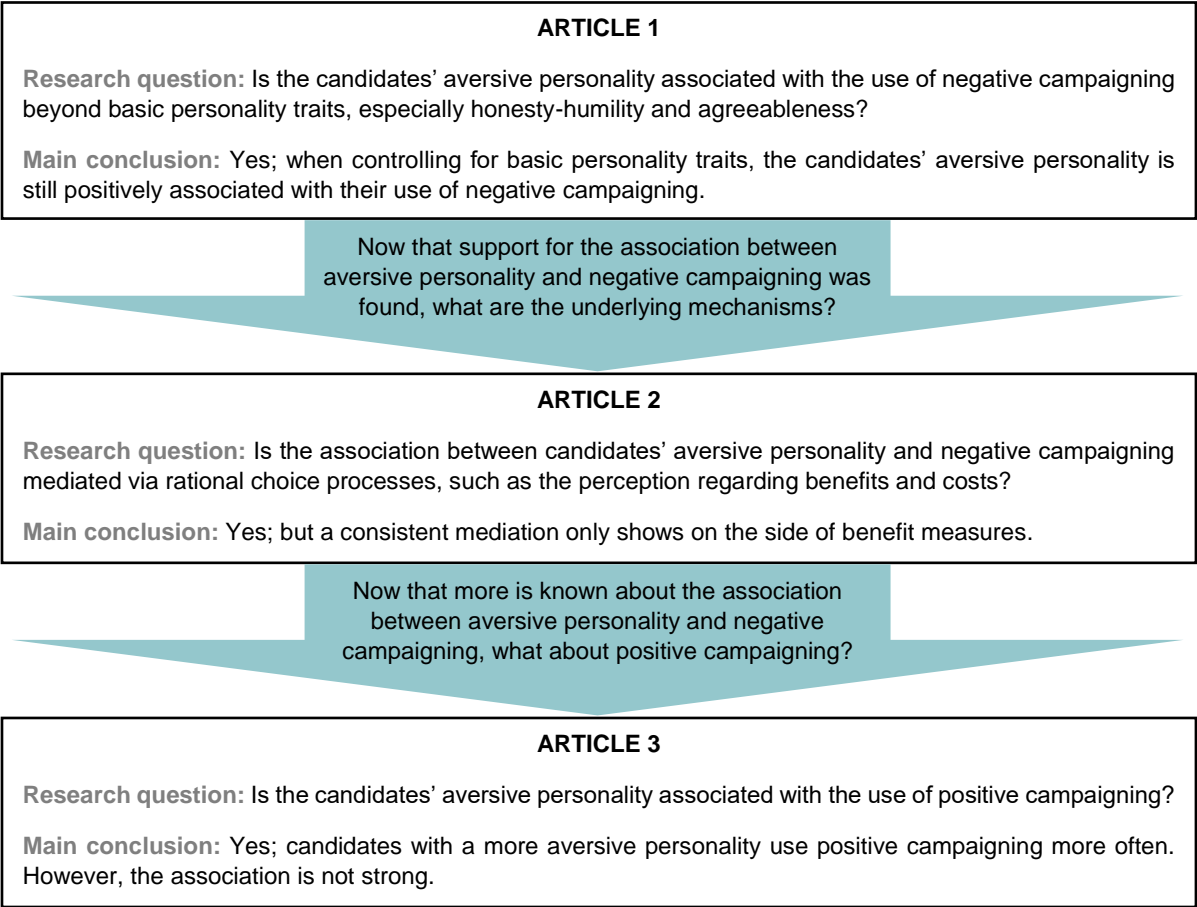
5 General Discussion and Conclusion

To wrap it up, this dissertation is aimed at providing more comprehensive knowledge about the role of the candidates' aversive personality in their campaign communication. A new and innovative data set with first-hand information from German state election candidates provided the possibility to pursue three research questions within three articles (see Figure 2 for a summary and the connection between the articles).

In the first article, it was asked whether the candidates' aversive personality is associated with the use of negative campaigning beyond basic personality traits, especially honesty-humility and agreeableness. Its results suggested that this is the case: When controlling for basic personality, aversive personality is still significantly associated with negative campaigning. Having clarified that not only basic but also aversive personality matters, the second article went into the details behind the association with negative campaigning. The research question was whether the association between candidates' aversive personality and negative campaigning is mediated by different perceptions of benefits and costs. Results showed that mediations exist mostly on the benefit side: There is an indirect association between aversive personality and negative campaigning via the perceived probability and magnitude of benefits and the expected utility. On the cost side, there first was a weak mediation only through the magnitude of costs which turned out to be unstable in the robustness check. The direct relationship between aversive personality and the use of negative campaigning remained when accounting for the mediators, leaving room for possible other underlying processes than the measured rational choice considerations. After having explored negative campaigning, the third

article focused on “the other side”, namely positive campaigning. It was asked whether the candidates’ aversive personality is associated with the use of positive campaigning. The results suggest that candidates with a more aversive personality use positive campaigning more often, but the relationship is low although statistically significant.

Figure 2
Connections between the Articles, Research Questions, and Main Results



These findings directly connect with previous research that emphasized the relationship between aversive personality traits and negative campaigning (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020) in mainly two regards: First, they once more support that candidates with a more aversive personality use negative campaigning more often, and at the same time explore this relationship in more detail. Second, they complement research about aversive personality and campaign communication by an extension towards positive campaigning. For theories about campaigning, this means that personality – and especially aversive personality – should

be on the list of possible determinants. To be clear, all examined relationships in the articles were derived from cross-sectional data and it is therefore impossible to prove causality. However, personality is mostly stable over the life course (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) and herein assumed to exist long before people become candidates and use campaign communication. It is therefore likely that personality is rather a determinant than a consequence of campaigning, although this cannot be proven with the data at hand.

This leads us to the limitations that the three articles have in common. First, self-reports of personality (e.g., Schumacher & Zettler, 2019), and self-reports in general, can always be biased by rationalization processes or social desirability. Participants might be hesitant to report aversive personality or negative campaigning. However, self-reports also have advantages as they enable the collection of first-hand information from the candidates and the inclusion of lesser-known candidates. Possibly, the risks of bias are not as high in a sample of political candidates. Regarding personality, it is not known which personality traits count as socially desirable in the political arena (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). It is possible that characteristics that would usually be regarded undesirable, e.g., being competitive, self-absorbed, or ruthless, are not as undesirable—or are even desirable—for a future political decision-maker. At least, politicians do not tend to describe themselves as overly more positive than the general population (e.g., lower agreeableness and lower conscientiousness: Best, 2011). Second, short scales to measure personality capture fewer personality facets than longer batteries. This limitation most likely also applies to the PEAPS that is used to measure aversive personality. Nevertheless, when all aversive traits were included in the questionnaire, the batteries would be too lengthy and would most likely deter participants from answering – leading to less population coverage and a less representative sample. Third, as this is a sample of German state election candidates, it is unclear whether the results also apply to other election types, election systems, and other countries. Also, campaigning is measured very generally to include the big picture of campaigning, but there might be differences by the medium at which campaigning occurs. Regarding possible context effects, future research from other countries, systems, elections, and for specific campaign media is necessary to see whether the results are generalizable or context-dependent.

Further research can start from here. If people with an aversive personality campaign differently, it could be one of the next questions if the differences in campaigning also lead to greater or weaker chances for them to be elected¹¹ or to perform well. Are they more likely to

¹¹ There are hints that aversive personality and electoral success are not related per se, but a potential mediation via the type of campaigning was not part of the study's outline (see Maier et al., 2022)

have a seat in parliament and do they have advantages in the short-term or long-term due to their campaigning? Charismatic and seemingly strong “dark” politicians could become disenchanted because of problematic consequences (see, e.g., Nai & Maier, 2024) once they are in office, or the opposite, they could show better abilities to be political leaders (see, e.g., S. F. Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013 who found psychopathy to be linked to positive and negative leadership outcomes). Another path that should be taken is longitudinal research to find out whether what precedes an attack is important for the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning. A candidate can be the first person in a reaction chain that uses negative campaigning, but they can also attack an opponent (without defending themselves) who attacked them before. Are candidates with an aversive personality more likely to do the former or the latter, meaning, are they more likely to start the fire or to be ignited by a spark? And does their use of negative campaigning depend on characteristics of the attacked person or party? For an exploration of these research questions, collecting data on the target of attacks is necessary. Another open question is whether candidates with a more aversive personality just use any kind of campaigning more often because they communicate more frequently.¹² This could also be assessed in the future, by comparing the overall frequency of campaigning (positive, negative, defense, and anything that does not fit into these categories) by degree of aversive personality to know whether potential voters are disproportionately flooded by information from candidates with an aversive personality. At this point, it can only be said that the more aversive the candidates’ personality, the more negative campaign messages—and also, although to a lesser extent, the more positive campaign messages—they contribute during the electoral race.

All in all, the dissertation adds to the existing knowledge in the political field and research. In the political field, information about who tends to use which kind of campaigning can be helpful when planning and preparing election campaigns. Knowing candidates and being able to estimate their personality traits then may help to assign better counseling (e.g., regarding the risks and benefits of using a specific kind of campaigning which they tend to use), better matching districts (e.g., assigning candidates to a district with a population that likes the campaigning style the candidate tends to use), and to fit campaigns to the candidates’ communication tendencies (e.g., designing campaigns with a communication style the candidate is feeling comfortable with, or that is tailored to their personality; see also Nai et al., 2022). In a nutshell, candidates with different personality traits have different needs, and

¹² This question was raised, e.g., by an anonymous reviewer of Article 3.

knowing them well may enable them and others to better meet specific political and personal needs and aims. In terms of the contribution to research, the dissertation extends fundamental theoretical knowledge by diving deep into the role of aversive personality and its connection to campaign communication. This kind of personality was in focus because it fits both, campaigning negatively and the attempt to put others down, as well as praising oneself and the attempt to elevate oneself to a better position. These two sides of aversive personality were thus brought into connection with the two types of campaign communication that fit to maximizing the own utility at the expense of others (which is part of the dark core, see Moshagen et al., 2018). By showing that aversive personality matters in positive and negative campaign communication and by contributing new theoretical considerations and empirical results to the established knowledge base, this dissertation takes research one step closer to a more complete picture of campaign communication.

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Appendix A: Curriculum Vitae

MONA DIAN

RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau, Kaufhausgasse 9, 76829 Landau, Germany
m.dian@rptu.de

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

- 07/2021 – now **Research Assistant**
RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau, Department of Political Science
- 06/2019 – 06/2021 **Research Assistant**
University of Applied Sciences Worms, Department of International Business Administration
- 09/2016 – 02/2019 **Master of Arts Sociology**
University of Mannheim
ERASMUS+ semester: Università degli Studi di Trento (09/2018 – 02/2019)
Thesis: Does immigrant ethnicity shape the association of threats with opinions on immigration policy?
- 09/2016 – 08/2018 **Student Research Assistant, Internship**
GESIS—Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences, Department of Survey Design and Methodology
- 06/2016 – 08/2016 **Working Student (during the vacation)**
RENOLIT SE, Department for Quality Management
- 06/2015 – 07/2015 **Internship**
Mannheim Institute for Public Health (MIPH), Department of Child and Health
- 04/2014 – 03/2015 **Student Assistant**
Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW), Department of International Management for Business and Information Technology (IMBIT)
- 09/2013 – 08/2016 **Bachelor of Arts Sociology**
University of Mannheim
Minor: Psychology
Thesis: Ist die Modernisierungsverlierer-These heute noch aktuell? [Is the losers of modernization thesis still relevant today?]
- 08/2004 – 03/2013 **Abitur**
Carl-Bosch-Gymnasium Ludwigshafen

LANGUAGES

German (native), English (fluent), French (basic)

Appendix B: Articles of the Dissertation



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Negative campaigning is “dark”—Not just disagreeable or dishonest: Results from German candidates' self-reports

Mona Dian^{a,*}, Jürgen Maier^a, Corinna Oschatz^b^a University of Koblenz-Landau, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Political Science, Landau, Germany^b University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

As it has been argued that “dark” personality is highly correlated with or even equivalent to the low poles of the basic personality traits honesty-humility and agreeableness, the explanatory role of dark personality as a unique driver of socially aversive behavior is called into question. Focusing on negative campaigning among candidates running for election, we analyze whether the relationship between aversive (dark) personality and negative campaigning remains or disappears when controlling for basic personality traits. Using self-reports from 1673 German candidates running for state parliaments, we show that low agreeableness, low honesty-humility, and high levels of aversive personality are linked to negative campaigning. When estimating a joint model including basic and aversive personality traits, the effect of honesty-humility disappears whereas the impact of agreeableness and aversive personality remains significant. We conclude that aversive personality, despite its similarities to low honesty-humility, and low agreeableness explain socially aversive behavior in the political domain—i.e. negative campaigning—beyond basic personality traits.

Literature on the behavioral influences of “dark”—or aversive—personality is growing as it has been attributed a high potential of explaining socially aversive behavior (Muris et al., 2017). Studies show that people with an aversive personality engage more often in antisocial activities such as bullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2015) or violent delinquency (Wright et al., 2017). However, the explanatory value added by aversive personality as a construct has been doubted: It was argued that aversive traits are highly correlated with or even equivalent to the two well-known basic personality traits (low) honesty-humility and (low) agreeableness (Hodson et al., 2018; Horsten et al., 2021; Muris et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2022; Vize et al., 2021). The question then arises if aversive personality explains socially aversive behavior on top of basic personality.

The discussion of the role of dark personality traits in explaining aversive behavior has focused on ordinary social interactions (e.g., Baughman et al., 2012; Horan et al., 2015) or behavior in the workplace (e.g., Cohen, 2016; Spain et al., 2014). However, the question of whether aversive personality can predict behavior is also important in the political arena, where decisions that are binding on all (Easton, 1953) are at stake. We aim to contribute to this debate by focusing on a special type of behavior in electoral campaigns: negative campaigning, i.

e. “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign” (Geer, 2006, p. 23). Negative campaigning can be understood as socially aversive since most voters dislike attacks (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). It is important to understand the factors that encourage candidates to show this behavior, as negativity is considered one of the main features of today's election campaigns (e.g., Fridkin & Kenney, 2012). Furthermore, exposing voters to attacks can potentially have corrosive effects on democracy; there is evidence that negative campaigning fosters (affective) polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012), increases cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), and can demobilize the electorate (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

Recent research shows that basic personality traits are linked to candidates' attack behavior. For instance, candidates with low levels of agreeableness are more likely to attack their opponent (Maier & Nai, 2021; Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019, 2022a, 2022b). However, previous studies exclusively use the Big Five Inventory (Goldberg, 1990). Analyses showing whether honesty-humility—a trait captured by the HEXACO Inventory (Lee & Ashton, 2004)—is related to negative campaigning are still missing. This relationship is likely because honesty-humility is also linked to aggressive communication (de Vries et al., 2013). In addition, negative campaigning was found to be related

* Corresponding author at: University of Koblenz-Landau, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Political Science, Kaufhausgasse 9, 76829 Landau, Germany.
 E-mail address: dian@uni-landau.de (M. Dian).

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to aversive personality traits such as sub-clinical narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Maier & Nai, 2021; Nai, 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020). However, the association between aversive campaign behavior and dark personality traits has only been demonstrated using expert interviews; evidence based on self-reports is lacking. While expert ratings of dark personality traits should not differ much from self-reports (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Vazire, 2006), they are limited to top candidates. By using self-reports, data can also be collected from less prominent candidates.

Using data of a unique survey among candidates running for six German state parliaments in 2021 and 2022, we test whether (i) basic personality traits, in particular agreeableness and honesty-humility, explain negative campaigning, (ii) aversive personality affects candidates' attack behavior, and (iii) aversive personality explains the use of negative campaigning beyond basic personality traits. We provide evidence that agreeableness, honesty-humility, and aversive personality are correlated with negative campaigning, but when estimating a joint model that includes both basic and aversive personality, the effect for honesty-humility disappears.

1. Basic personality and negative campaigning

Basic personality traits are often captured by the Big Five Inventory (Goldberg, 1990) and, to a lesser extent, by the HEXACO model (Lee & Ashton, 2004). The HEXACO model referred to in this article can be basically understood as an extended version of the Big Five Inventory, including a sixth trait, honesty-humility. From a theoretical perspective, particularly agreeableness and honesty-humility can be linked to negative campaigning.

Low scorers on the agreeableness scale hold grudges, want to enforce their way of doing things, and are judging and criticizing others (Ashton & Lee, 2007). They are more prone to lose their temper (Ashton & Lee, 2007) and display higher verbal aggressiveness (de Vries et al., 2013; García-Sancho et al., 2017). The link between agreeableness and communication also shows in an electoral context. Less agreeable candidates are significantly more likely to use negative campaigning (Maier & Nai, 2021; Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019, 2022a, 2022b). We therefore expect:

H1. : The higher the candidates' self-reported level of agreeableness, the less often they use negative campaigning.

Honesty-humility has not been linked to negative campaigning so far. However, there are reasons to believe that honesty-humility should be related to going negative: People with low honesty-humility tend to manipulate others for their own sake, bend rules, feel self-important, and seek wealth and status (Ashton & Lee, 2007). The lower likelihood of socially desirable behavior among people with low honesty-humility (Ashton & Lee, 2007) and their higher verbal aggressiveness (de Vries et al., 2013) should reflect in harsher campaigning. Therefore, we expect:

H2. : The higher the candidates' self-reported level of honesty-humility, the less often they use negative campaigning.

2. Aversive personality and negative campaigning

Aversive personality is often conceptualized as a set of separate but interrelated traits. The most prominent inventory to measure aversive or dark personality traits is the Dark Triad, consisting of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). This concept was further developed by adding sadism as a fourth trait, resulting in the Dark Tetrad (Buckels et al., 2013; Chabrol et al., 2015). However, the most recent concept of aversive personality proposes that aversive traits correlate to a large extent (Douglas et al., 2012; Furnham et al., 2013) and are rooted in a common "dark core", reflecting "the general tendency to maximize one's individual utility—disregarding,

accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—, accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications" (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 657).

Individuals with an aversive personality consequently have lower prosocial tendencies which reflects in their communication: They are more likely to accept other peoples' harsh language (Nai & Maier, 2021), they personally have a higher tendency to communicate negatively and aggressively (Horan et al., 2015; Nocera & Dahlen, 2020; Sumner et al., 2012), and they are more likely to bully other people (Baughman et al., 2012; Goodboy & Martin, 2015).

Aside from everyday situations, aversive personality and communication are related regarding the use of negative campaigning. Studies comparing leaders in the US or worldwide find that candidates' aversive personality goes hand in hand with a more frequent use of negative campaigning (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020). Hence, we expect:

H3. : The higher the candidates' self-reported level of aversive personality, the more often they use negative campaigning.

2.1. Basic personality traits vs. aversive personality traits: similar or different?

As agreeableness and honesty-humility have the potential to explain negative campaigning, aversive personality as its source is not untested. The concern about the usefulness of aversive personality is based on its strong correlation with agreeableness (Muris et al., 2017; Stead et al., 2012) and honesty-humility (Hodson et al., 2018; Jonason & McCain, 2012; Lee & Ashton, 2014; McLarnon & Tarraf, 2021). It has been suspected that specifically the dark core could be an example of the jangle fallacy, i.e. measuring the exact same construct as low agreeableness but having a different name (Rose et al., 2022; Vize et al., 2021). However, other researchers argue that despite high correlations and overlaps, low honesty-humility and agreeableness are not equal to aversive personality. For instance, Moshagen et al. (2020) see agreeableness and the dark core to be functionally different. They find that the dark core shows stronger associations to various aversive behaviors than—and beyond—agreeableness (e.g., internet trolling). Furthermore, Howard and Van Zandt (2020) argue that high honesty-humility cannot just be regarded as the absence of Dark Triad traits because most of its variance was distinguishable from the three dimensions. Horsten et al. (2021) show that honesty-humility is functionally and nomologically distinct from the dark core because of different conceptional origins and unique relations to criterion measures (e.g., callousness).

In sum, although high correlations between low agreeableness, low honesty-humility, and aversive personality were reported, aversive personality seems to differ to some extent from what they exactly measure. Therefore, we expect that aversive personality accounts for the candidates' negative campaigning beyond agreeableness and honesty-humility. Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H4. : The relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning remains when controlling for HEXACO traits.

3. Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a post-election survey among candidates running for six state parliaments in Germany (2021: Baden-Wuerttemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Berlin; 2022: Saarland). All candidates (including candidates running for smaller parties in the 2021 elections), were invited to participate.

3.1. Sample and procedure

Starting the day after the election and ending two months later, data

were collected online and by mail: Candidates with a publicly provided personal email address were invited by email to participate in an online questionnaire (65 %). The remaining candidates (35 %) received an invitation by regular mail including a printed questionnaire, a return envelope, and in addition, a personalized link to the online questionnaire in case they prefer to participate online. Participants were instructed to fill out the questionnaires personally. 43.5 % ($N = 1673$) from the 3842 invited candidates responded. The study was IRB approved before data collection (GESIS ethics committee, 27 November 2020, reference number 2020–6).

After deletion of cases with nonresponse at the relevant variables ($n = 227$) and after excluding respondents who rushed through the online questionnaire ($n = 32$, index of relative completion speed >2 ; see Leiner, 2019), 1414 candidates remain. 33 % are females and the age ranges between 18 and 83 years ($M = 45.31$, $SD = 13.75$). Candidates who participated in our survey belonged to the CDU (11 %), SPD (12 %), GRÜNE (12 %), DIE LINKE (9 %), FDP (11 %), AfD (5 %), and other parties (40 %).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Negative campaigning

We asked the candidates on a 5-point Likert item from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) how often they attacked the political opponent, i.e. criticized other parties or candidates ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.04$; items in Table A.1, Appendix A).

3.2.2. Basic personality

Basic personality traits are measured by the German version of the 24-item Brief HEXACO Inventory (BHI; de Vries, 2013; Twardawski et al., 2021). Each trait is the mean score of four items from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*fully agree*). We excluded the item "I am seldom cheerful" from extraversion because it correlated negatively with the other facets. Additionally, we slightly adjusted the wording of two items belonging to honesty-humility. In line with previous studies employing the BHI, reliabilities are medium to low (Cronbach's $\alpha_H = 0.41$, $\alpha_E = 0.40$, $\alpha_X = 0.60$, $\alpha_A = 0.41$, $\alpha_C = 0.50$, $\alpha_O = 0.45$) (de Vries, 2013; Julian et al., 2022). This is likely due to the shortness of the scales in combination with the high construct width (de Vries, 2013).

3.2.3. Aversive personality

Aversive personality is captured using the PEAPS scale (Appendix B) as proposed by Maier, Oschatz, et al. (2022). The scale is based on the idea of a common dispositional basis of aversive personality (dark core; e.g., Moshagen et al., 2018; Schreiber & Marcus, 2020) and calculated as the average across the following six items, ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*fully agree*): "I want my rivals to fail", "I insist on getting the respect I deserve", "It's wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later", "There are things you should hide from other people to preserve your reputation", "People who mess with me always regret it", "There have been times when I was willing to suffer some small harm so that I could punish someone else who deserved it". High scores on the scale indicate a high level of aversive personality ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.70$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.67$).

Asking politicians about their level of aversive personality is not without challenges. Responses can be tainted by social desirability or processes of rationalization (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). However, in line with previous findings that the bias is not stronger among politicians than in citizen samples (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019) our sample's arithmetic mean of aversive personality is somewhat higher than in a student sample ($M = 1.77$ – 1.99 , $SD = 0.36$ – 0.41 ; Bader et al., 2021).

3.3. Analytical strategy

In a first step, correlations provide an overview of interrelations between basic personality traits, aversive personality, and negative

campaigning. In a second step, ordered logistic regression models are estimated stepwise (basic personality only, aversive personality only, and a joint model) which enables us to see if the relationship of aversive personality with negative campaigning changes when agreeableness and honesty-humility are added to the model. While aversive personality, agreeableness, and honesty-humility are the focus of the analyses, the remaining HEXACO traits are used as controls. Lastly, we compare the model fit statistically.

4. Results

Honesty-humility and agreeableness are likely to impact the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning when they are correlated with both, negative campaigning and aversive personality. Correlations can be due to overlaps between personality variables. Table 1 shows that agreeableness and honesty-humility are not only connected to negative campaigning but also to aversive personality. This is in line with previous research (e.g., Hodson et al., 2018; Jonason & McCain, 2012; Lee & Ashton, 2014; McLarnon & Tarraf, 2021; Stead et al., 2012).

To see whether basic and aversive personality both contribute to the explanation of negative campaigning, we estimate a series of ordered logistic regression models in Fig. 1 (coefficients and Brant tests: Tables A.2 and A.3). In Model 1 and 2, basic personality traits and aversive personality are regressed separately on negative campaigning. In Model 1, the basic personality traits agreeableness ($\beta = -0.602$, $p < .001$) and honesty-humility ($\beta = -0.249$, $p = .003$) are negatively and significantly related with negative campaigning (support for $H1$ and $H2$). Model 2 shows that aversive personality is positively and significantly associated with negative campaigning (support for $H3$; $\beta = 0.595$, $p < .001$).

In Model 3, we add aversive personality on top of basic personality to see if the former can still explain negative campaigning. Now, the coefficient of aversive personality is the part which remains when the influences of basic personality traits are removed. In this model, the association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is somewhat lower than in Model 2 but is still significant (support for $H4$; $\beta = 0.430$, $p < .001$). In addition, agreeableness is still significantly related to negative campaigning ($\beta = -0.465$, $p < .001$), contrary to honesty-humility which becomes insignificant in the combined model ($\beta = -0.083$, $p > .050$).

Across all regression models, McFadden's pseudo- R^2 is low. This reflects that negative campaigning depends on multiple additional factors besides personality, most of which are assumed to be linked to rational choice considerations (see, e.g., Maier, Stier, & Oschatz, 2022; Walter & Nai, 2015). Model 3 has the highest ratio of information gain compared to the null model (Shtatland et al., 2002) (Model 1: $R_{McF}^2 = 0.021$; Model 2: $R_{McF}^2 = 0.018$; Model 3: $R_{McF}^2 = 0.028$). A likelihood ratio test of the nested Models 1 and 3 shows that adding aversive personality on top of basic personality results in a significant increase in model fit ($LR \chi^2(1) = 28.06$, $p < .001$).

The results are robust in models with control variables for context

Table 1
Pearson correlation coefficients.

	Negative campaigning	Aversive personality
Negative campaigning	1.000	
Aversive personality	0.225***	1.000
Honesty-humility	-0.119***	-0.417***
Emotionality	-0.010	0.028
Extraversion	-0.047	-0.142***
Agreeableness	-0.206***	-0.372***
Conscientiousness	-0.022	-0.099***
Openness	0.066*	-0.038

Note. $N = 1414$.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

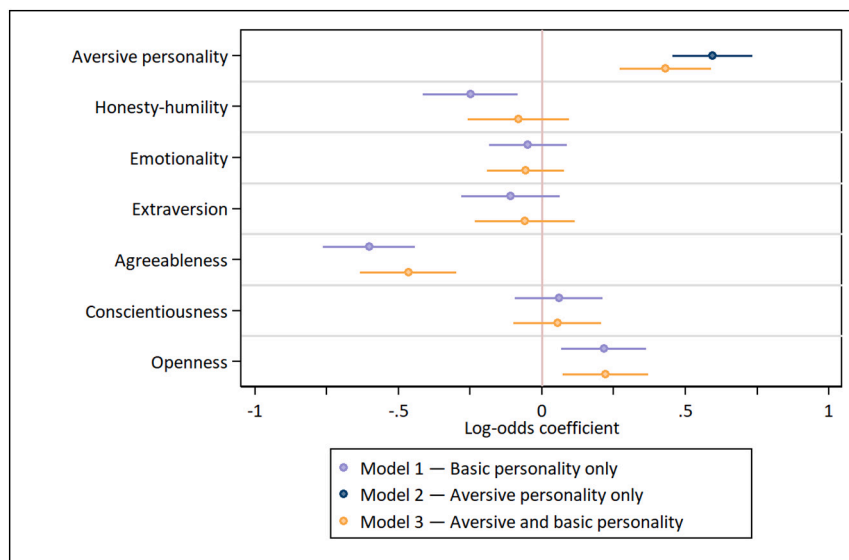


Fig. 1. Log-odds coefficients of ordered logistic regression of aversive and basic personality traits on negative campaigning. Note. $N = 1414$. Bars represent 95 % confidence intervals.

and candidates' background to account for additional determinants of negative campaigning (Table A.4). Furthermore, models with party weights or election clustered standard errors (Table A.5), and models with dummy variables for party, election, and answer mode show no meaningful deviations (Table A.6). Overall, the results are stable across different model specifications.

5. Conclusion

Using a novel dataset with self-reports of political candidates, we show that the more aversive their personality is, the more often they use negative campaigning. More so, aversive personality explains negative campaigning beyond basic personality traits like agreeableness and honesty-humility, despite doubts about the uniqueness of aversive personality (especially the dark core).

But which features of aversive personality may motivate candidates to use negative campaigning and yet do not belong to honesty-humility or agreeableness? Aversive personality is distinct as it includes a joyful desire to make others miserable in combination with a lack of empathy (Moshagen et al., 2018). While low scorers on honesty-humility and agreeableness also may produce disadvantages for others, this is rather a by-product (versus goal) of their actions which they may feel bad about (i.e., empathy; Horsten et al., 2021). Additionally, aversive personality is characterized by justifying malevolent actions (Moshagen et al., 2018) and thus, aversive people tend to be unaware that their behavior is problematic (Hudson, 2022). This is different for basic personality traits, e.g. people are more likely to wish to become more agreeable than less "dark" (Hudson, 2022). Lack of empathy, justification of one's actions and enjoyment of others' disadvantage while maintaining a positive self-image are features which may lead to more negative campaigning.

The insights of our study should be interpreted considering some limitations. First, our data are tied to one country, election type, and election system. Future research in other contexts should be conducted to reveal possible differences. Second, self-report short scales are not perfect as social desirability bias and low reliabilities can impact the estimates. Even though other candidate surveys that measure basic personality traits suggest that politicians ascribe more socially desirable characteristics to themselves (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019), the bias does not appear to be overly strong; at least not stronger than in citizen samples (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). Indeed, it is not clear per se what qualities politicians themselves find desirable; they may consider high

self-esteem, tactical skill, and a certain ruthlessness to be prerequisites for success in the political arena (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). In line with these arguments, studies report that politicians in Germany score lower than ordinary citizens on some personality traits intuitively categorized as socially desirable (Best, 2011). Third, the low reliability of short scales, especially the BHI, is a well-known problem (see also: de Vries, 2013; Julian et al., 2022) which is occurring in our study as well. de Vries (2013, pp. 877–878) argues that "the fact that the BHI scales have low alpha reliabilities does not seem to have major validity repercussions" while "the BHI combines both shortness and content breadth". For political elite samples, short scales are a practical solution as they provide an opportunity to gather self-report information about personality at all.

With this article, we present first-time insights that demonstrate: Although the similarity of aversive personality to low honesty-humility and low agreeableness was criticized, they contribute differently to the explanation of going negative. Our results indicate that the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning found in previous studies is more than just an effect of disagreeableness and dishonesty in disguise.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data are part of an ongoing project and will be made available for reuse via GESIS Secure Data Center (SDC).

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.112014>.

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A Different “Dark” Rationality? Testing the Mediation Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning Through Perceived Benefits and Costs

Abstract

It was previously shown that candidates with a more aversive personality tend to use more negative campaigning in the electoral competition. However, the underlying mechanisms are still unclear. Because negative campaigning is often explained by assuming rational choice mechanisms, this article focuses on the question of whether the probability and magnitude of benefits and costs as well as the expected utility and disutility mediate the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning. Using a data set with candidates from nine German state elections, mediation models are run. The results imply that aversive personality is indirectly associated with negative campaigning through the probability and magnitude of benefits and the expected utility perceived by the candidates. The magnitude of costs has a weak specific indirect effect which turns out to be unstable in the robustness check. There is no sufficient evidence that the probability of costs or the expected disutility mediates the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning. In all models, the mediation is not strong which implies that other mechanisms must also be at play. The article ends with possible implications for the planning of campaign communication and ideas for further research.

Keywords: negative campaigning, dark personality, rational choice, subjective expected utility, benefits, costs

A Different “Dark” Rationality? Testing the Mediation Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning Through Perceived Benefits and Costs

The tendency for socially detrimental behavior in individuals with a “dark” personality, a mix of sub-clinical socially aversive traits such as (but not limited to) Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, is long established (e.g., Furnham et al., 2013). Individuals with this personality maximize their own utility while ignoring, accepting, or intending that others are harmed in the process (Moshagen et al., 2018).

Also in the political context, socially detrimental behavior is connected to dark, herein called aversive, personality: Candidates with more aversive personality traits were found to engage in more negative campaigning (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020). Negative campaigning, defined as “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign” (Geer, 2006, p. 23), seems to fit the needs of individuals with an aversive personality: It is intended to reduce the opponent’s chances and thereby raise the candidate’s relative chances (Benoit et al., 2000). If the campaign strategy works, it maximizes utility at the cost of others.

However, negative campaigning comes with a considerable cost potential. Although using this strategy can indeed reduce the affect for the target of attacks (Lau et al., 2007) it does not automatically enhance the chances of the candidate or party that issues the attacks: Negative campaigning can lead to backlash effects (Pattie et al., 2011), less favorable evaluations of the attacker (Carraro et al., 2010), and positive spillover effects on uninvolved third candidates (Galasso et al., 2023). In the bigger picture, it was discussed whether negative campaigning also harms democratic functioning as a whole. While negative campaigning can have mobilizing effects (Martin, 2004), it can also demobilize voters and decrease political efficacy (Ansolabehere et al., 1994). After the election, negative campaigning can complicate coalition formation (Walter et al., 2014).

While the costs for democracy are of societal importance, the costs for the candidates themselves are crucial for them and their campaign managers when choosing whether or not to use negative campaigning. However, these costs should exist for all candidates regardless

of their personality. It seems equally rational or irrational for all candidates within similar circumstances to use negative campaigning, which raises the question of why negative campaigning is used more when aversive personality is more pronounced. A possible explanatory approach is offered by the wide versions of rational choice theory which recognize that the process of utility maximization also includes individual perceptions (Opp, 2020). Based on this line of thought, the question is whether the association between candidates' aversive personality and negative campaigning is transported via systematical differences in their perceptions of the benefits and costs of negative campaigning. If candidates with a more aversive personality anticipate higher magnitudes of benefits and lower ones of costs, and expect the benefits to be more likely and the costs to be less likely to happen, then they might use negative campaigning more frequently.

Data from 1,843 candidates in nine state elections in Germany provide the basis for testing whether this is the case. The dataset provides self-reported information directly from the candidates which allows for exploring how they differ in their views regarding the benefits and costs of negative campaigning. Mediation models show that the candidates' level of aversive personality is indirectly associated with negative campaigning through the probability and magnitude of benefits as well as the expected utility (probability multiplied by magnitude of benefits). Aversive personality is also indirectly but weakly related to negative campaigning through the magnitude of costs, but this effect dissolves in the robustness check. Also, there is no sufficient evidence for mediation via the probability of costs or the expected disutility (probability multiplied by magnitude of costs). Before showing these analyses, the literature about rational choice approaches, negative campaigning, and aversive personality is reviewed and connected.

Rational Behavior, Rational Choice, and Negative Campaigning

Individuals behave (instrumentally) rationally, which is the kind of rationality meant by rational choice theory, when their actions are in line with their preferences (Quackenbush, 2004). This requires that they think about the action's consequences. The values of

behavioral consequences range from negative, i.e. costs, to positive, i.e. benefits (e.g., Hirsh et al., 2018). But not only the values are important: Subjective expected utility (SEU) theory (e.g., Savage, 1954; Schoemaker, 1982) is one example out of many rational choice-based approaches which describes that the perceived probability of an outcome has to be combined with its value. Individuals then choose between actions by comparing the subjective expected utility which is "defined as the sum of the utilities for each behavioral consequence, multiplied by the subjective probability of each consequence" (Opp, 1986, p. 89). When comparing different alternative behaviors, they choose the behavior with the highest SEU (e.g., Schoemaker, 1982).

Two things must be noted at this point. First, a rational choice for an individual does not always equate with what would be generally considered a normatively good choice (Quackenbush, 2004) and it does not mean that the behavior is also objectively the best choice (Opp, 2020). Thus, rationality can rather be defined in terms of the behavior that is employed to reach a goal, not in terms of the goal itself (Downs, 1957/1968). Depending on the goal, the same behavior can be rational for one person and irrational for another person. Second, rational choice is not the only route that can lead to an action. Behaviors that were once considered and then automated because they worked well fall within the scope of value-expectancy or SEU theories, but rational choice approaches are not suitable for explaining reactions that were never the result of a cost-benefit analysis, e.g. biological reactions (Opp, 2020). Although rational choice may not be the only way to explain behavior, it is a simplified take to understand a part of the decision-making process.

Negative campaigning is a behavior that candidates can decide for or against, and therefore it is often explained in the literature with the help of rational choice approaches. Lau and Pomper (2004), for example, write that negative campaigning is "largely a rational course of action for political candidates" (p. 38). Therefore, candidates should be more likely to use negative campaigning when benefits exceed costs (e.g., Walter & Nai, 2015). Skaperdas and Grofman (1995), also using rational choice type logic, theorize that candidates use negative campaigning when doing so offers a relative gain over the

opponents: Backlash effects are possible but candidates hope that negative campaigning reduces the opponent's chances, so they should use negative campaigning if it makes them lose fewer votes relative to their opponent. Despite the notions of rational choice mechanisms in the explanation of negative campaigning, extensive empirical tests of this mechanism have not been conducted. An exception is a study by Maier, Stier, and Oschatz (2023) in which a positive association of the benefit-cost differential with negative campaigning was found. However, only a few connections between candidate characteristics and negative campaigning were mediated by the benefit-cost differential. This supports the idea that other mechanisms than rational choice must also be at work.

In this article, the rational choice approach is applied to the context of negative campaigning in assuming that candidates use more negative campaigning the higher and more likely they perceive its benefits and the lower and less likely they perceive its costs to be.

Aversive Personality and the Rational Choice of Negative Campaigning

By personality, people vary in cognitive, affective, and motivational processes (Baumert et al., 2017). Behavioral differences by personality can be due to these variations in how individuals think and process, feel and experience, and approach or avoid certain situations. It was found that some basic personality traits are connected with whether people choose criminal behavior through the risk they perceive and through negative feelings they anticipate (Van Gelder & De Vries, 2012). Also when the risky choice is operationalized more broadly, basic personality traits affect choice behavior via the perceived costs and benefits and also directly (Soane et al., 2010). An approach that considers individual differences as part of (ethical) decision processes is the moral utility framework by Hirsh, Lu, and Galinsky (2018). They incorporate personality in their framework by stating that “the SEUs of different behavioral options will depend on the relative importance of the individual's goals, much of which is related to broad personality characteristics” (p. 54). Considering this, as well as the place of subjectivity in wide rational choice approaches, I assume that processes triggered

by personality traits push or reduce different costs, benefits, and their anticipated probability which results in different behaviors. In other words, personality might influence the rational choice equation.

The definition of a particular concept of aversive personality indicates that subjective rational choice processes may be closely related to personality structures: The dark core is the common source of aversive personality, and is defined as “the general tendency to maximize one’s individual utility— disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—, accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications” (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 657). Some descriptions of aversive personality leave room for the interpretation that people with such a personality attach greater importance to certain benefits and costs of behavior than others. For example, people with an aversive personality may not find harming others very costly on an emotional level, or they may not notice that they are harming others (Moshagen et al., 2020). Expressed in terms of rational choice theory, the higher the aversive personality, the less costly is socially malicious behavior. Even more so, studies show that people with an aversive personality are more likely to enjoy others’ misfortune (James et al., 2014), and harming others could also be considered a benefit (see also Moshagen et al., 2020). Other possible benefits and costs may also be pushed in magnitude when aversive personality is more pronounced: Literature about the single aversive traits suggests that Machiavellians strive for money, power, and status (Furtner & Baldegger, 2016), narcissists seek attention and self-validation (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), and affective-interpersonal psychopathy is positively associated with social status goals and negatively with communal goals (Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2019). I assume that if it is more important for people with an aversive personality to move up the hierarchy and seek personal gain they should place a higher value on these possible benefits of a behavior. If it is less important for them not to disadvantage others or to connect with others, they should assign a lower value to these kinds of behavioral costs.

Empirically, it was found that people with aversive personality traits tend to take more risks. For example, recklessness, which is part of psychopathy, and violent voyeurism, which

is part of sadism, were linked to less compliance with protective measures against COVID-19 (Konc et al., 2022). Furthermore, risk-taking tendency fully explains some of these associations. Also, deviousness, which belongs to Machiavellianism, connects with less willingness to get vaccinated, but this association was not explained by risk-taking tendency. In a study among Polish adults, Machiavellianism was not associated with financial risk-taking, but narcissism and psychopathy were connected with a propensity to take financial risks in general, as well as investment and gambling risks (Sekścińska & Rudzinska-Wojciechowska, 2020). Others also found that psychopathy and narcissism, but not Machiavellianism, are linked to measures of risk-taking (Malesza & Ostaszewski, 2016; Stanwix & Walker, 2021). A study by Foster et al. (2009) provides insights into the mechanism between risk-taking and personality by illustrating that more narcissistic people differ from less narcissistic people in that they anticipate higher benefits from risky behaviors, but do not differ in terms of perceived risks. These perceived benefits then mediate the relationship between narcissism and the likelihood of taking risks. In a gambling study, narcissists were more reward-focused in the presence of risks, and overconfident (Lahey et al., 2008). Thus, narcissists' higher risk-taking may be due to an increased perception of benefits from risky behavior. Generally, benefits could weigh more than costs when it comes to risky behavior. Dhimi and Mandel (2012) found that only the importance of benefits was associated with forecasted risk-taking, but neither the probability of benefits and costs nor the importance of costs or their product terms were.

The hypotheses combine the findings of previous studies that aversive personality traits are associated with the tendency to engage in negative campaign communication (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020) with the idea that the candidates' behavior is in part transmitted¹ by rational choice mechanisms and that an aversive personality affects the

¹ The often used terms complete and partial mediation are not used in this paper as they do not inform about whether an explanation via the effect is indeed complete. In reality, a mediation is more likely to be partial when the sample size and power of the direct effect's test are higher (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017). Furthermore, even when a relationship is already mediated “completely” additional mediators are still possible (Rucker et al., 2011).

subjective perceptions of the magnitude and probability of behavioral consequences. These differing perceptions in turn affect candidate behavior, that is, negative campaigning.

H1. The more aversive the candidates' personality the more often they use negative campaigning.

H2. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the perceived probability of benefits as well as by the magnitude of benefits.

H3. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the perceived probability of costs as well as by the magnitude of costs.

H4. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the expected utility.

H5. The association between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positively mediated by the expected disutility.

Method

Data and Sample

The hypotheses are tested using a survey among candidates who were running for nine state parliaments in Germany in 2021 (Berlin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), 2022 (Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony), and 2023 (Bremen, Bavaria, Hesse). The goal was to invite all candidates from the six most important parties as well as candidates from parties that were likely to become part of the government and candidates from other smaller parties in 2021 ($N = 5,444$ were running). Data collection began with the invitation to the survey on the day after the election and continued for two months, during which two reminders were sent out. In the invitation letter, participants were asked to fill out the survey in person. Candidates with a publicly available personal email address received a personalized link to the online survey. If no email address could be

found, postal invitations with a printed questionnaire and a free return envelope were sent to candidates by regular mail. The postal invitations alternatively offered a link and password for the online survey.

The invitation could be delivered successfully to 5,344 candidates, and 2,177 (40.7%) candidates answered the questionnaire at least partially. 18 Participants who rushed through the online questionnaire were filtered out using a speed index as described by Leiner (2019), and another 316 participants were excluded because of missing values on the variables for aversive personality or negative campaigning. This results in a sample of 1,843 participants for the analyses. 38.1% of the candidates were female. The age ranged from 18 to 86 years ($M = 46.08$, $SD = 13.57$). 15.1% belonged to the CDU/CSU, 16.1% to the SPD, 18.0% to the GRÜNE, 14.1% to the FDP, 13.0% to DIE LINKE, 8.0% to the AfD, and 15.7% to other parties.

Measures

The measures come from self-report questionnaires (the original German item wordings are listed in Table A1 in the Appendix) and are complemented by data from the candidate lists published by the returning officers.

Negative Campaigning

The use of negative campaigning was assessed with the question: “How often did you attack the political opponent, that is, criticizing other parties or candidates?” The scale ranges from 1 “never” to 5 “very often” ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.99$).

Aversive Personality

To measure aversive personality, the Political Elites Aversive Personality Scale (PEAPS) was used (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023). The scale is based on the idea that several aversive personality traits are rooted in a common dark core (Moshagen et al., 2018; Schreiber & Marcus, 2020). The scale consists of only six items and uses mitigated item

wording compared to the original wording which could be considered too harsh (Maier, Oschatz, et al., 2023). With these adjustments, it is intended to increase participation in elite surveys of candidates. The items are worded as follows (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.67$): i. “There have been times when I was willing to suffer some small harm so that I could punish someone else who deserved it”, ii. “I insist on getting the respect I deserve”, iii. “I want my rivals to fail”, iv. “It's wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later”, v. “There are things you should hide from other people to preserve your reputation”, and vi. “People who mess with me always regret it”. The answer categories range from 1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “fully agree”. The items are combined into a mean scale ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 0.70$). Measuring personality with a self-report scale is a challenge because social desirability and rationalization processes can affect the responses. It is however not clear what counts as socially desirable in a political context (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019), where a certain ruthlessness could be seen as desirable. The quality of the PEAPS is supported by its stability over time, which was demonstrated by moderate to good test-retest reliability in a longitudinal design (Maier et al., 2024).

Measures Regarding Benefits and Costs

Because the magnitude and probability of benefits and costs are self-reported, the measures represent the candidates' subjective perceptions thereof. The perceived magnitude of benefits, respectively costs, of negative campaigning was measured by asking: “In your opinion, how big are the advantages [disadvantages] associated with attacking the political opponent?” The 5-point scale ranges from 1 “no advantages [disadvantages] at all” to 5 “very big advantages [disadvantages]” (magnitude of benefits: $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.07$; magnitude of costs: $M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.97$). If participants responded with a 2 to 5 on the magnitude scale (i.e., they at least saw some benefits/costs in negative campaigning), the respective probability of benefits and/or costs was measured by asking: “How likely do you think it is that the advantages [disadvantages] will occur in the event of an attack on the political opponent?” Responses are represented on a scale from 1 “very unlikely” to 5 “very

likely” with a midpoint labeled “partly/partly” (probability of benefits: $M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.75$; probability of costs: $M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.77$). Because the postal participants in 2021 responded on a scale from 1 to 7 which was adjusted to a scale from 1 to 5 post-survey, the scale used here has 9 points.² The expected utility scale, following the SEU theory, is built by multiplying the variables of probability and magnitude of benefits ($M = 9.28$, $SD = 4.32$), and the expected disutility scale by multiplying the variables of probability and magnitude of costs ($M = 9.89$, $SD = 4.33$). This results in a range from 2 to 25.

Control Variables

The analyses include political and sociodemographic control variables. Incumbent is coded 1 if the candidate was already a member of the state parliament during the election and 0 if not. Governing party is 1 if the candidate’s party was in government in the respective state parliament during the election and 0 if it was not. Political ideology is self-reported using the item “In politics, people often talk about ‘left’ and ‘right’. Please classify the persons and groups mentioned on the following scale. -My person” with an 11-point scale from 1 “left” to 11 “right” ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 2.35$). The same scale was folded in half to capture extremism, resulting in a six-point scale in which 0 represents a neutral and 5 an extreme ideology ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.56$). Sociodemographic characteristics were provided in the candidate lists. Age was calculated by subtracting the birth year from the election year. Gender was coded 1 for male candidates and 0 for female candidates.

Analytical Strategy

Mediation models are calculated using Hayes’ PROCESS procedure for SPSS version 4.3.1 (Hayes, 2018, IBM Corp, 2023). Model 4 (Hayes, 2018, p. 585) is specified to

² Participants responded on a scale from 1 to 7 in the postal questionnaires in 2021, while the scale in the online questionnaires ranged from 1 to 5. The scale from 1 to 5 was used in both modes thereafter. To combine the scales, responses on the scale from 1 to 7 were re-scaled into the scale from 1 to 5 using the formula “new value = $((4/6 * \text{old value}) - (4/6)) + 1$ ”. By this transformation, the minimum of the scale stays 1, the midpoint becomes 3 instead of 4, and the maximum becomes 5 instead of 7.

test for the mediations. In the main analysis, three parallel mediation models are run: The first model with the probabilities of benefits and costs as mediators, the second with the magnitudes of benefits and costs as mediators, and the third with the expected utility (multiplication of probability and magnitude of benefits) and expected disutility (multiplication of probability and magnitude of costs) as mediators.

Parallel mediation models are used to hold the respective other mediator constant, i.e., to partial out the effect of the benefit measure from the effect of the cost measure and vice versa. The mediation through probabilities and magnitudes of benefits/costs is estimated in two separate models. If they were combined into one model, participants who did not respond that there were at least some advantages or disadvantages would be excluded due to the aforementioned filter because PROCESS uses listwise deletion of missing values. This would cut off the category 1 from the magnitude scales. To keep the full range of the magnitude scale, two separate models are run. In the third model, however, this exclusion of participants cannot be avoided because the probability is multiplied with the magnitude.

In all models, for the indirect effects, bootstrapped unstandardized regression coefficients with 5,000 iterations are used, and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals are reported (seed in all models is set to 23543). If these confidence intervals do not include zero, the specific indirect effects mediate the relationship with 95% confidence. All models include control variables that may be associated with aversive personality, the perception of benefits and costs, and negative campaigning. The main analysis is followed by robustness checks.

Results

All mediation models are interpreted bearing in mind that gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbency, and membership in a governing party are controlled. Overall, the total effects in the mediation models confirm that aversive personality is positively and significantly associated with negative campaigning. This means that the higher the candidates score on the aversive personality scale, the more frequent is their self-

reported use of negative campaigning. This association is mediated by some, but not all, rational choice mechanism variables that were hypothesized to be mediators.

As shown in Figure 1, the higher the self-reported aversive personality, the higher the perceived probability of benefits from negative campaigning. The higher the probability of benefits, the more negative campaigning candidates use, holding the probability of costs and aversive personality constant. Aversive personality is not significantly associated with the perceived probability of costs from negative campaigning. However, the higher the probability of costs, the less negative campaigning candidates use, holding the other mediator and aversive personality constant. With 95% confidence, aversive personality is related to the use of negative campaigning indirectly through the probability of benefits but there is no sufficient evidence for a mediation through the probability of costs. Aversive personality is still positively and significantly associated with the use of negative campaigning when the probabilities of benefits and costs are accounted for.

[Figure 1 approx. here]

In Figure 2, it can be seen that the higher the candidates' aversive personality, the higher is also the magnitude of benefits they see in negative campaigning. The higher the magnitude of benefits, the more negative campaigning is used, holding the magnitude of costs and aversive personality constant. The higher the self-reported aversive personality, the lower the magnitude of costs of negative campaigning. Holding aversive personality and the magnitude of benefits constant, the magnitude of costs is negatively associated with how often candidates use negative campaigning. With 95% confidence, aversive personality is indirectly related to negative campaigning through the magnitudes of benefits and costs. However, it must be noted that the specific indirect effect of the magnitude of costs is very low. Both specific indirect effects are positive, meaning that more negative campaigning is used through the two indirect paths. Aversive personality is positively and significantly associated with the use of negative campaigning when accounting for the mediators.

[Figure 2 approx. here]

As illustrated in Figure 3, the higher the candidates' aversive personality, the higher the expected utility of negative campaigning. The higher the candidates' expected utility, the more negative campaigning they report using, holding the expected disutility as well as aversive personality constant. Aversive personality is not significantly associated with the expected disutility of negative campaigning. However, holding aversive personality and the expected utility constant, the higher the candidates' expected disutility, the less negative campaigning they use. While with 95% confidence, aversive personality is indirectly associated with negative campaigning through the expected utility, but there is no sufficient evidence for mediation through the expected disutility. Also in this model, the direct effect between aversive personality and negative campaigning is positive and significant.

[Figure 3 approx. here]

The results of the main analyses commonly suggest that a part of the association of aversive personality with how often candidates use negative campaigning goes through the probability and the magnitude of benefits and their multiplication, i.e., the expected utility. On the side of cost measures, there is a weak mediation through the magnitude of costs in Figure 2 until now.

Coming to the robustness checks, a model with the four potential mediators, i.e., the probabilities and magnitudes of benefits and costs, was run (Figure A1 in the Appendix). The reason is that the probabilities of costs or benefits could contain some parts of the magnitudes of costs or benefits and vice versa. However, when all four potential mediators are included, they control for each other. Also in this model, the specific indirect effects through the probability and magnitude of benefits have a confidence interval that does not include zero, signaling a mediation. There is no sufficient evidence for mediation via the

probability of costs, and also not anymore via the magnitude of costs. To understand why the latter mediation is no longer significant as it was in Figure 2, a follow-up model with only candidates who were not filtered out for the probability items but without the probability measures as mediators was calculated (Figure A2 in the Appendix). In this model, there is also no sufficient evidence for mediation via the magnitude of costs – so the reason was most likely not the additional mediators but rather that the connected filter leads to the loss of category 1 of the magnitude measures. Nevertheless, this shows that the mediation via the magnitude of costs from the main analyses is not stable while the mediation via the magnitude of benefits, which is also influenced by the filter, remains.

Additionally, to better grasp whether the expected disutility plays a role by degree of aversive personality at all, additional models among subgroups of candidates were run (Figure A3 in the Appendix). Among candidates with a below-median utility as well as among those with an above-or-equal-median utility, the confidence intervals of the indirect effect via the expected disutility contain zero. In other words: In the low and high utility subgroups, there is no sufficient evidence for mediation through the disutility. The other way around, among candidates with a below-median disutility as well as among those with an above-or-equal-median disutility, the expected utility was a mediator with 95% confidence.

Across all models, the anticipation of potential benefits rather than costs is the point at which candidates differ by level of aversive personality, and which consistently mediates part of the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning.

Discussion and Conclusion

Negative campaigning is supposed to help candidates to enhance their chances in a political competition. However, this type of campaign communication can have negative consequences not only for the candidates who are attacked but also for the candidates who use it. The decision whether or not to use negative campaigning was often assumed to be driven by rational choice mechanisms (Lau & Pomper, 2004; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; Walter & Nai, 2015). As aversive personality traits were repeatedly found to be associated

with the use of negative campaign communication (Nai, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Nai & Maier, 2020), the question arose whether candidates with a more aversive personality perceive the benefits of negative campaigning to be higher and more likely, and the costs to be lower and less likely and therefore use negative campaigning more often. In this article, it was tested if these rational choice-type mechanisms mediate the association between aversive personality and negative campaigning.

Mediation models show that the more aversive the candidates' personality the more often they report using negative campaigning (support for *H1*). Regarding the specific indirect effects, aversive personality is indirectly and positively associated with negative campaigning through the probability of benefits, the magnitude of benefits, and the expected utility (support for *H2* and *H4*). However, there is no sufficient evidence for a positive indirect effect through the probability of costs as well as the magnitude of costs; the confidence interval for the mediation through the probability of costs is never entirely above zero, and for the mediation through the magnitude of costs only when the full scale is considered (no support for *H3*). There is also no sufficient evidence that the expected disutility mediates the association between aversive personality and negative campaigning (no support for *H5*).

Throughout the models, benefit measures play a greater role as mediators than cost measures. This observation seems to contradict the rule that “losses loom larger than gains” (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, p. 279). However, it is unclear in this study whether candidates are comparing the gain and loss of the same good (e.g., likability lost vs. gained, votes lost vs. gained) or if they have the gain and loss of differently valued goods in mind (e.g., family opposes negative campaigning vs. voters like negative campaigning). Therefore, it is impossible to tell whether “gains loom larger than losses” applies here. Aside from the issue of direct comparability of the goods themselves, the fact that political candidates are a specific sample could explain the greater role of benefit measures. The behavior of candidates in general could be less demotivated by potential costs and more by gains, but this assumption should be investigated by further research. The models also show that candidates differ more in the benefit measures by aversive personality than in the cost

measures, for whom the personality coefficients are often not significant. This fits with the mentioned higher reward focus (Lahey et al., 2008) and higher anticipated benefits from risky behavior (Foster et al., 2009) in people with higher narcissism. It should be tested in the future, however, if this explanation is also plausible for a combined measure of aversive personality such as PEAPS.

This study sheds more light on the black box of how aversive personality could be connected with negative campaign communication. However, some limitations have to be considered. Self-reports of personality come with the possibility of bias due to rationalization processes or social desirability (e.g., Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). As previously stated, it is unsure which personality traits count as socially desirable in the political arena (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). However, self-reports also have advantages as they enable the collection of first-hand information from the candidates and the inclusion of lesser-known candidates. For researching rational choice mechanisms as proposed by SEU theory, self-report data are necessary to know how the benefits and costs are perceived subjectively. Nevertheless, the possibility of bias has to be kept in mind and might also apply to self-reported negative campaigning. Furthermore, the results have to be interpreted based on the context of the sample, which is state elections in the multi-party system of Germany. To test whether the results are generalizable to other countries, elections, and electoral systems, the analysis would need replication in these other contexts. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the dataset which does not allow causal interpretations. Although it is likely that personality traits came first, then candidates thought about reasons for and against the use of negative campaigning, and then they used more or less negative campaigning as a result, this order cannot be proven by the analyses. Additionally, the expected utility and disutility between different types of campaign communication cannot be compared with the data set at hand. Items about benefits and costs do not exist for other types of campaigning than negative campaigning.

Nevertheless, research about direct personality effects on negative campaigning is important for generating knowledge about which groups of individuals are more likely to

engage in it. They could thus be targeted for counseling, campaigns can be tailored to their needs, and they could be nominated for positions or constituencies in which their dispositional tendencies, also for a certain kind of campaigning, fit well. Getting to know the mechanisms between personality traits and campaign communication goes further: Mediating mechanisms inform about possible ways to adjust behavior to some degree even when stable characteristics like personality underlie the behavior. Reality-checking the perceived magnitude and probability of benefits candidates perceive may benefit candidates, especially those with a higher aversive personality, if they take risks because they expect unrealistically high benefits from negative campaigning. Whether such interventions are useful needs to be tested empirically in the future; whether they should be used is a normative issue that is not going to be discussed, herein. Another route of research is worth exploring: The mediations in the shown analyses are not very strong, which supports the idea that rational choice is not the only mechanism that influences negative campaigning (Maier, Stier, & Oschatz, 2023 also note this possibility). The question remains what mechanism is responsible for the part of the relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning which is unexplained by the proposed mechanisms. Is it impulsive or spontaneous behavior that was never processed in a cost-benefit analysis? As the data used in this study do not provide an opportunity to test this, it is subject to further research if measures of impulsiveness also contribute to the connection between personality and campaigning. Furthermore, and also not sensibly feasible with the PEAPS, it is still an open question how the single aversive traits are on their own associated with the cost and benefit rationale. Possibly, Machiavellians' behaviors are much more driven by rational choice because of strategic thinking, or Narcissists' behaviors by perceived benefits because they focus on their perceived superiority. These differences could be examined in more detail in the future.

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Conflict of Interests

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Ethics Statement

The overall project was IRB-approved before data collection (GESIS ethics committee, 27 November 2020, reference number 2020–6).

Data Accessibility Statement

Since the data contain sensitive information from candidates, the data can be only made available to other researchers on request. The study and analyses were not preregistered.

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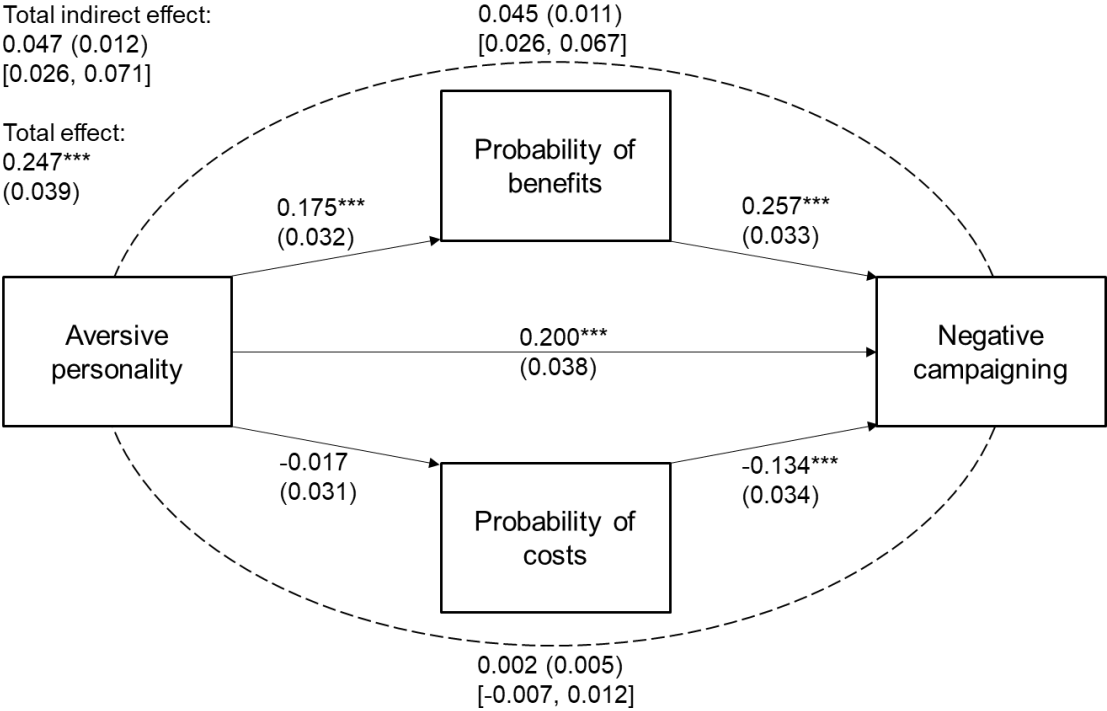
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Figures

Figure 1

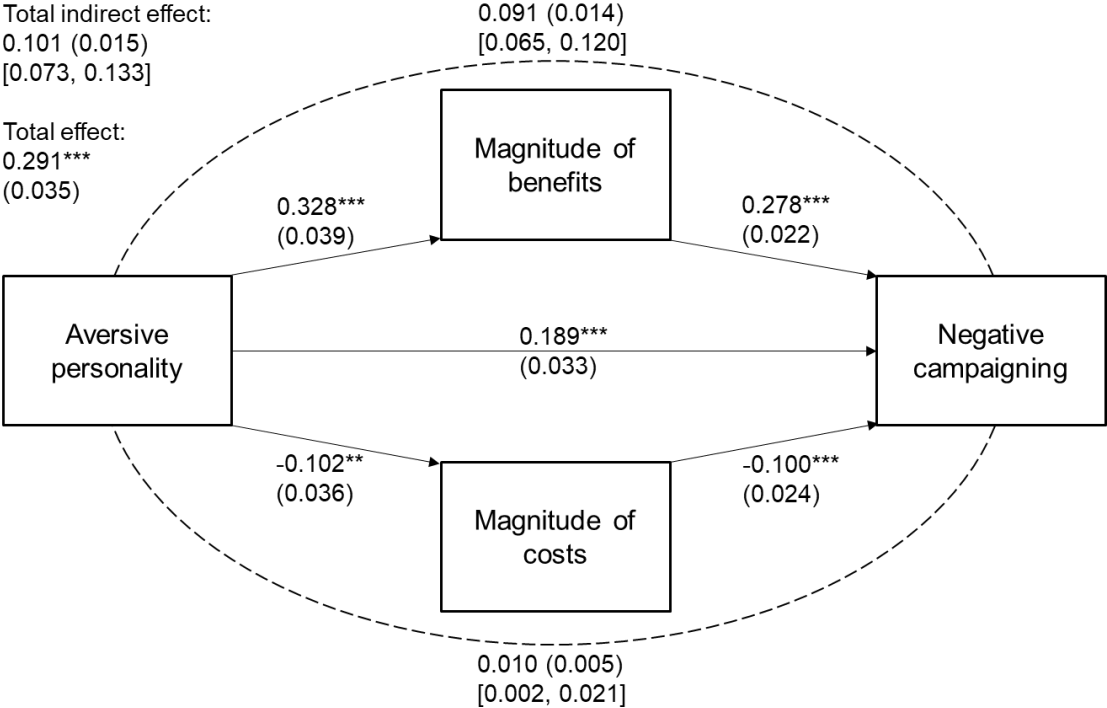
Parallel Mediation Model With the Probabilities of Benefits and Costs as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning



Note. $N = 1,266$. Estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent indirect effects. Indirect effects are reported with bootstrapped coefficients and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (in brackets, 5,000 iterations, seed = 23543). Control variables: gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbent, governing party. See Table A2 in the Appendix for regression results. Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 2

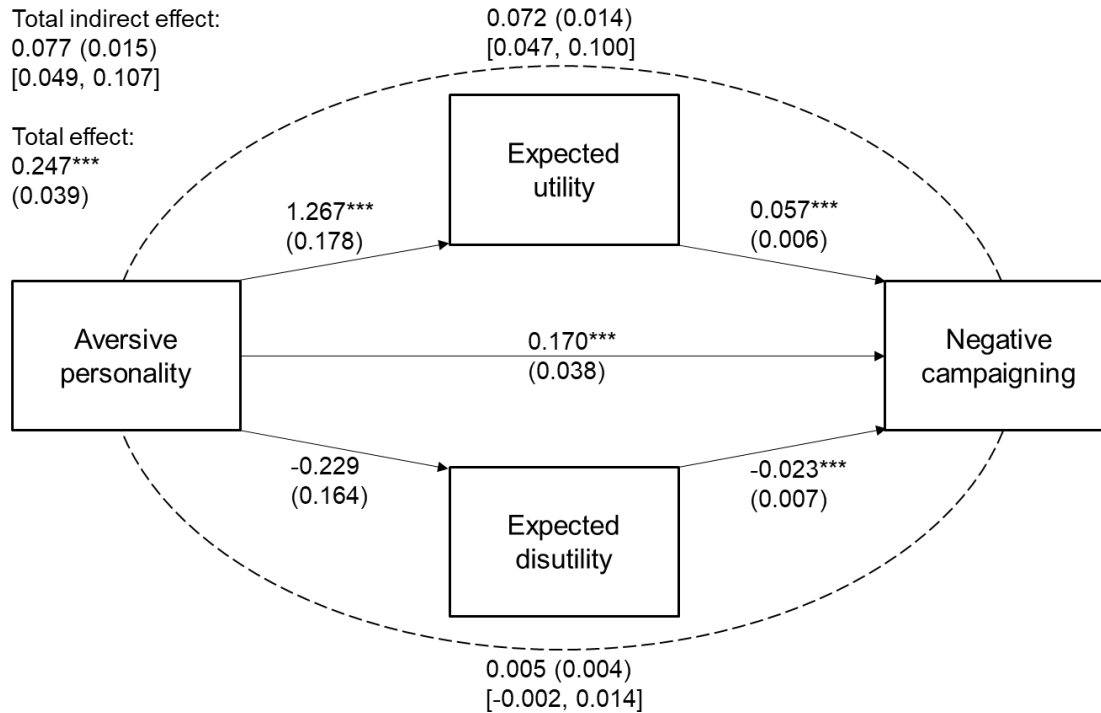
Parallel Mediation Model With the Magnitude of Benefits and Costs as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning



Note. N = 1,589. Estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent indirect effects. Indirect effects are reported with bootstrapped coefficients and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (in brackets, 5,000 iterations, seed = 23543). Control variables: gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbent, governing party. See Table A3 in the Appendix for regression results. Significance levels: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Figure 3

Parallel Mediation Model With the Expected Utility and Disutility as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning



Note. $N = 1,266$. Estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent indirect effects. Indirect effects are reported with bootstrapped coefficients and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (in brackets, 5,000 iterations, seed = 23543). Control variables: gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbent, governing party. See Table A4 in the Appendix for regression results. Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A Different “Dark” Rationality? Testing the Mediation Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning Through Perceived Benefits and Costs

Online Appendix

Table A1

English (Translated) and German (Original) Item Wordings For Items Used in The Main Analyses

Measure	Questionnaire items
Negative campaigning	How often did you attack the political opponent, that is, criticizing other parties or candidates? <i>Und wie häufig haben Sie den politischen Gegner angegriffen, d.h. Kritik an anderen Parteien oder Personen geübt?</i>
Aversive personality ^a	There have been times when I was willing to suffer some small harm so that I could punish someone else who deserved it. <i>Ich habe schon mal kleine Nachteile in Kauf genommen, um eine Person zu bestrafen, die es verdiente.</i> I insist on getting the respect I deserve. <i>Ich beharre darauf, den Respekt zu bekommen, den ich verdiene.</i> I want my rivals to fail. <i>Ich will, dass meine Konkurrenten scheitern.</i> It's wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later. <i>Es ist ratsam, Informationen im Auge zu behalten, die man später gegen andere verwenden kann.</i> There are things you should hide from other people to preserve your reputation. <i>Es gibt Dinge, die du vor anderen Menschen verbergen solltest, um dein Ansehen zu wahren.</i> People who mess with me always regret it. <i>Menschen bereuen es immer, wenn sie sich mit mir anlegen.</i>
Magnitude of benefits/costs	In your opinion, how big are the advantages [disadvantages] associated with attacking the political opponent? <i>Wie groß sind Ihrer Meinung nach die Vorteile [Nachteile], die mit einem Angriff auf den politischen Gegner verbunden sind?</i>
Probability of benefits/costs	How likely do you think it is that the advantages [disadvantages] will occur in the event of an attack on the political opponent? <i>Für wie wahrscheinlich halten Sie es, dass die Vorteile [Nachteile] bei einem Angriff auf den politischen Gegner eintreten?</i>
Political ideology / extremism	In politics, people often talk about "left" and "right". Please classify the persons and groups mentioned on the following scale. -My person. <i>In der Politik reden die Leute häufig von „links“ und „rechts“. Bitte ordnen Sie die genannten Personen und Gruppen auf der folgenden Skala ein. -Meine Person.</i>

Note: ^a Original PEAPS items (in German) and English translation: (Maier et al., 2023)

Table A2

OLS Regression Results of the Mediation Model With the Probability of Benefits and Costs as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning

	Mediator 1: Probability of benefits		Mediator 2: Probability of costs		Dependent variable: Negative campaigning	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Aversive personality	0.175 ***	0.032	-0.017	0.031	0.200 ***	0.038
Probability of benefits					0.257 ***	0.033
Probability of costs					-0.134 ***	0.034
Gender (male)	-0.028	0.044	-0.151 ***	0.043	0.183 ***	0.052
Age	-0.001	0.002	-0.004 *	0.002	0.002	0.002
Political ideology	0.003	0.012	-0.018	0.011	0.061 ***	0.014
Extremism	-0.002	0.017	-0.031	0.016	0.132 ***	0.020
Incumbent	0.088	0.070	0.063	0.068	0.294 ***	0.083
Governing party	-0.096 *	0.045	0.063	0.044	-0.342 ***	0.053
Constant	2.587 ***	0.138	3.445 ***	0.133	1.181 ***	0.222
R ²	0.030		0.023		0.185	
F	5.642 ***		4.312 ***		31.639 ***	
df1	7		7		9	
df2	1258		1258		1256	

Note. $N = 1,266$. Parallel mediation model estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. SE = standard error. Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Indirect effects, total indirect effect, and total effect are reported in Figure 1 in the article.

Table A3

OLS Regression Results of the Mediation Model With the Magnitude of Benefits and Costs as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning

	Mediator 1: Magnitude of benefits		Mediator 2: Magnitude of costs		Dependent variable: Negative campaigning	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Aversive personality	0.328 ***	0.039	-0.102 **	0.036	0.189 ***	0.033
Magnitude of benefits					0.278 ***	0.022
Magnitude of costs					-0.100 ***	0.024
Gender (male)	0.154 **	0.054	-0.054	0.050	0.180 ***	0.046
Age	-0.006 **	0.002	-0.009 ***	0.002	0.004 *	0.002
Political ideology	0.029 *	0.014	-0.026 *	0.013	0.056 ***	0.012
Extremism	0.079 ***	0.021	-0.060 **	0.020	0.110 ***	0.018
Incumbent	0.085	0.091	0.050	0.084	0.264 ***	0.077
Governing party	-0.248 ***	0.057	0.255 ***	0.053	-0.357 ***	0.048
Constant	1.805 ***	0.169	3.841 ***	0.157	1.090 ***	0.180
R ²	0.091		0.047		0.260	
F	22.528 ***		11.225 ***		61.745 ***	
df1	7		7		9	
df2	1581		1581		1579	

Note. $N = 1,589$. Parallel mediation model estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. *SE* = standard error. Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Indirect effects, total indirect effect, and total effect are reported in Figure 2 in the article.

Table A4

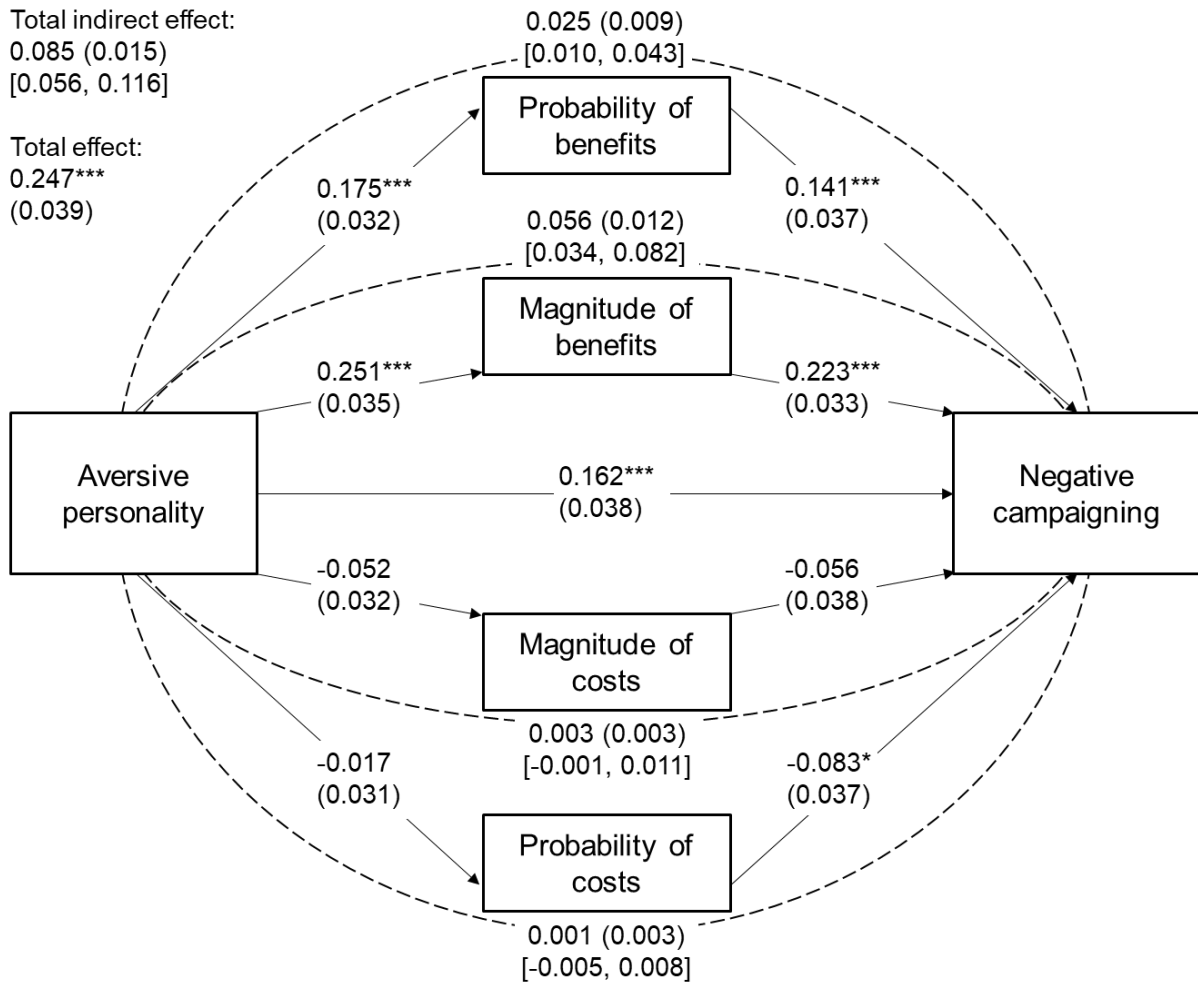
OLS Regression Results of the Mediation Model With the Expected Utility and Expected Disutility as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning

	Mediator 1: Expected utility		Mediator 2: Expected disutility		Dependent variable: Negative campaigning	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Aversive personality	1.267 ***	0.178	-0.229	0.164	0.170 ***	0.038
Expected utility					0.057 ***	0.006
Expected disutility					-0.023 ***	0.007
Gender (male)	0.124	0.245	-0.654 **	0.225	0.174 ***	0.051
Age	-0.009	0.009	-0.033 ***	0.008	0.003	0.002
Political ideology	0.102	0.064	-0.099	0.059	0.056 ***	0.013
Extremism	0.144	0.095	-0.138	0.087	0.124 ***	0.020
Incumbent	0.182	0.393	0.402	0.361	0.307 ***	0.082
Governing party	-0.844 ***	0.252	0.543 *	0.232	-0.315 ***	0.053
Constant	5.567 ***	0.769	12.428 ***	0.707	1.352 ***	0.187
R ²	0.060		0.033		0.212	
F	11.454 ***		6.193 ***		37.564 ***	
df1	7		7		9	
df2	1258		1258		1256	

Note. $N = 1,266$. Parallel mediation model estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. *SE* = standard error. Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Indirect effects, total indirect effect, and total effect are reported in Figure 3 in the article.

Figure A1

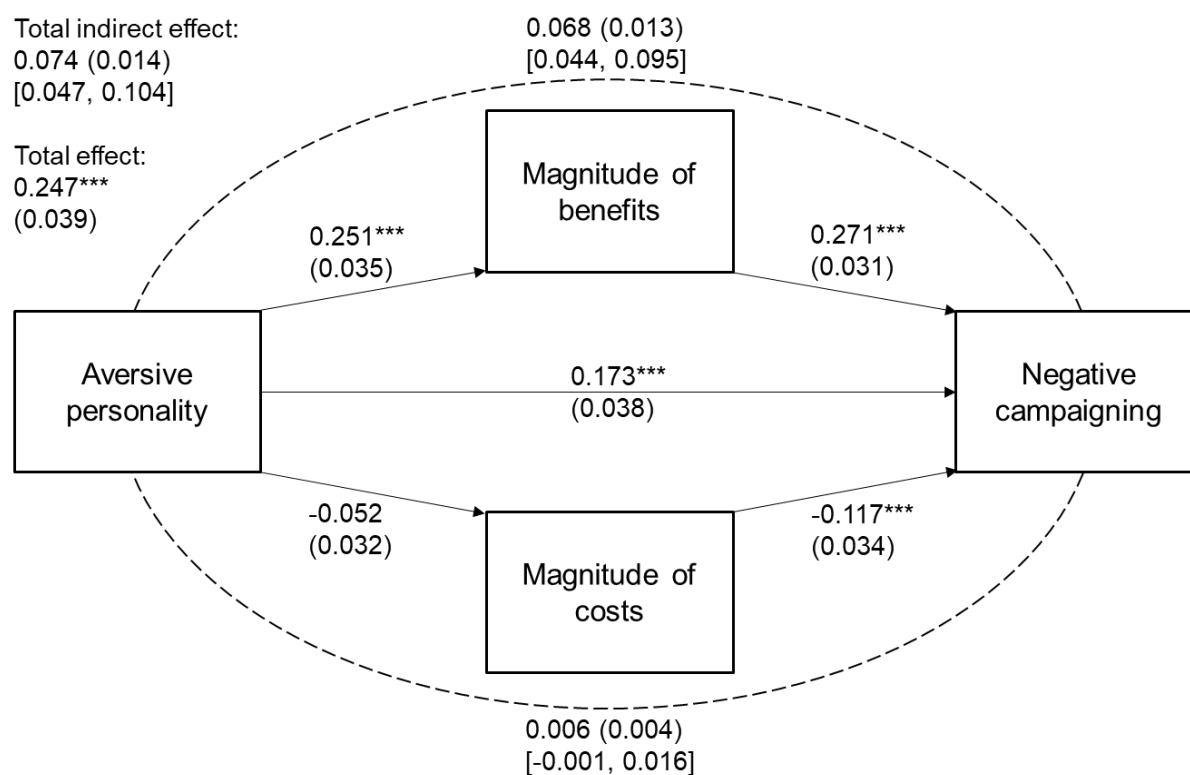
Mediation Model With the Probabilities and Magnitudes of Benefits and Costs as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning



Note. $N = 1,266$. Estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent indirect effects. Indirect effects are reported with bootstrapped coefficients and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (in brackets, 5,000 iterations, seed = 23543). Control variables: gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbent, governing party. Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure A2

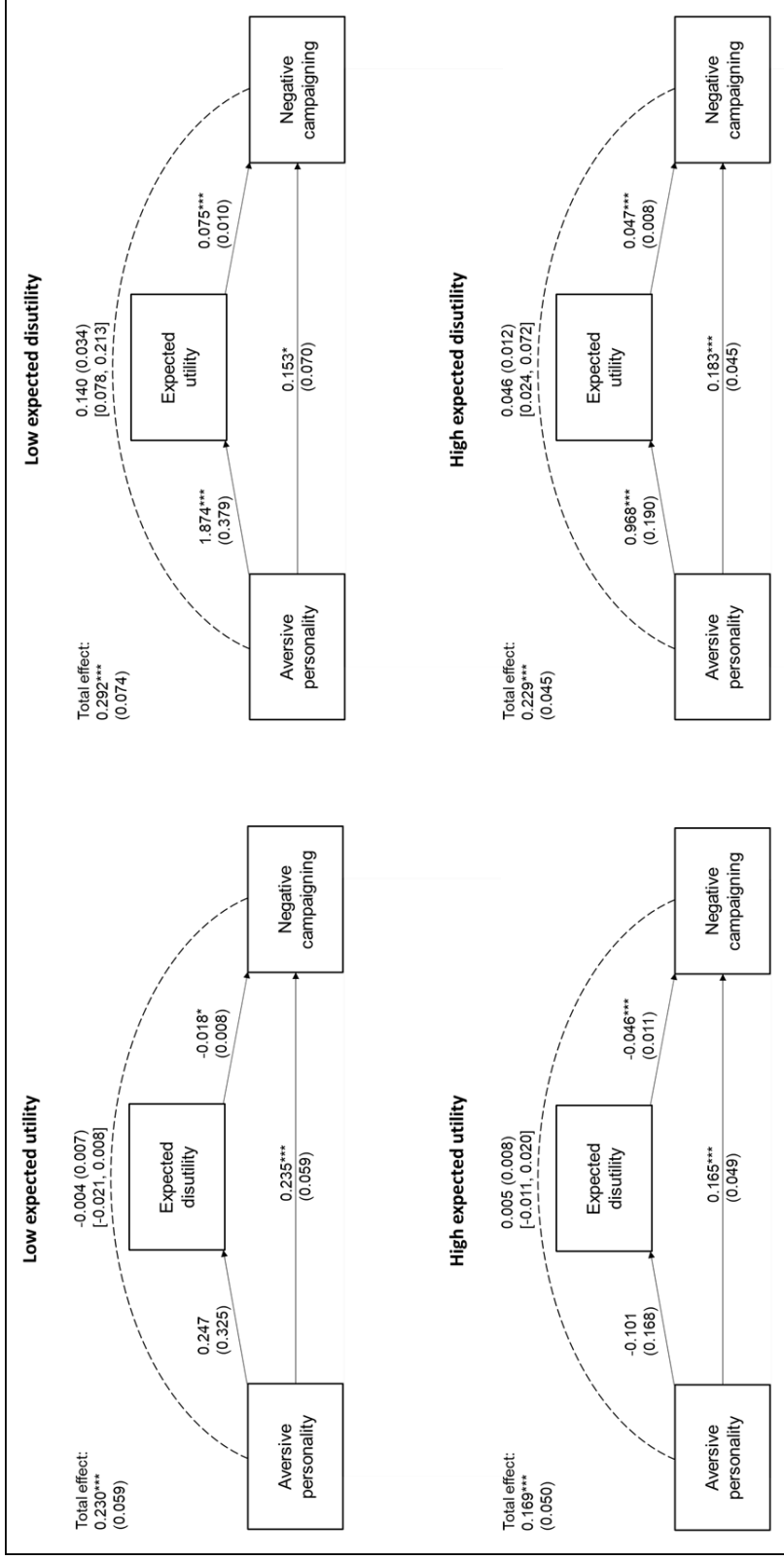
Mediation Model With the Magnitude of Benefits and Costs as Mediators of the Association Between Aversive Personality and Negative Campaigning Without Candidates With Missing Values on the Probability Variables



Note. $N = 1,266$. Estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors in parentheses. Dashed lines represent indirect effects. Indirect effects are reported with bootstrapped coefficients and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (in brackets, 5,000 iterations, seed = 23543). Control variables: gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbent, governing party. Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure A3

Mediation Models Among Subgroups by Expected Utility and Expected Disutility



Note. $N_{top\ left} = 477$, $N_{bottom\ left} = 789$, $N_{top\ right} = 364$, $N_{bottom\ right} = 902$. Estimated using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2023). Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard errors in parentheses. Dashed line represents indirect effects. Indirect effects are reported with bootstrapped coefficients and 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (in brackets, 5,000 iterations, seed = 23543). Control variables: gender, age, political ideology, extremism, incumbent, governing party. Low and high expected (dis)utility are separated by a median split (below median vs. above or equal to median). Significance levels: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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“Dark” positivity: Do candidates with a more aversive personality use positive campaigning more often?

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Mona Dian 

Department of Political Science, RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany

Abstract

Although positive campaigning is a widely used communication strategy in election campaigns, determinants aside from political characteristics and gender are largely unknown. However, the personality traits of candidates could affect campaigning strategies beyond these factors. Recent research shows that people with an aversive (“dark”) personality tend to self-promote and are attracted to leadership positions. Transferring these findings to self-promotion in election campaigns, I ask if candidates with a more aversive personality use positive campaigning more often. 2,133 candidates who ran for 10 state parliaments in Germany in 2021, 2022, and 2023 self-reported how often they used positive campaigning. Analyses via structural equation modeling show that the candidates’ aversive personality is positively and significantly related to their use of positive campaigning and that this relationship holds when controlling for political and socio-demographic characteristics. The implications of the findings and potential pathways for further research are discussed.

Keywords

positive campaigning, acclaims, candidate survey, dark personality, election

Introduction

When explaining the campaign communication of candidates, research mostly focuses on negative campaigning – a strategy that is potentially detrimental to democracy (Ansolabehere et al., 1994), intentionally harmful for other candidates or parties (Benoit, 2017), and yet, risky for its users as it can lead to backlash effects (Roese and Sande, 1993) and alienate voters (Walter and Van der Eijk, 2019). The other side of campaign communication, positive campaigning or acclaiming, is much less researched although it is the most widely used communication strategy in election campaigns (e.g., Benoit, 2017; Brazeal and Benoit, 2001; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Paatelainen et al., 2016; Stein and Benoit, 2021). While negative campaigning refers to “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign” (Geer, 2006: 23), acclaims “seek to promote a candidate’s own strengths and advantages” (Benoit, 2017: 7) and aim to build a good reputation (Bernhardt and Ghosh, 2020). At the same time, acclaims are relatively safe to use: Positive campaigning is usually supported by voters (Reinemann and Maurer, 2005) and is low-risk because of its positive content (Wicks et al., 2011). Even though acclaims have the potential to increase votes and inform voters about the candidates’ qualities,

determinants beyond the candidates’ political position are largely unknown. This article aims to broaden the understanding of which types of candidates use positive campaigning more often.

Specifically, I extend research to the role of the candidates’ personality in their use of positive campaigning. Findings that the candidates’ use of attacks differs regarding their personality traits (Maier et al., 2023) underline that personality matters for campaign communication. Particularly, the aversive or “dark” personality, referring to non-pathological traits that can lead to socially problematic or malevolent actions (Moshagen et al., 2018; Paulhus and Williams, 2002), was identified as a driver of negative campaigning (Nai et al., 2019; Nai and Maier, 2020) – but its possible relationship with positive campaign communication was not researched yet although both strategies are not mutually exclusive. Candidates with a more aversive

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Corresponding author:

Mona Dian, Department of Political Science, RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau, Kaufhausgasse 9, Landau 76829, Germany.
Email: m.dian@rptu.de

personality could use both, positive and negative campaigning more often than others: The so far employed focus on negative campaigning follows research on the association of aversive personality with various kinds of behaviors that are harmful toward others (e.g., bullying: Goodboy and Martin, 2015; deception and lying: Jonason et al., 2014). However, there are reasons to believe that candidates who score higher on aversive personality traits may also like to present themselves as overly positive and that their personality could foster positive campaigning as well. People with an aversive personality tend to overestimate themselves (Jain and Bearden, 2011; O'Reilly and Hall, 2021; Smith et al., 2018). At the same time, they seek admiration and attention (Jones and Paulhus, 2014; Nevicka et al., 2011) which can be satisfied by publicly presenting their inflated self-views. While grandiosity and self-promotion may be less in demand in some situations, they can appear appropriate for leadership positions. An aversive personality can have a "bright" side and serve as a door-opener when striving for or holding such positions (see Smith et al., 2018 for a review). Indeed, people with high narcissism and psychopathy are often found in higher levels of management (Boddy et al., 2010; Grijalva and Harms, 2014). If these findings are transferred to the context of election campaigns, having an aversive personality could be beneficial for candidates to present themselves to the public in a good light. The question is, therefore, whether candidates with a more aversive personality use positive campaigning more often.

To understand why this may be the case, the function of positive campaigning in election campaigns and the state of knowledge about its determinants are introduced. Findings on positive self-views, self-promotional tendencies, and attraction to policy positions in people with aversive personality traits lead to the expectation that the candidates' aversive personality is positively associated with the use of positive campaigning. The empirical analysis is based on data from 2,133 political candidates who ran for 10 state parliaments in Germany. The dataset is unique as most measures come from self-reports which are first-hand information and allow the inclusion of less popular candidates for whom external assessments are often not available. Results show that candidates with a more aversive personality use positive campaigning more often than those with a less aversive personality. This is the case even when political and sociodemographic characteristics are controlled.

Purpose and known determinants of positive campaigning

There are many reasons why candidates may consider the use of positive campaigning. Before and during an election,

people need to know why they should vote for a candidate. Acclaims inform voters about what they can expect – they advertise the candidates' personal features (character acclaims) or their political plans and achievements (issue acclaims, Benoit, 2017). In other words, positive campaigning is supposed to improve the reputation of candidates (Bernhardt and Ghosh, 2020). An advantage of positive campaigning is that it usually does not backfire, provided that the candidates do not exaggerate too much (Schütz, 1998). Positive messages are likely to be supported by the audience (Reinemann and Maurer, 2005) and are less risky than other types of messages because their content is positive (Wicks et al., 2011). In an experimental setting, it shows empirically that candidates who used positive campaigning are rated more favorably than opposing candidates (Carraro et al., 2010).

Although negative campaign ads are more memorable than positive ones (e.g., Bradley et al., 2007; Chang, 2001), this does not always have the desired effects. Positive messages, on the other hand, enhance candidate evaluation (Matthews and Dietz-Uhler, 1998; Nai and Seeberg, 2018) and could act as a defense against damaging messages of the opponent (Kahn and Geer, 1994). Positive campaigning is linked to more of one's own voters going to the polls under some circumstances, and increased vote shares when opponents are out-advertised (Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2016). Positive messages also boost the likelihood of voting for their sponsor (Matthews and Dietz-Uhler, 1998). Moreover, a higher volume of positive campaign messages improves candidate ratings more than a lower volume (Kahn and Geer, 1994; Nai and Seeberg, 2018).

Knowledge on the candidate level about the use of positive campaigning mainly concerns the status of political incumbency. Incumbents were found to use more acclaims than challengers (Benoit, 2014; Vafeiadis et al., 2018). In theory, incumbents have more to advertise. They can highlight their experience in a political position and talk about how they have achieved past successes (Benoit, 2017). In German state elections, one might think of incumbency in two different ways: incumbency of the candidate and, in a broader sense, incumbency of the party for which the candidate is running. The reason is that the election systems in most of the German states are based on the principle of personalized proportional representation. Consequently, people have one vote for a constituency candidate ("first vote") and another vote for a party ("second vote"). While approximately half of the seats in a parliament are assigned to winners of the constituencies, the other half is filled by the party members on the parties' lists. Incumbency could thus affect positive campaigning via the candidates' personal incumbency or via their membership in a governing party whose successes and experience they can use for their acclaims.

The candidates' gender is another known determinant of positive campaigning. However, research on the effects of gender is inconclusive and rare. Some studies find a slight tendency for men to promote themselves more than women (e.g., Panagopoulos, 2004), but others conclude that women are more likely than men to use positive campaigning and mostly rely on this strategy (e.g., Coffé et al., 2023).

Connecting positive campaigning and aversive personality

While we do not know much about which candidates use positive campaigning more than others aside from political characteristics like incumbency and sociodemographic characteristics like gender, recent research on negative campaigning goes beyond that and shows that especially an aversive personality plays a role in negative campaign communication. When findings about personality effects on self-view, leadership, and political ambition are linked, there are reasons to assume that aversive personality traits are associated with positive campaigning as well.

Concepts of aversive personality. People have different degrees of aversive personality traits, ranging from low to high levels. Aversive personality is often conceptualized as a set of separate but interrelated traits. Prominent examples are the Dark Triad which consists of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus and Williams, 2002), and the Dark Tetrad which additionally includes the fourth trait sadism (Buckels et al., 2013; Chabrol et al., 2015). Due to the strong correlation between the separate aversive traits, the idea behind newer concepts is that aversive personality is a collection of various traits with one common source (Douglas et al., 2012; Furnham et al., 2013). This conceptualization is also valuable because of failed attempts to separate aversive traits empirically (Bader et al., 2023). The so-called "dark core" (Moshagen et al., 2018: 661) reflects "the general tendency to maximize one's individual utility—disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—, accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications" (Moshagen et al., 2018: 657). In other words, people with aversive personality traits seek what they subjectively perceive as benefits even when the means to this end are sometimes harmful to others. The common core can be described as a combination of aversive features of personality traits, while the specific traits on their own can additionally entail non-aversive features (Bader et al., 2023). Regarding the Dark Triad, the core comprises psychopathy's meanness, narcissism's self-centered antagonism and, partly, agentic extraversion and neuroticism, and Machiavellianism's amoral manipulation, cynicism, distrust, and desire for control and status (Bader et al., 2023).

Self-perception and self-presentation of individuals with an aversive personality. Despite their socially problematic actions, people with an aversive personality manage to think positively about themselves (e.g., Jain and Bearden, 2011; O'Reilly and Hall, 2021; Smith et al., 2018). To keep doing so, they find reasons or hold beliefs why their malevolent behavior is justified (Hilbig et al., 2022). Examples of those beliefs are the competitive jungle social worldview (Duckitt et al., 2002) and normlessness (Seeman, 1959). Apart from this, a belief that is often held by people with an aversive personality and connected to putting oneself in the foreground is that they are better than others.

A variety of studies point out that individuals with highly aversive personality traits have more positive self-evaluations than others although they do not perform better by more objective measures (Gabriel et al., 1994; Guedes, 2017; Jain and Bearden, 2011; Robins and John, 1997). A potential reason is that people with an aversive personality have exceedingly positive, and sometimes inflated, self-views: They tend to be self-entitled, convinced of themselves (Jain and Bearden, 2011; O'Reilly and Hall, 2021; Smith et al., 2018), and attention-seeking (Jones and Paulhus, 2014; Nevicka et al., 2011). For example, highly narcissistic people think that they are superior (Brummelman et al., 2016), special and unique (Emmons, 1987), and psychopathy is linked to grandiosity and arrogance (Hare et al., 2000; Mathieu et al., 2020).

People with an aversive personality also tend to promote themselves, which serves two main purposes. The first purpose is maintaining a grandiose self-view and was mainly discussed in research about narcissism (e.g., Back et al., 2013). The narcissistic self "is a self that cannot stand on its own" (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001: 179), and for external validation, narcissists seek attention or admiration (Brummelman et al., 2016; Emmons, 1987). The need for admiration may be unique to narcissism but superiority, entitlement, and dominant behavior are part of the dark core (Moshagen et al., 2018). The second purpose of self-promotion is connected to the strategic side of individuals with an aversive personality. Machiavellians manipulate others in order to gain money, power, and status (Furtner and Baldeger, 2016). Assertively promoting their strengths helps them to demonstrate their perceived dominance and skills and thereby make a good impression (Furtner et al., 2017; Sherry et al., 2006). They tend to show a perfectionistic version of themselves and hide personal weaknesses (Sherry et al., 2006). In an experiment, high Machiavellians presented themselves as highly capable, even when they were not, to intimidate others (Shepperd and Socherman, 1997). Research about personality effects on leadership suggests that high-functioning psychopathic individuals can present themselves as perfect leaders (Palmen et al., 2018). People with higher psychopathy appear charming (Mathieu et al., 2020) and

seem charismatic and skilled in presentations (Babiak et al., 2010).

The self-promotional tendency of people with an aversive personality was also shown empirically. Studies show that individuals with higher aversive traits use self-presentational tactics and show off on social media (Abell and Brewer, 2014; Carpenter, 2012; Fox and Rooney, 2015; McCain et al., 2016), as also shown by the fact that psychopaths post more selfies (Fox and Rooney, 2015), and narcissists share positive life events to project a positive self-image (Bergman et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2016).

Most of the presented research on self-perception and self-presentation focuses on separate aversive traits, but large parts of these traits are common to an aversive core (Bader et al., 2023). Regardless of the specific trait, people with high scores tend to present themselves positively. The nuanced reasons may be various, but a driver of behaviors common to all aversive traits should be utility maximization at the expense of others. Such kind of utility maximization is a major consequence of the dark core (Hilbig et al., 2023). During an elections' campaign phase, which is a competitive situation, self-promotion does not only inform about candidates' strengths but also intends to create a relative competitive advantage or at least enhance reputation and status. Thus, self-promotion during an election is intended to maximize utility at the expense of others, which suits the needs of people with an aversive personality.

Motivation and perceived talent for politics of individuals with an aversive personality. Also in the political domain, individuals with high scores on aversive personality traits tend to have a grandiose and positive self-image.

Machiavellians and narcissists think that they are especially qualified for a political career and that they would be successful in this field (Blais and Pruyers, 2017; Peterson and Palmer, 2019). In addition to feeling more confident when imagining themselves in a political role, Machiavellians as the strategists among people with an aversive personality are more likely to enjoy campaign activities (Peterson and Palmer, 2019). Narcissists are also more likely to have thought about running for office (Peterson and Palmer, 2019). All Dark Triad traits are related to feeling qualified and having thought about applying for a political position (Peterson and Palmer, 2021). Not only do people with an aversive personality themselves think that they are a good fit for such positions, but also their external image as political leaders seems to be convincing: Narcissists were better rated at charismatic leadership and, together with fearlessly dominant psychopaths, at presidential performance (Deluga, 1997; Lilienfeld et al., 2012). Additionally, experts attributed higher overall greatness and public persuasiveness to narcissistic politicians (Watts et al., 2013).

Being attracted to a political career can be a reason for people with an aversive personality to promote their

perceived greatness and ability toward others. Self-advertising can lead to external validation of their self-perception as competent and successful politicians. It can also help to gain a competitive advantage by increasing the chance of obtaining an influential political position or improving reputation and status. In the context of campaign communication, I expect that candidates with an aversive personality present themselves in a good light by using positive campaigning. Therefore, the hypothesis is: *The higher the self-reported aversive personality of candidates, the more often they use positive campaigning (H1).*

Data and methods

The analyses are based on data from candidates who ran for 10 state parliaments in Germany in 2021, 2022, and 2023 ($N = 5,896$ were running; 2021: Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, 2022: Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony, 2023: Bremen). A full sample was drawn by inviting all candidates to the survey, including members of smaller parties for the elections in 2021.

Sample and procedure

Data collection started on the day after the election and ended 2 months later. To reach the candidates, publicly available contact information was researched. Candidates with a personal email address were invited by email to participate in an online questionnaire. If such an email address was not found, candidates received a printed questionnaire together with a return envelope. In addition, the postal invitation included a personalized link to the online questionnaire for candidates who preferred to participate online. 5,755 candidates were successfully contacted, of which 42.7% ($N = 2,456$) at least answered the questionnaire partially (Rhineland-Palatinate: $n = 362$, Baden-Wuerttemberg: $n = 490$, Saxony-Anhalt: $n = 153$, Berlin: $n = 391$, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania: $n = 161$, Saarland: $n = 116$, Schleswig-Holstein: $n = 139$, North Rhine-Westphalia: $n = 336$, Lower Saxony: $n = 224$, Bremen: $n = 84$). 2,142 candidates reported their use of positive campaigning. Nine Participants who rushed through the online questionnaire were excluded (index of relative completion speed >2 ; see Leiner, 2019). The final sample consists of 2,133 candidates. 13.4% belonged to the Christian Democrats (CDU), 13.5% to the Social Democrats (SPD), 6.7% to the Alternative for Germany (AfD), 11.8% to the Liberal Party (FDP), 11.1% to the Left Party (DIE LINKE), 15.5% to the Green Party (GRÜNE), and 28.1% to other parties. 34.6% of the participants were female, and the sample was between 18 and 87 years old ($M = 45.92$; $SD = 13.70$).

Measures

The measures come from self-report questionnaires (see [Table A1](#) in the Appendix for the wording of the questionnaire items) and candidate lists published by the state returning officers.

Positive campaigning. To measure the use of *positive campaigning*, candidates were asked: “If you think back to your own election campaign. How often have you promoted your own policy, i.e. presented your political achievements, political plans, political positions, or your own person in a positive way?” They reported their level of positive campaigning with answer categories from 1 “never” to 5 “very often” ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.94$). To validate this self-reported measure, it was correlated on the aggregate level with the observed acclaims on the social media accounts of the candidates (see [Figure A1](#) in the Appendix). As a matter of course, social media covers only one part of the entire use of positive campaigning but this gives a hint if the self-reports go in the right direction. The positive relationship between the two measures suggests that this is the case.

Aversive personality. *Aversive personality* was assessed using the PEAPS short scale ([Maier et al., 2023](#)) which combines aversive traits into one scale, following the idea of a common core and findings about the large overlap of aversive traits (e.g., [Moshagen et al., 2018](#); [Schreiber and Marcus, 2020](#)). The combined measurement intends to increase participation, as election candidates are unlikely to answer the extensive batteries that allow measuring the traits separately. Moreover, the original item wording can be considered harsh or inadequate ([Maier et al., 2023](#)). Thus, the PEAPS scale mitigates the item wording and minimizes the number of questions to a short scale of six items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.67$): i. “There have been times when I was willing to suffer some small harm so that I could punish someone else who deserved it”, ii. “I insist on getting the respect I deserve”, iii. “I want my rivals to fail”, iv. “It’s wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later”, v. “There are things you should hide from other people to preserve your reputation”, and vi. “People who mess with me always regret it”. The answer categories range from 1 “do not agree at all” to 5 “fully agree”. Collecting personality self-reports from political elite samples is challenging. Social desirability and rationalization processes can affect the responses ([Schumacher and Zettler, 2019](#)). In this sample, the average scores of the six PEAPS scale items cover low and high levels of aversive personality and follow a bell-shaped distribution which is only slightly left-leaning ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.70$).

Control variables. The analyses include political and sociodemographic control variables. Political characteristics are

adjusted by four different measures. First, *incumbent* denotes if the candidate was already a member of the state parliament during the election (0 “no incumbent”, one “incumbent”). Second, *governing party* is 1 if the candidate’s party was in government in the respective state parliament during the election and 0 if it was not. Third, an 11-point scale from 1 “left” to 11 “right” indicates the candidate’s *political ideology* ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 2.24$). Fourth, to capture *extremism*, *political ideology* was folded in half, resulting in a six-point scale in which 0 represents a neutral and 5 an extreme ideology ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.56$). Sociodemographic characteristics were provided in the candidate lists. *Age* was calculated by subtracting the birth year provided in the candidate lists from the election year. *Male* was coded 1 for male candidates and 0 for female candidates.

Analytical strategy

After a description of the candidates’ reported use of positive campaigning, structural equation models (SEM) were calculated to account for the latent measurement of aversive personality (using the R package lavaan; [Rosseel, 2012](#)). The indicators of aversive personality as well as the measure of positive campaigning are ordered categorical and endogenous, and positive campaigning is skewed to the right. As ordered categorical outcome variables are neither continuous nor normally distributed, the reported SEM use WLSMV, a weighted least square estimator that can handle such variables (see [Muthén, 1984](#)): WLSMV estimates model parameters via diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS). The full weight matrix is used to compute robust standard errors as well as a scaled and shifted test statistic (simple second-order correction) ([Rosseel, 2023](#)). A probit link is applied to all paths directed towards positive campaigning, which means that an unobservable and continuous variable y^* is assumed to underlie the ordered outcome variable ([Muthén, 1984](#)). Unstandardized probit coefficients then indicate how a change of one unit in the predicting variable changes y^* , *ceteris paribus*. Pairwise deletion of missing values was specified. This procedure nonetheless deletes cases with missing values on the exogenous covariates listwise because the model is estimated conditional on them.

Model fit was assessed following the suggestions by [Kline \(2005\)](#) who defines an acceptable fit as TLI and CFI of higher than 0.90, and SRMR and RMSEA of less than 0.10. The chi-square test is often significant in large samples even when differences from perfect fit are trivial ([Bentler and Bonett, 1980](#); [Kline, 2005](#)). For the models in [Figures 1–3](#), power analyses show that the probability for rejecting the hypothesis of exact fit (RMSEA for $H_0 = 0.00$) when true fit is the respective models’ RMSEA (RMSEA for H_1) is higher than 0.99, given the models’ N , degrees of freedom, and an alpha value of 0.05 ([MacCallum et al., 1996](#); [Zhang and Yuan, 2018](#)).

To begin with, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to ensure that the latent variable aversive personality is well represented by its indicators. Then, structural equation models were run to assess the relationship between aversive personality and positive campaigning. The first model includes only the latent variable aversive personality without control variables. The second model tests if the coefficient of aversive personality remains stable when political and sociodemographic characteristics are held constant (see Table A2 in the Appendix for a correlation matrix). To capture possible associations of the control variables with aversive personality and at the same time campaigning, the latent variable aversive personality was additionally regressed on the control variables (see also Muthén, 2012). The specific relationships between control variables and aversive personality are not central to the research question and thus they solely serve as adjustments. Finally, robustness checks and an exploratory test of how aversive personality is associated with a high or low use of both, positive and negative campaigning, are calculated.

Results

Acclaims are used frequently among the candidates in the sample. 2.0% ($n = 43$) never used positive campaigning, 5.4% ($n = 115$) used it seldomly, and 14.2% ($n = 302$) sometimes. The majority of candidates often used positive campaigning (44.7%, $n = 954$). 33.7% ($n = 719$) reported that they used positive campaigning very often.

Figure 1 shows a confirmatory factor analysis of aversive personality. All of the six indicators load adequately on aversive personality and the model fit is good.

But how is aversive personality related to positive campaigning? Two structural equation models with positive campaigning as the dependent variable were calculated. In Figure 2, positive campaigning is regressed on aversive personality without control variables (see Table A3 in the Appendix for full results). The scaled goodness of fit indices indicate a good model fit. The use of positive campaigning

increases with the aversiveness of the candidates' personality ($\beta = 0.151$; $p = .003$).

The SEM illustrated in Figure 3 includes political and sociodemographic control variables (see Table A4 in the Appendix). The model has an acceptable fit. Incumbents on average use positive campaigning more often than others ($\beta = 0.425$; $p < .001$). The use of positive campaigning did not differ significantly by membership in a governing party, gender, age, political ideology, or extremism. Despite controlling for these variables, aversive personality and positive campaigning are positively and significantly related ($\beta = 0.165$; $p = .003$).

In both models, the R^2 belonging to the dependent variable positive campaigning is nevertheless low (without control variables: $R^2 = 0.007$, with control variables: $R^2 = 0.025$). This indicates a low magnitude of the association between aversive personality and positive campaigning despite statistical significance.

Four robustness checks test if the association holds when the model is altered. The first check adds election dummy variables to adjust for possible differences between the elections (Table A5 in the Appendix). The second check accounts for the candidates' perceived chance to win (Table A6 in the Appendix). The reason for running the latter robustness check is that it may not be incumbency itself that causes incumbents to acclaim more. They, and also some other candidates, may use more positive campaigning to push votes as they have a high chance to win – or to play safe because they have a low chance to win (see, e.g., research on frontrunners and trailing candidates; Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995; Wicks and Souley, 2003). The third robustness check includes dummy variables for the candidates' parties (Table A7 in the Appendix). Candidates might self-select into parties based on their personality traits, and party membership comes with different resources and types of electorates which could in turn be connected with different campaign strategies. Fourth, the latent measurement of aversive personality was replaced by a mean score of the six items (Table A8 in the Appendix). The

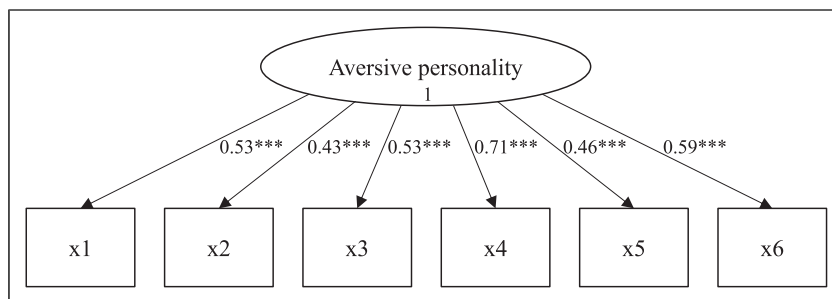


Figure 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of the latent variable aversive personality.

Note: $N = 2,118$. CFA using DWLS with a scaled and shifted test statistic and robust standard errors (WLSMV). The variance of the latent factor is fixed to 1. $\chi^2(9) = 74.74$, $p < .001$, $CFI = 0.97$, $TLI = 0.96$, $RMSEA = 0.06$ [0.05, 0.07], $SRMR = 0.03$. Significance levels: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

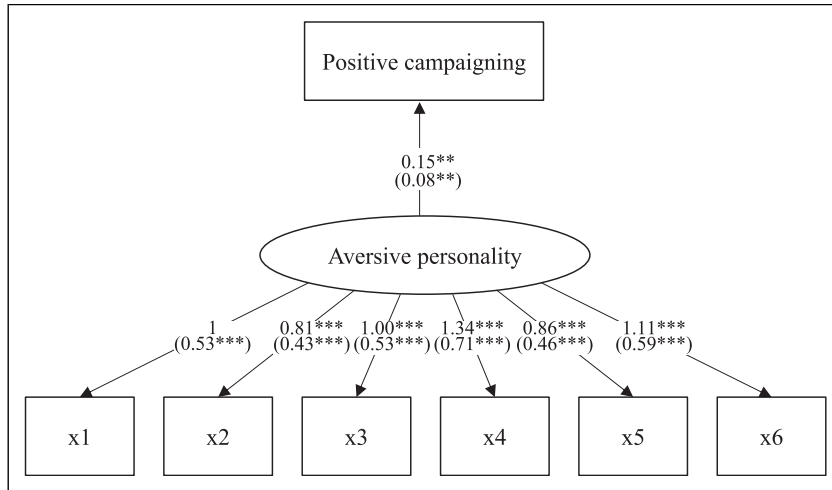


Figure 2. Structural equation model without control variables.

Note: $N = 2,133$. SEM using DWLS with a scaled and shifted test statistic and robust standard errors (VLSMV). Standardized coefficients in parentheses. See Table A3 in the Appendix for full results. $\chi^2(14) = 85.07, p < .001, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05 [0.04, 0.06], SRMR = 0.03$. Significance levels: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

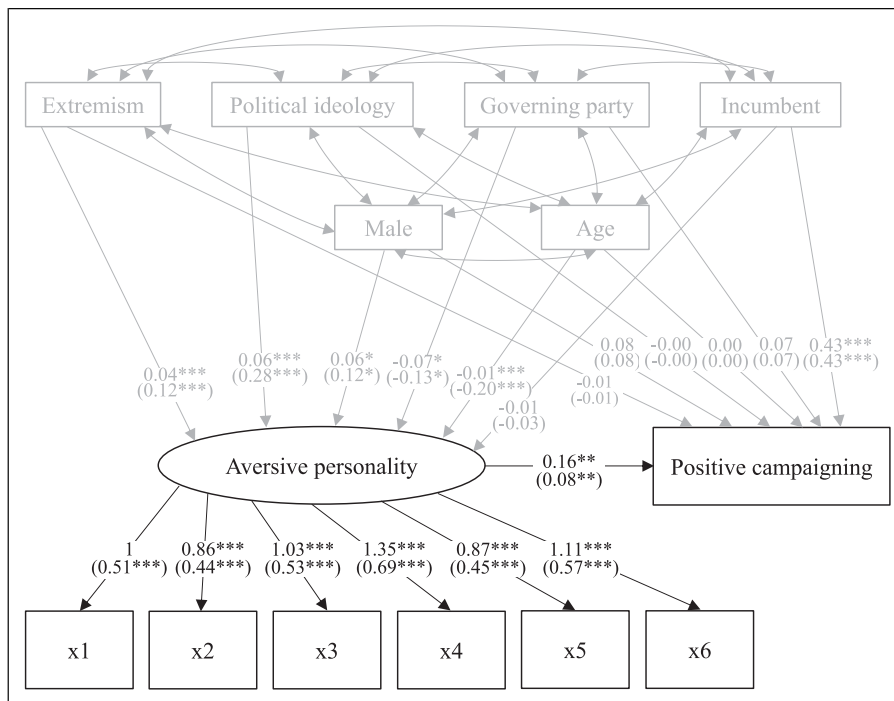


Figure 3. Structural equation model with control variables.

Note: $N = 1,961$. SEM using DWLS with a scaled and shifted test statistic and robust standard errors (VLSMV). Standardized coefficients in parentheses. Exogenous covariates are correlated but the correlations are not estimated (model estimation is conditional on exogenous covariates). See Table A4 in the Appendix for full results. Gray arrows and boxes belong to control variables. $\chi^2(44) = 200.23, p < .001, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.04 [0.04, 0.05], SRMR = 0.03$. Significance levels: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

coefficient for aversive personality is positive and significant in each robustness check. All models therefore imply that candidates with a more aversive personality use positive campaigning more often.

As previous studies report a positive relationship between aversive personality and negative campaigning, the question remains if candidates use both, positive and negative campaigning, more often. The dependent variable

was switched to a binary variable in two exploratory models. Results show that the more aversive the personality, the more likely are candidates to use both kinds of campaigning often or very often (Table A9 in the Appendix), and the less likely they are to use both kinds of campaigning never or seldomly (Table A10 in the Appendix).

Discussion and conclusion

Research on campaign communication focused mainly on the explanation of negative campaigning as a potentially harmful strategy. Aside from a few studies on how political characteristics and gender affect the candidates' use of acclaims, positive campaigning did not receive as much attention. In order to broaden the understanding of what characteristics are associated with the use of positive campaigning, I asked if a more aversive personality is related to a more frequent use of acclaims.

Analyzing a large-scale sample of German candidates who were running for 10 state elections, I find that in addition to and beyond political characteristics, the candidates' use of positive campaigning differs by their personality. The more aversive the personality of the candidates, the more often they use positive campaigning. The reported share of explained variance in positive campaigning points towards a low association which is nevertheless significant and stable throughout different model variations. The results align well with previous findings that people with an aversive personality think highly of themselves and their abilities, and communicate these beliefs to the public. The formerly discovered "bright" side of "dark" personality in leadership (e.g., Judge et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2018) can thus also be observed in the context of election campaigning – people with an aversive personality tend to behave in a way that can be beneficial for attaining a political position. The more aversive the personality of candidates is the more they seem to pull all the strings of campaign communication – not only the negative but also, to a limited extent, the positive ones. Candidates with a more aversive personality are also more likely to have a high use and less likely to have a low use of both, positive and negative campaigning. Theoretically, this makes sense: Candidates with a more aversive personality may use negative and positive campaigning more often out of different motives (i.e. going against others vs self-promotion) that are all means to a perceived utility maximization.

However, it is still unclear whether the utility is maximized as intended by the candidates. While some studies show that aversive personality traits such as psychopathy and narcissism can be positively associated with political success measures like election success and winning the popular vote (Nai, 2019a, 2019b; Watts et al., 2013), it is subject to future research if these associations are

moderated by the used forms of campaigning or their combination. Furthermore, from these analyses alone it cannot be stated that an aversive personality lines up with more campaign communication in general; research about other kinds of campaigning and their connection to aversive personality (e.g., defenses) is necessary to test this assumption.

Some limitations of this study should be considered. First of all, state elections in Germany take place in complex election systems. The candidates who participated may be influenced by the circumstances within the country, the multi-party system, or by the elections being on the federal-state level. More research is needed to clarify if the results are generalizable to other contexts than German state elections. Also, the measure of aversive personality in the analyses is a self-report scale. Self-reports can be biased when candidates give socially desirable or rationalized answers. However, it is not clear at this time if aversive personality traits are perceived as undesirable in the political arena (Schumacher and Zettler, 2019). Being a tactical and, to some extent, ruthless person with high self-esteem could be considered an advantage in political competition. Indeed, while politicians on average were found to report higher scores on socially desirable basic personality traits than a community sample, the bias does not appear to be overly strong (Schumacher and Zettler, 2019). In a German study, politicians scored lower on personality traits that would be intuitively labeled socially desirable (Best, 2011). Nevertheless, biases in the aversive personality self-reports of the present study cannot be excluded, and candidates might report a personality that they perceive as desirable, especially during an election. The chance of bias may be reduced because candidates were informed about data anonymization before the study, data were collected after the election, and PEAPS-scale items are more moderate. Positive campaigning is also measured by self-reports and, likewise, the responses can be biased by social desirability and rationalization processes. Nevertheless, on the aggregate level, the self-reports correlate positively with the use of acclaims on the candidates' social media and thus, go in the expected direction. In comparison to content analyses of written or published information, self-reports have the advantage that they capture positive campaigning of all kinds. Furthermore, the analyses rely on cross-sectional data which implies that associations are not the same as causal relationships. Although personality was often assumed to be stable, a variety of studies suggest that personality traits can change over time (see Caspi et al., 2005 for a review). People are drawn to certain environments because they fit their personality, which in turn reinforce continuity in personality traits (Roberts and Robins, 2004). I assume that, predominantly, candidates with an aversive personality use positive campaigning because it fits their needs. However, without longitudinal research, it cannot be ruled out that

using positive campaigning also amplifies aversive traits even though the timespan of a campaign is quite limited. Additionally, the positive relationship between aversive personality and positive campaigning could also reflect that candidates with a low level of aversive personality avoid positive campaigning. Lastly, the low share of explained variance also implies generally low associations with positive campaigning. While this study offers a preliminary step, more research should be employed to test if the results regarding aversive personality hold with different kinds of measurements, samples, and in different political arenas (e.g., social media, traditional media).

By providing rare insights into the field of positive campaigning, the findings of this study once more underline the importance of the relationship between personality and campaign communication, in addition to other studies about personality effects on negative campaigning (e.g., Maier and Nai, 2023; Maier et al., 2023; Nai and Maier, 2020). The fact that candidates with different personal characteristics act and communicate differently opens up new research paths. Future research could explore possible mechanisms and dependencies of the connection between aversive personality and positive campaigning. For instance, the strength of this association might depend on the exact content of the positive message. Candidates with an aversive personality may focus more on promoting themselves as a person than their political plans. Furthermore, there may be a higher difference between more and less aversive candidates depending on other factors, for example, issue ownership: While highly aversive candidates may overestimate themselves and promote their abilities regardless of owning an issue or not, less aversive candidates may be similarly confident, but only when being issue-owners. To appropriately test such hypotheses, more comprehensive data is needed. Other research paths could also consider the effects of more basic concepts of personality on positive campaigning, for example, Big Five personality traits like extraversion and openness.

While this study provides first answers to one out of many open questions about positive campaigning, more research on its determinants and consequences is necessary. When this less detrimental side of campaigning is better understood, along with the previous findings from negative campaigning research, a more complete picture of campaign communication can be obtained.

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Research ethics

The study was IRB approved before data collection (GESIS ethics committee, 27 November 2020, reference number 2020–6)

ORCID iD

Mona Dian  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5164-6704>

Data availability statement

Since the data contain sensitive information from candidates, the data can be only made available to other researchers on request.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author biography

Mona Dian is a research assistant at the Department of Political Science, RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau. Her research focuses on political behavior and the political communication of candidates, especially the role of personality in election campaigns.

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