Negative Campaigning in the National Council

How National and State Elections Shape Negative Campaigning in Parliamentary Debates

Mag. Benjamin Riesch, MA
Department of Government, University of Vienna

Introduction

Democracy relies on debate, with parliaments serving as key arenas where elected officials present policies and political values, including for strategic campaigning. Yet, it remains unclear how often these debates involve negative campaigning – strategies aimed at discrediting opponents to boost one's own image. This study asks: **Why and when do politicians use negative campaigning in ordinary parliamentary speech?** I explore how temporal contexts like election campaigns or coalition negotiations shape this behaviour. To efficiently analyse large-scale speech data, I introduce a novel method to detect and measure negative campaigning, offering new insights into strategic language use in legislative politics.

Theory and Hypotheses

Parties and MPs are strategic actors who pursue vote-, office-, and policy-seeking goals (Strøm & Müller, 1999). Negative campaigning serves as a tool to advance these goals when expected benefits outweigh potential costs (Walter & Nai, 2015). Parliamentary debates, though primarily institutional, provide a **visible stage for such strategic communication** (Proksch & Slapin, 2014). I argue that the likelihood and intensity of negative campaigning vary with temporal context. **During election campaigns**, parties intensify attacks to maximise voter support. **After elections**, negativity decreases as parties shift focus toward coalition-building and office-seeking. These dynamics extend beyond the national level as **state-level elections and coalition processes influence national parliamentary rhetoric**. Parties gain resources and organisational strength through state-level successes (Dinas & Foos, 2017). As a result, MPs may increase negative rhetoric during state campaigns and adopt a more conciliatory tone during state-level coalition talks. The following hypotheses guide my analysis:

- **H1**: MPs resort to negative campaigning more often in the **immediate run-up to** (national and state) **elections** than at other times during the legislative period.
- **H2**: MPs resort to negative campaigning **less frequently during coalition negotiations** (at the national and state level) than at other times during the legislative period.

Methodology

This study applies computational text analysis to detect negative campaigning in ordinary parliamentary speeches. I combine **Named Entity Recognition**, which identifies over 2,000 references to parties, with a **dictionary-based negativity measure** (Haselmayer & Jenny, 2020). If a party is addressed in a negative sentence, it is coded as an instance of negative campaigning (see example on the right). This approach captures both the target and the tone used. While scalable, the method may overlook subtle attacks and occasionally misclassify either the target or the level of negativity. Nevertheless, it offers a necessary trade-off for identifying broader patterns in large-scale speech data.

The dataset includes **38,091 speeches from the Austrian National Council** (2009–2019), comprising 1.10 million sentences from 437 MPs across seven parties (Sylvester et al., 2022). The period covers 22 state elections and three national elections. A multivariate **two-part model** is applied to jointly estimate the likelihood and intensity of attacks, which suits the zero-inflated nature of the data. The model incorporates information about the speech, speaker, target party, as well as temporal and state-level political context.
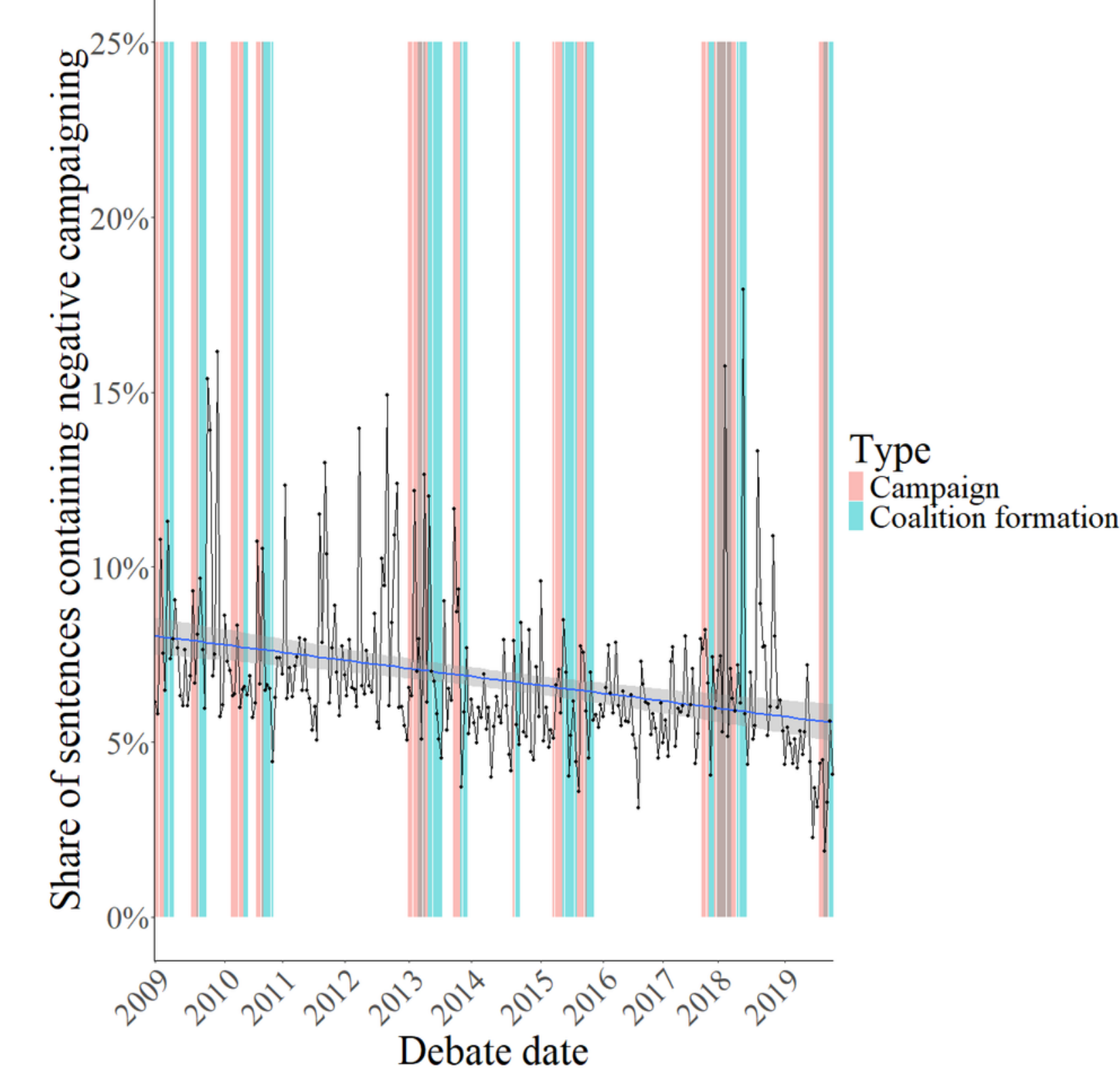
Example

"We are tabling this motion today, and then we will see whether you also agree to this motion today – as a contribution to political hygiene, because together with the [**ÖVP**] you are **constantly soiling** political hygiene in Austria, dear comrades from the **SPÖ**."

(Gerald Grosz, BZÖ, 15.10.2012 – own translation)

Fig. 1: Percentage of negative campaigning over time

Fig. 2: Share of negative campaigning by party and legislative period
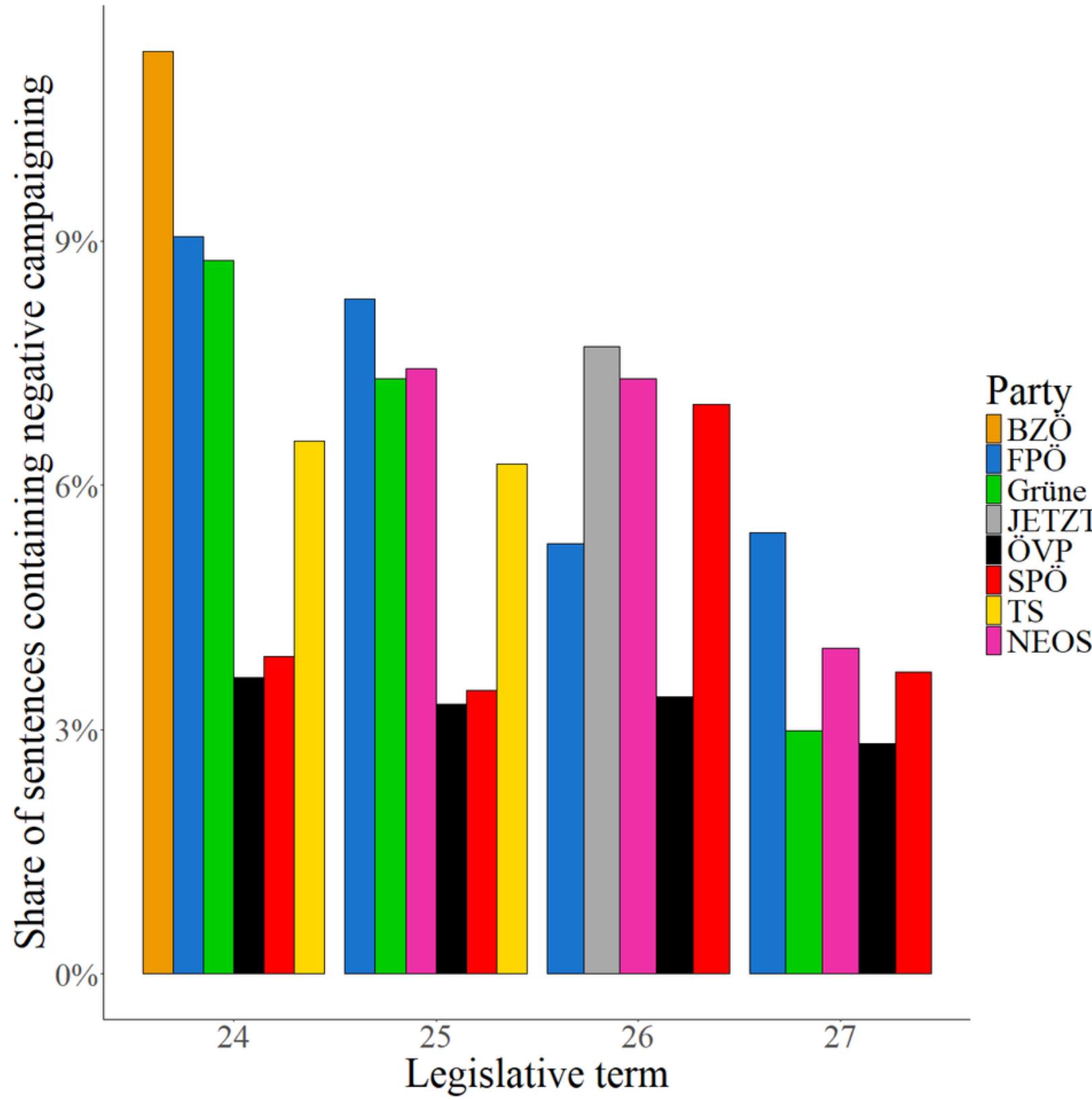
Fig. 3: Total number of attacks by target and sponsor

Results

Roughly **6.58%** of all parliamentary sentences in the Austrian National Council contain negative campaigning, amounting to over **102,000 instances** between 2009 and 2019. However, this use is uneven with some debate days show negativity rates as high as 15%. Government parties are more frequent targets, while opposition parties attack more often and more intensely, including each other. Governing parties, by contrast, show restraint, particularly toward coalition partners.

Temporal context shapes negative rhetoric, though not always as expected. During **national election campaigns**, attacks are more intense, but not more frequent. During **national government formation**, attacks become less likely, but not less harsh. At the **state level**, patterns differ: **election campaigns** reduce both the frequency and intensity of attacks, while coalition negotiations increase them. These findings suggest that parties and MPs adjust rhetorical strategies not only to national but also to subnational political processes.

Conclusion

This study is among the first to examine negative campaigning in parliamentary speech. Using a **transferable and scalable method** combining sentiment analysis and named entity recognition, it shows how **temporal context** – especially election campaigns and coalition negotiations – **shapes MPs' rhetoric**. Findings extend research on legislative communication and negative campaigning, while raising questions about state-level effects. Understanding negative campaigning in parliament is vital for assessing its impact on democratic discourse and public trust.

References

Dinas, Elias, and Florian Foos. 2017. 'The National Effects of Subnational Representation: Access to Regional Parliaments and National Electoral Performance'. Quarterly Journal of Political Science 12(1): 1–35.

Haselmayer, Martin, and Marcelo Jenny. 2020. 'The German Political Sentiment Dictionary (SUF Edition)'. https://data.aussda.at/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.11587/7PFLIU (February 17, 2024).

Proksch, Sven-Oliver, and Jonathan B. Slapin. 2014. The Politics of Parliamentary Debate: Parties, Rebels and Representation. Cambridge: University Press.

Strøm, Kaare, and Wolfgang C. Müller. 1999. 'Political Parties and Hard Choices'. In Policy, Office or Votes? How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions, eds. Kaare Strøm and Wolfgang C. Müller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–35.

Sylvester, Christine, Zachary Greene, and Benedikt Ebing. 2022. 'ParlEE Plenary Speeches Data Set: Annotated Full-Text of 21.6 Million Sentence-Level Plenary Speeches of Eight EU States'. https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/ZY3RV7 (November 24, 2023).

Walter, Annemarie, and Alessandro Nai. 2015. 'Explaining the Use of Attack Behaviour in the Electoral Battlefield: A Literature Overview'. In New Perspectives on Negative Campaigning: Why Attack Politics Matters, eds. Alessandro Nai and Annemarie Walter. Colchester: ECPR Press, 97–114.