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Give the media what they need : negativity as a media access tool for politicians

Give the media what they need: Negativity as a media access tool for politicians

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Abstract

Recent studies indicate that politicians' negativity usage fails to enhance their approval ratings among the general public, yet politicians regularly use it. This begs the following question: why are politicians so negative if this strategy does not bolster their prospects for re-election? In this paper, I argue that the media, driven by audience engagement, plays a pivotal role in shaping politicians' propensity for negativity. Specifically, politicians resort to negativity because it aligns with the media's negativity bias, thereby increasing their chances of securing media access and public attention. I test this expectation on the less-likely case of Belgium, using data on politicians' negativity usage in parliament and their presence in prime-time TV news (2010-2020). The results show that using negativity significantly increases politicians' chances of gaining media access, particularly when using uncivil negativity. The more media access politicians start to attract due to negativity, the more they resort to negativity.

Keywords: Incivility; Politicians; Mediatization; Media Logic; Negativity

Introduction

Negativity in politics is a multi-layered concept (Lipsitz and Geer 2017). For instance, it can relate to media outlets reporting political news with a negative tone and a pessimistic outlook (Lengauer et al. 2011), or to citizens actively engaging with negative political information (Soroka 2014). Concerning the primary suppliers of political negativity, namely politicians, *negativity* is predominantly defined as "any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign" (Geer 2006: 23). Occasionally, this type of negativity may deviate from social norms (Mutz 2015), resulting in uncivil exchanges as politicians engage in mocking and name-calling (Sobieraj and Berry 2011).

Such negative and uncivil communication between politicians can have a profound impact on society. On the one hand, negativity can positively affect the public by increasing their political attention (Mueller and Saeltzer 2022; Mutz 2015; Soroka 2014) and satisfaction with democracy (Ridge 2022; Tuttnauer 2022; Van Elsas and Fiselier 2023). On the other hand, it can also yield adverse consequences, such as lower voter turnout (Nai 2013), heightened public anger (Gervais 2017; Walter and Ridout 2021), increased resentment toward politics (Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg 2022), and the amplification of affective polarization (Druckman et al. 2019; Iyengar et al. 2012; Skytte 2022). Yet, while we know a lot about the *impact* of negative political communication between politicians, it is imperative to elucidate the underlying *causes* that drive politicians to be negative. This is especially vital in light of the escalating and pervasive nature of negativity and incivility in political discourse (Frimer et al. 2023; Geer 2012; Maisel 2012).

Scholars who study the *causes* of negativity between politicians often argue that negative rhetoric is used to increase one's electoral attractiveness at the expense of political opponents

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(Harrington and Hess 1996; Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). However, this strategy does not always pay off. The so-called "boomerang effect" of negativity can lead to declining approval (Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Nai and Maier 2021) and may increase voters' preference for other candidates (Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2022; Walter and Van der Eijk 2019). This makes the usage of negativity by politicians a risky strategy, the outcomes of which are often uncertain (Lau et al. 2007).

Despite these uncertainties about the effects of negativity, some politicians believe that discrediting and attacking opponents is their main job (Sevenans et al. 2015). Studies have shown that this is indeed the case: criticism among politicians is not something that only occurs during hostile campaigns, but in regular day-to-day politics as well (Ketelaars 2019). As such, based on these findings, one might get the impression that the rationale of politicians regarding negativity usage is that the benefits (i.e. more support among the voters) must outweigh the costs (i.e. less support). But this is far from true. A recent longitudinal and comparative study shows that politicians' usage of negativity in day-to-day politics does not lead to increasing public approval in public opinion polls, and more often than not results in decreasing approval (Poljak 2023b). But then why do politicians persistently rely on negativity by criticising each other if they see that this does not benefit their voter support? This question is particularly puzzling knowing that politicians admit that their approval among the public is an important indicator in their daily work (Oleskog Tryggvason 2020).

In this paper, I argue that the media's negativity bias, fuelled by the audience's engagement with negative news, may explain why politicians continue to use negativity despite its uncertain impact on public approval and negative side effects on society. While I am not the

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first to theorise about the relationship between political negativity and the media (see Ridout and Walter 2015), previous studies focused exclusively on short-term campaigning periods establishing that negativity usage leads to media coverage (Haselmayer et al. 2019). While these findings are fundamental, they do not explain the persistent usage of negativity by politicians beyond campaigns, nor do they tell us whether media coverage of negative politicians reinforces negativity usage.

To clarify the interaction between political negativity and media, I rely on the literature on the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck 2008). This theory argues that politicians adapt their behaviour to media logic as a means of achieving media access. Politicians need to do this as gaining continuous access to the media can significantly benefit their re-election goals (Van Erkel and Thijssen 2016; Van Remoortere et al. 2023). However, it remains unclear which media logic politicians should follow to reach the news and several studies offer different arguments (see review in Vos 2014). Nevertheless, we do know that media logic embodies techniques media use to capture citizens' interest (Strömbäck 2008). Given the public's tendency to react more strongly to negative information compared to positive ones, media outlets often operate under a negativity bias (Soroka 2014). Consequently, I anticipate that politicians cater to the media's demand by providing them with what they need to engage their audience: negativity.

In this paper, I formulate three hypotheses: (i) negative politicians have a higher chance of appearing in the news, (ii) especially if they use uncivil negativity and, (iii) once politicians gain media access following negativity, they are incentivised to go negative again. These hypotheses are tested on the less-likely case of Belgium, using data on negativity usage by 367 politicians in the country's federal parliament during an 11-year period (January 2010 - December 2020). More

specifically, I analyse whether a politician goes negative during question time sessions in the parliament at noon (t-1) and regress this decision on a possible news appearance later that day during prime-time TV news at 7 pm (t). In turn, I also test whether appearance in the news due to negativity (t), leads politicians to go negative again (t+1). The results significantly confirm the expectations. Negative politicians in parliament have a higher probability of getting into prime-time TV news, especially if they use negativity that is uncivil, and once they gain media access following negativity, this experience increases the probability of going negative again. As such, the results confirm that politicians try to adapt to media logic, as they are likely aware that using negativity results in media access and public attention.

Negative politicians

The literature studying politicians' negativity usage has already explored the causal mechanisms behind the usage of negativity linking it to a *vote*-seeking political strategy (see review in Nai and Walter 2015). Negativity is used as a means to diminish the electoral attractiveness of opponents, and increase one's own chances of election victory (see also functional theory by Benoit 1999). While recent studies challenge this notion by showing that certain personality traits also contribute to higher negativity usage (Nai et al. 2022), the general principle of politicians' rational approach to using negativity holds: politicians who consider the use of negativity to be a beneficial rather than costly strategy, are more likely to go negative (Maier et al. 2022). This can be observed by looking at how public approval impacts politicians' negativity usage. Politicians with low approval ratings are more likely to resort to negativity compared to politicians with high approval

ratings (Damore 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær 2010; Haynes and Rhine 1998; Maier and Jansen 2017; Nai and Sciarini 2018; Walter and Van der Brug 2013).

However, while negativity can potentially increase approval ratings, or at the very least diminish the approval rating of the competition, there is a boomerang effect associated with negativity usage. Nai and Maier (2021), for instance, demonstrated that harsh negativity does not diminish the evaluation of the target but rather reflects negatively on the one employing negativity. Furthermore, a study by Walter and Van der Eijk (2019) points out that using negativity may lead to a second preference boost, whereby citizens may choose to vote for their second preferred candidate if their initial candidate goes negative. In addition to that, targets of attacks may receive higher voter support as opposed to attackers (Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2022). Recently, a longitudinal and comparative study from Europe showed that politicians' negativity usage hardly impacts public approval in opinion polls, and when it does, it is most damaging for the attacker (Poljak 2023b). These effects are especially applicable in multi-party systems where voters have multiple ideological proximate candidates to support (see Walter 2014; Walter et al. 2014).

Still, negativity remains widespread and present in a day-to-day context (Ketelaars 2019). This begs the question: if politicians see that their negativity usage does not impact or even hurt their approval, why do they continue using it? We could simply assume that politicians remain unbothered by, and do not care about public opinion polls. But this notion contradicts many studies on political representation, which have shown that politicians tend to follow public opinion daily (Wlezien 1995) and admit that their approval impacts their day-to-day work (Oleskog Tryggvason 2020). After all, public approval polls are the most accurate predictor of the

election outcome, especially closer to elections (Jennings and Wlezien 2018). Therefore, politicians are affected by public approval, and it remains unclear why negativity remains continuously used even though it is hardly paying off (Poljak 2023b).

To disentangle this phenomenon, I argue that we need to place greater focus on the media, driven by audience engagement, as a predictor of negativity usage. As stated before, I am not the first to explore the relationship between political negativity and the media. Geer (2012), for instance, argued that negativity in politics is rising as a result of increased negativity in media. Following this premise, Ridout and Walter (2015) have theorised that politicians supply media with negativity as this strategy has more chances of getting picked up by journalists. Although their analysis of political advertisements in the news did not identify a strong bias towards negative political ads, Benoit et al. (2004) and Haselmayer et al. (2019), for example, did show this to be the case. Among campaign messages politicians supply to the public, negative messages are more likely to reach the news as opposed to non-negative ones. Furthermore, politicians who employ more negativity tend to receive greater media coverage (Maier and Nai 2020), and politicians in general are more likely to be featured in negative news stories (Niven 2001; Vliegenthart et al. 2011).

Despite these fundamental findings, the (short-term) campaign-centric perspective does not tell us anything about the media coverage of negativity in routine politics. It is crucial to move beyond campaigns because it is likely that the daily presence of negativity contributes to citizens' satisfaction with democracy (e.g., Tuttnauer 2022), but also growing resentment towards politics. This resentment erodes political trust (e.g., Thorson et al. 2000), reduces voter turnout in elections (e.g., Nai 2013), and exacerbates affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012).

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Moreover, previous studies investigating the relationship between politicians' use of negativity and news media primarily treated the media as a dependent variable, overlooking the exploration of whether media coverage reinforces negativity among politicians. To the best of my knowledge, it remains unknown whether media coverage of negative politicians amplifies the inclination for negativity within these same politicians (but do see Geer 2012).

Mediatization of (negative) politicians

In the era of social media, politicians have unprecedented opportunities to engage with the public. Yet, while social media has considerable influence on the public (Conway et al. 2015), traditional media continue to play a vital role in politics (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata 2017). As a result, politicians still consider traditional media more pivotal for informing citizens about their activities (Soontjens 2021) and for obtaining feedback from the public (Walgrave and Soontjens 2023) when compared to social media. For instance, while social media primarily enable politicians to connect with their existing followers (Jürgens 2011; Peeters 2022), it does not reach the general public that consumes media sources beyond social networks (see also Dubois and Blank 2018). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that politicians continue to rely on traditional media access to communicate with the public.

Two broad goals can be on politicians' minds when they try to gain media access: personal-driven goals or policy-driven goals. Personal goals relate to politicians being occupied with their own image to attract votes at elections and advance their careers. For example, recent studies show that having more media access increases vote share at elections (Van Erkel and Thijssen 2016). Furthermore, being in the news allows politicians to climb the ladder in their careers by

reaching positions of party leaders, ministers, or prime ministers (Van Remoortere et al. 2023).

Politicians themselves admit that media can make or break them (Van Aelst et al. 2008). This is of

particular importance with the increasing partisan dealignment where voters become volatile

(Dassonneville 2023) and base their vote choice on individual politicians, rather than parties

(Garzia et al. 2022).

While certain politicians may be primarily driven by their personal goals, politicians may

also want to gain media access to advocate their policies. Instead of paying attention to their

public image (see Louwerse and Otjes 2016), certain politicians see their main role as policy

advocates that genuinely care about tackling issues and implementing their ideology and policy

solutions (Sevenans et al. 2015). Pushing for an issue through media coverage can be particularly

useful due to the agenda-setting power that the media has over political agendas (Vliegenthart

et al. 2016) and politicians are well aware of this fact (Walgrave 2008). Therefore, if a politician is

successful in gaining media attention, their issue and policy solutions receive a spotlight as well.

Ultimately, regardless of when we observe politicians or what their underlying goal is, it is likely

to expect that vast majority of them crave media attention.

While politicians' dependence on the media cannot be understated, gaining media access

is not an easy task. Journalists and media editors act as gatekeepers determining who gets into

the news (Shoemaker et al. 2008). For example, a journalist is more likely to report on stories that

are going to generate greater sales or increase viewership and visits to the media webpage.

Journalism studies on metrics nicely depict this phenomenon. The more citizens click on the news

and increase the metric of the news story, the more journalists tend to prioritise these stories

(Lamot and Van Aelst 2019). Therefore, politicians that want to increase their chances of getting into the news need to adapt to media and journalists' preferences for what is relevant.

This phenomenon is the crux of the literature on the mediatization of politics which claims that politicians *adopt* the media logic (Strömbäck 2008). Media logic represents the abovementioned techniques the media uses to capture citizens' attention which is visible through news values that make certain stories newsworthy such as *conflict* (stories about arguments or controversies), *entertainment* (stories that are humorous) or *shareability* (stories that generate engagement) (Harcup and O'Neill 2017). Therefore, politicians need to use media logic by following these news values to attract journalists' interest, that is, they need to provide journalists with something controversial, funny, etc. Indeed, empirical applications of the theory highlight that politicians do abide by the media logic trying to use it for their own advantage (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011). Yet, studies offer different reasons about the exact *type* of media logic and news values that allow politicians to enter the media (see literature review in Vos 2014).

This is where the negativity bias comes in (Soroka 2012). This concept may help us to disentangle politicians' negativity usage as a media access tool. Negativity bias in the news is the result of human psychology: we attribute more importance and heavier weight to negative, rather than positive information (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2020; Soroka and McAdams 2015; Soroka et al. 2019; for an additional cultural perspective see Shoemaker 1996). Therefore, as consumers of news, we are more prone to consume negative rather than positive news (Fournier et al. 2020; Robertson et al. 2023). This nudge from the public reinforces journalists' media logic to use their gatekeeping role by providing negativity as this generates more attention for the news outlet. As such, negativity bias in the news can be seen as a concept that reflects media logic relying on

news values such as *conflict* between two sides (Lengauer et al. 2011), driven by audience engagement with such attractive news. Even in situations where the negative news does not attract attention (Muddiman et al. 2020), journalists' gut feeling or practices will lead them to rank negative news higher (Bartholomé et al. 2015; Lamot and Van Aelst 2019).

Accordingly, if politicians want to gain media access, they need to provide the media with what the media needs: negativity. However, if the majority of politicians adopt such media logic by using negativity as a media access tool, there is a possibility that negativity gets too widespread. As a result, journalists need to draw a line about which type of negativity gains priority over which. This is where incivility comes in. Incivility is defined as the breakage of conventional social norms of communication (Mutz 2015; Walter 2021). While negativity usage represents criticisms among politicians on their policies and traits (Geer 2006), incivility goes beyond by including additional elements such as name-calling or mocking (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). Consequently, if negativity becomes uncivil, it does not only align with the news value of *conflict,* but covers other values such as *entertainment*, where certain forms of incivility, such as name-calling, may be perceived as humorous (Verhulsdonk et al. 2021). This makes uncivil negativity extremely newsworthy (Muddiman 2018; Mutz 2015; Skytte 2019) provoking stronger responses among the public in comparison to civil negative communication (e.g. Hopmann et al. 2018; Reiter and Matthes 2021; Walter and Ridout 2021).

Following this theoretical outline, I propose three main hypotheses (see Figure 1). Firstly, I expect that negativity usage by politicians pays off in terms of gaining media access due to the negativity bias. In other words, negative politicians will have a higher probability of appearing in the news (H1). In addition, among negative politicians, I expect those that use incivility in the

process to be particularly successful in gaining media access (H2). Lastly, I argue that this media

logic has an impact on politicians through the mediatization of politics. Because politicians

experience greater media coverage when they are negative, I expect them to rely upon negativity

even more compared to politicians that never experience media access (H3).

Figure 1. Causal structures that lead to negativity usage by politicians
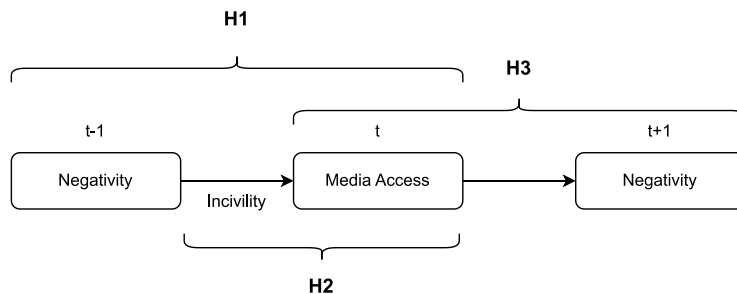
Methodology

I test my hypotheses using the case of Belgium, which is relevant due to the several characteristics

that make the confirmation of hypotheses less likely. Firstly, the politics of Belgium can be

described as a consensus democracy with a multi-party system where politicians need to

cooperate to pass legislation or form a government (see Lijphart 2012). As a result, negativity

usage in such countries tends to be low due to the importance of forming coalitions, unlike

majoritarian two-party systems where there is minimal cross-party cooperation (Elmelund-

Præstekær 2010). In addition, the boomerang effect of negativity is costlier in multi-party systems

such as Belgium's. Voters in multi-party systems can easily change their vote choice for an

ideological proximate party, something that is less likely in two-party systems (Walter 2014; Walter et al. 2014). Therefore, Belgian politicians may be more unlikely to use negativity as a media access tool as it may diminish party cooperation or make voters side with the competition.

Moreover, given that Belgium has a federal political system with decentralised power, politicians do not need to fight for media attention as much as politicians in other countries that are more centralised. As was shown by Vos and Van Aelst (2018), politicians in Belgium can expect to enjoy considerable media access regardless of whether they are prime ministers, ministers, party leaders, or ordinary members of parliament (MPs). This is different from news in centralised majoritarian systems such as the US or the UK, where the role of president or prime minister makes up for the majority of political media coverage. Therefore, due to the decentralised political system, individual politicians in Belgium do not have as strong internal pressure to attract media attention through negativity as they already enjoy considerable media coverage. The absence of individual media-seeking behaviour is further reinforced by Belgium's partocratic system, where parties, rather than individual politicians, play a central role in the political landscape.

Lastly, regarding media, Belgium has traditionally been classified into the *Democratic Corporatist* media model which is characterised by strong journalism professionalisation with less commercial pressure (Hallin and Mancini 2004). This limits commercial media logic that contributes to more sensationalism in the news (Arbaoui et al. 2020). However, recent studies suggest that Belgium might exhibit elements of other media models where journalist professionalisation levels are lower (Humprecht et al. 2022). Nevertheless, even in these cases, Belgium still scores high in state support for free media, a factor negatively correlated with

political parallelism (Humprecht et al. 2022). Therefore, regardless of how we categorise Belgium's media model, there is an indication that the country's media offers a less fertile ground for identifying negativity biases in the news, especially when compared to countries with low state support and fully liberalised media landscape.

While working with the Belgian case offers several advantages, there is one notable disadvantage to consider. Given that politicians' negative usage to seek media attention is uncommon, this rarity implies that when politicians do choose to go negativity, this action is more likely to attract significant media coverage. Consequently, Belgium becomes a more viable case for confirming H1 and H2. Nevertheless, recent studies (Poljak 2023a) reveal that the utilisation of negativity in Belgian politics remains consistently low through time. This implies that journalists in Belgium generally encounter consistent levels of negativity from politicians, eliminating concerns about a sudden surge in negativity that would increase the probability of identifying negativity bias in news.

Data

To test my hypotheses, I analyse individual politicians' negativity usage in Belgium's federal parliament (De Kamer) during question time[1] (QT) and compare it with politicians' media access

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[1] Question time in Belgium takes place every week for approximately two hours during which minority and majority MPs pose questions to the prime minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers, and other cabinet members (i.e. secretaries). Questions are asked in thematic blocks (e.g. on health), and designated cabinet members provide answers to questions, after which all MPs that posed questions in this block may refute answers they received. The share of questions is distributed equally to all parties, regardless of their parliamentary size.

in prime-time TV news in Flanders – one of the two major regions in the country. The choice of QT is driven by its consistent occurrence in day-to-day politics, attracting high media coverage and capturing citizens' attention on a weekly basis (Osnabrügge et al. 2021). This makes it a suitable platform for testing politicians' use of negativity as a media-access tool on a day-to-day basis.

I initially use the *QuestionTimeSpeech* dataset (Poljak and Mertens 2022), where the units of observation represent each speech contribution during QT debates in Belgium. The strength of this dataset is that it goes beyond parliamentary questions which are predominantly studied in the literature (see Borghetto and Chaqués-Bonafont 2019), and also contains answers, interruptions, and points of order. As such, besides ordinary members of parliament (MPs), this allows us to study cabinet members as well (Prime Ministers and Ministers).

To code the usage of negativity, I randomly sampled QTs by taking one QT per month between January 2010 and December 2020. In total, I sampled 103 QTs (30.4% of all QTs between 2010 and 2020) during which 6.634 speeches were made. Four coders underwent six weeks of training to code negativity in the speeches, achieving Krippendorff's alpha scores exceeding .80 for all relevant variables. Negativity was operationalised as attacks in which (i) *criticism* is explicitly attributed to (ii) a *political actor* (following Geer 2006). Coders coded negativity directed at any formal political actor such as individuals (e.g. PM), groups of individuals (e.g. ministers), individual parties (e.g. Greens), or a group of parties (e.g. coalition government). Negativity directed toward informal political actors such as interest groups, the army, or foreign political actors was not coded. Among speeches containing negativity, coders were also tested for coding incivility, which

was broadly defined as any form of impolite speech (Mutz 2015), including name-calling, mocking, or sarcasm[2].

However, it's important to acknowledge that the focus on negativity directed at formal political actors and reliance on textual data means I overlook intricate details that can exist in communication, such as *intolerant* speech directed at parts of society (Rossini 2022) or nonverbal elements like eye-rolling (Mutz 2015). While my scope is somewhat limited, it provides a robust and conservative estimation of the effects between politicians' usage of negativity and the media.

Overall 2.168 speeches (32.7%) contained negativity and among these negative speeches, 559 (25.8%) contained incivility. Non-negative speeches had an average of 212 words (SD = 180 words), while negative speeches averaged 246 words (SD = 123 words). Examples of negativity and incivility usage are available in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of coding negativity and incivility in speeches

Neg.	Incivility	Politician	QT	Speech
No (0)	No (0)	Rachid Madrane (PS)	7.6.2012	*Mr. Prime Minister, we welcome the rapid and firm position of your government with regard to strengthening the fight against radicalism (…)*
		Sarah Smeyers (N-VA)	2.4.2010	*Madam Minister, I really hope from the bottom of my heart that there will be no relaxation in the area of the guidance of the unemployed by the RVA.*

[2] For example, name-calling encompasses instances where politicians are referred to using terms other than their name or official title, like calling a minister a *Smurf*. Mocking involves ridiculing politicians, e.g. when a minister is labelled the *Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. Sarcasm is coded when politicians make ostensibly positive statements that are undercut by criticism, as in saying, *You are a Champion*, followed by the statement, *Champion in lying*. As a result, we coded instances of mockery or sarcasm only when they were clearly and obviously present, disregarding any types that could be considered ambiguous or fall under a grey area.

Yes (1)	No (0)	Charles Michel (MR)	8.2.2018	*Madam MP the way in which your question is posed shows an imperfect or incomplete knowledge of the way the government deals with this issue.*
		Monica De Coninck (sp.a)	26.4.2018	*However, I do not accept that so many children disappear in this country. I think there should be a priority action plan, not just from you, but from the entire government.*
	Yes (1)	Marco Van Hees (PVDA)	2.7.2015	*Minister, I note that in addition to playing the role of the Smurf with glasses, you also play the role of the happy Smurf – "it will be better tomorrow".*
		Tanguy Veys (VB)	6.2.2014	*You wash your hands in innocence, then no longer like a Walloon Houdini, but like Pontius Pilate.*

Note: More examples are available in Appendix B.

The testing of the hypotheses was conducted by transforming the coded data so that each politician that spoke during a particular QT constitutes a unit of observation. In total, the final dataset contains 2.829 observations of politicians participating in QT with 367 individual politicians re-appearing across 103 QTs. Speakers that moderate QTs are omitted as they go negative to get politicians back in line when they break the rules of procedures. As such, negativity used by speakers is not suited for testing the theoretical framework of strategic political behaviour driven by the media. Furthermore, I omitted independent politicians without party affiliation as it is not possible to control their ideological positions, which may impact negativity usage (e.g. Maier and Nai 2021).[3]

Negativity is the first binary variable that indicates whether a particular politician during a particular QT engaged in negativity (0=No; 1=Yes). This is followed by a second binary variable *incivility* that indicates whether incivility was used in the process (0=No; 1=Yes). For example, if a politician A on a specific QT (1 observation in data) attacked another political actor for a policy

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[3] Despite omitting participation of speakers (N=103) and independent MPs (N=65) in QTs, sensitivity analyses including these groups of politicians do not show different results from the ones reported in the main text.

they advocated, a value in the *negativity* variable is 1 indicating that politician A engaged in negativity. In addition, if politician A also mocked the other actor in the process, a value of 1 is attributed to the variable *incivility*. On average, 45.4% of politicians per QT engage in negativity and the average incivility usage per QT (among politicians that engage in negativity) is 31%. These numbers are consistent through time (see yearly trends in Appendix B). As such, the dataset includes a variety of politicians that go negative but also many politicians that remain neutral in a debate by not criticising anyone explicitly. Given that politicians may attack more than one actor on a particular QT, I also generate additional count variables indicating the total amount of negativity and incivility used, which will be used in the sensitivity analyses (Appendix C).

Media access is the third binary variable and shows whether a politician following a QT session (in which it participated) also got media access (0=No; 1=Yes). To generate this variable, I used the Electronic News Archive (ENA) dataset from Belgium, which collects appearances of politicians in prime-time 7 pm Flemish news on the main public (VRT) and private (VTM) broadcasts in Flanders[4] (nieuwsarchief.be). This variable is placed future in time, more specifically, +7 hours following a QT in the parliament. On average, 14.4% of politicians that participate in QT get a chance to appear in the prime-time news following QT. This shows that media access does not come hand in hand with simply participating in QT. Additional binary variables for only public or private media access are also generated, together with the overall

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[4] The market is evenly split between the two while serving almost 80% of the 6 million Flemish audiences in Belgium (De Swert and Hooghe 2010). According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* from 2022, over 70% of the Flemish audience trusts both prime-time TV news while 60% indicate TV as a source of news (Reuters Institute 2022). There is no national television in Belgium.

count of media appearances following QT, all of which will be used in sensitivity analyses (Appendix C).

Cumulative media access is the fourth variable. This variable is a cumulative variable and indicates for each observation the number of times the politician gained media access due to negativity in previous observations. If a politician was negative three times in the past (*Negativity = 1*), and two times this negativity resulted in media coverage (*Media Access = 1*), this politician receives a cumulative media access of 2 at that point in time. There are 748 observations of politicians that have non-zero cumulative media access.[5] Additionally, a binary variable is generated separating politicians into a control group (no media access following negativity ever) and a treatment group (did experience media access following negativity at least once). This variable will be used in the sensitivity analyses (Appendix C).

Analysis

Due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variables (*negativity* and *media access*), the testing of the hypotheses was conducted by running logistic regressions. Three main models are run, one for each hypothesis. To test H1, i.e. media granting more access to negative politicians, media access is the main dependent variable placed at t (7 pm TV news), whereas negativity is

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[5] 51.5% of these politicians have a cumulative media access of 1, 20% have a cumulative media access of 2, 8.6% have a cumulative media access of 3, 6.5% have a cumulative media access of 4, 5.8% have a cumulative media access of 5, and 4.7% have a cumulative media access of 6. All observations above 6 make up less than 1% of observations with a maximum value of 11.

used as the main independent variable and is lagged at t-1 (seven hours[6] before TV news). To test H2, i.e. politicians that use uncivil negativity are more likely to gain media access compared to politicians that use civil negativity, I repeat the previous model but instead of negativity, I use incivility in negativity as the main independent variable. Therefore, in this particular model, I only work with observations of politicians per QT that displayed negative behaviour during QT (N=1,284). Lastly, to test H3, i.e. politicians who get media access due to negativity are more likely to go negative again, I take negativity as the dependent variable and place it at t (QT), while cumulative media access is placed at t-1 (all observations before the observed QT). In this final model, I remove all politicians that appear only once or that were never negative in my data leading to the final N of 2,537. This makes the model more valid as it evaluates observations of politicians that (no not) accumulate media access following negativity.

All models were run through a multi-level modelling structure in which individual politicians (N=367) and QTs (N=103) are inserted as a random intercept but are crossed with each other (see Figure 2). This modelling structure is important due to the panel nature of data in which politicians re-appear as observations (see more in Chung and Beretvas 2012). As such, observations are clustered under politicians that re-appear through QT sessions, safeguarding that no individual or QT is skewing the results (e.g. a specific politician who generally goes negative during QT and gets into the news often). In addition to the modelling structure, each regression includes several control variables that may impact *media access* of MPs and Cabinet Members (Yildirim et al. 2023) and *negativity/incivility* usage (e.g. Goovaerts and Turkenburg

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[6] The choice of the 7-hour lag is the result of journalists actively following the debate in real-time (e.g., the special TV program *Villa Politica* during QT), making it plausible that politicians from QT appear in the news on the same day.

2022). This includes the status of the politicians (Opposition MP; Majority MP; Minister; Deputy PM; PM), their gender (Man; Woman), and their parties' ideological extremity (distance from the ideological centre based on the Chapel Hill Expert Data; Jolly et al. 2022). Furthermore, due to the importance of the electoral cycle (e.g. Poljak, 2023a), I also control election proximity (how many months have passed since the last election) and also for regional differences in Belgium (Flanders; Wallonia). I also include public approval of politicians' parties in my models, but due to the data scarcity on approval in Belgium, which removes almost 40% of data observations, this variable is only included in the sensitivity analyses (Appendix C).

Figure 2. Visual illustration of the multi-level model crossing politicians with QTs in which they participate
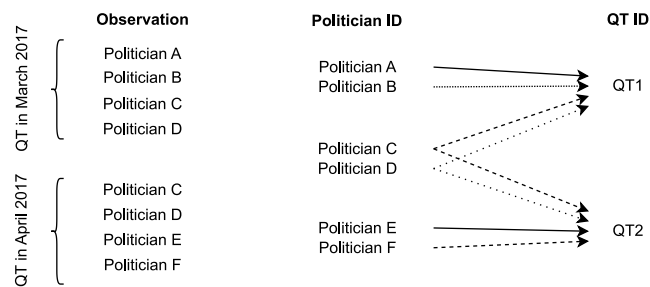
Results

The results of the multi-level logistic regressions are reported in Table 2. These results show a significant negativity (and to a lesser extent incivility) bias in the news when politicians are covered confirming H1 and H2. More specifically, Model 1 shows a positive and significant coefficient for the negativity variable: politicians that go negative in the parliament at noon are more likely to appear in the prime-time TV news later that day at 7 pm when compared to

politicians that do not engage in negativity. In addition, Model 2 provides support that among those that do go negative, politicians that use incivility in the process are significantly more likely to appear in the news when compared to those that used negativity that was civil. Regarding H3, the results also confirm the mediatization of (negative) politicians. A positive and significant coefficient for the *cumulative media access* variable shows that the more media access politicians accumulate due to their negative behaviour, the more likely they become to use negativity again. In addition to the main predictors, the results also highlight that cabinet members enjoy significantly greater media access (see also Yildirim et al. 2023) and men politicians gain more media access following QT when compared to women politicians (Thesen and Yildirim 2023).

Table 2. Testing the probability of gaining media access (Model 1;2) and using negativity (Model 3)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	DV: Media-access (1=Yes) (t)		DV: Negativity (1=Yes) (t)
	Coef. (SE)		Coef. (SE)
Independent variables			
Negativity (ref. no) (t-1)	.787 (.174) ***	-	-
Incivility in negativity (ref. no) (t-1)	-	.629 (.236) **	-
Cumulative media access (t-1)	-	-	.111 (.044) *
Control variables			
Electoral cycle	.004 (.006)	.008 (.009)	.006 (.004)
Opposition MP (ref.)			
Majority MP	.048 (.248)	.291 (.316)	-2.005 (.134) ***
Minister	2.090 (.293) ***	2.253 (.481) ***	-3.067 (.203) ***
Deputy PM	2.661 (.344) ***	2.029 (.586) **	-3.290 (.266) ***
PM	5.998 (.593) ***	6.639 (1.028) ***	-2.285 (.358) ***
Ideology	-.744 (1.029)	-1.930 (1.292)	1.737 (.578) **
Man (ref.)			
Woman	-.482 (.216) *	-.569 (.295) †	-.011 (.122)
Flanders (ref.)			
Wallonia	-1.907 (.241) ***	-2.271 (.364) ***	-.247 (.122) *
Constant	-2.817 (.395) ***	-2.191 (.513) ***	.866 (.224) ***

Variance (QTs)	.582 (.196)	.568 (.284)	.176 (.063)
Variance (Politicians)	.337 (.118)	.798 (.337)	.119 (.064)
N (observations)	2.829	1.284	2.537
N (QTs)	103	103	103
N (individual politicians)	367	269	234
N (min. politicians per QT)	13	5	13
N (max. politicians QT)	37	22	35
AIC (empty model)	1.748 (0=1.930)	789 (0=887)	2.659 (0=3.031)

Note: †p<0.1 *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.00

To get a visualisation of these findings, post-estimated predicted probabilities of regression analyses are provided in Figure 3. Regarding negativity bias in the news, shown in the top-left side, the average probability of media access at 7 pm TV news is 60.7% more likely for politicians that were negative during QT compared to those that were not (9.5 to 15.4). Zooming in on those that were negative, at the top-right side of Figure 3, the average probability for media-access increases by 53.3% for politicians that decided to use incivility (8.1 to 12.4). Finally, at the bottom of Figure 3, we can also see that for each media access following negativity, the average probability that a politician goes negative again increases. For example, politicians that were in the news twice after they were negative have a 4.5% higher probability of going negative again compared to those that were in the news following negativity only once (45.5 to 47.6).

Figure 3. Predicted probability of gaining media access following negativity in QT (top-left), using incivility in negativity (top-right), and going negative again following media access after negativity (bottom)
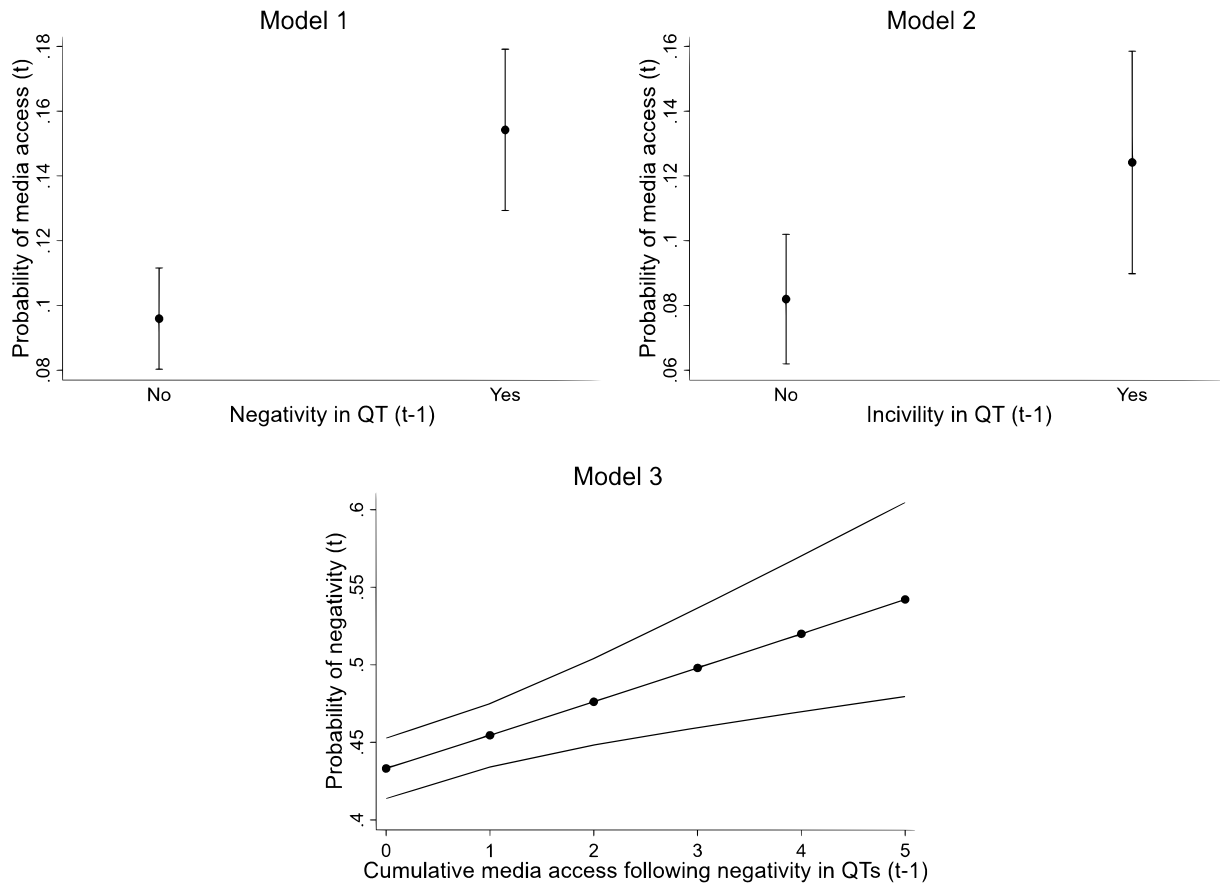
Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean.

Further Tests of Causality

Before discussing and concluding the results, it is necessary to address several issues related to determining causality. The first issue of causality arises from politicians using negativity on issues that the media seeks to cover, indicating that it is issues, rather than negativity, that drive journalists' bias towards negative politicians. To explore this, speeches were automatically issue-

coded using the Comparative Agendas Project dictionary. This dictionary maps references to 21 major issues, such as the economy, immigration, social welfare, or defence (Albaugh et al. 2013). The resulting dataset consists of observations for each issue (N=21) within a given QT (N=103), indicating the share of attention devoted to each issue (N=2,163). By testing the relationship between issue attention in the two groups of speeches (those that were negative vs. those that were not), a positive and significant correlation was found (Pearson's r = .5419; p = .000). Therefore, although not perfectly correlated, this finding supports the notion of a negative bias among journalists, as they may cover politicians who are not negative in QT but address similar issues as those who adopt negativity.

The second causality issue relates to the possibility of consistently negative politicians, creating endogeneity in Model 3 (Table 2). This means that media reinforcing negativity among politicians may not be driven by the media itself, but by politicians with a consistent tendency toward negativity. To investigate this, I focused on 234 politicians who displayed negativity at least once in the dataset. They were split into two groups: a control group with no media access after negativity, and a treatment group with media access following negativity (using the same model as in Table 2, i.e., Model 2). The results (full output in Appendix C3) revealed a significant difference between the two groups. The probability of politicians adopting negativity increased by 17.8% (from .45 to .53; see Figure 4) when comparing the control group (no media access) to the treatment group (media access) following negativity.

Figure 4 Predicted probability of going negative if a politician has no experience with media access following negativity (control) vs. politicians that do have experience following negativity (treatment)
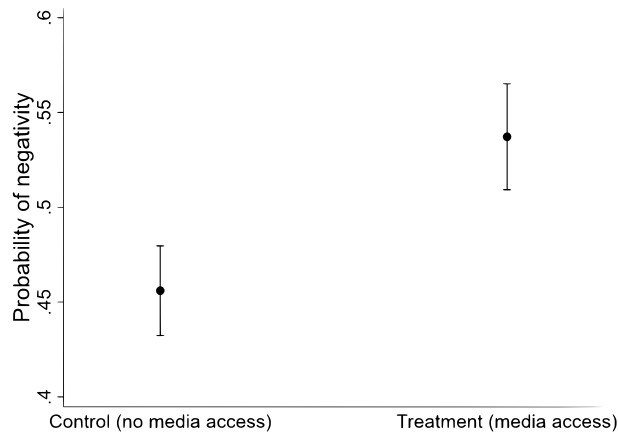
Note: Vertical lines indicate 90% confidence intervals holding other variables at their mean.

Another endogeneity concern is the possibility that politicians respond to media scrutiny by adopting a negative tone in QTs to protect their reputation. To investigate this, I examined politicians' cumulative media exposure following QTs when they were not negative. The analysis revealed no significant relationship, indicating that being in the news after QTs does not result in increased negativity in subsequent QTs (Appendix C4). This finding further supports H3 and suggests that being in the news doesn't inherently stimulate politicians to be negative; rather, it's their own supply of negativity, if picked up by journalists, that stimulates subsequent negative rhetoric. While the issue of endogeneity does remain, these findings do provide additional evidence that the media may act as a reinforcing role for politicians' negativity usage.

Sensitivity analyses

Lastly, to further ensure the validity of the main findings, several sensitivity analyses were conducted (Appendix C1-C7). These analyses examined differences between public and private TV broadcasts, tested the hypotheses using count dependent variables, including public approval, omitting 2020 due to the round of the flag effect during the COVID pandemic (Louwerse et al. 2021), and finally, running fixed-effects models. These analyses consistently aligned with the theory, but the public broadcaster in Flanders showed a greater susceptibility to negativity bias compared to private broadcasts. This is likely due to the heightened responsibility of public broadcasts to report on parliamentary activities (see more in Appendix C), in contrast to private TV news.

Discussion and Conclusion

When politicians decide to go negative, voters will not immediately be inclined to vote for them. However, politicians persistently rely on negativity. In this paper, I offered one possible explanation for this counterintuitive behaviour: politicians use negativity as a media access tool. Relying on the mediatization literature, I argue that politicians adopt media logic that is driven by a negativity bias. If politicians aim to be successful in obtaining news coverage (e.g., to advance their personal careers and their policy goals), they need to provide the media with negativity. Using longitudinal data on the negativity usage of Belgian politicians in the country's federal parliament, and data on the media access in prime-time TV news, I show support for these hypotheses. The results indicate that the media reports more on negative politicians. The more the media prioritise the coverage of negative politicians, the more they stimulate further negative political behaviour.

While these findings may initially raise concerns, there are several encouraging aspects to consider in the results presented in this paper. Firstly, it is noteworthy that a significant number of politicians maintain a neutral stance and refrain from engaging in negativity during parliamentary debates in day-to-day politics (Appendix B). Moreover, even among those who do employ negativity, the majority do so without resorting to incivility. This indicates that the negative communication utilised by politicians predominantly adhere to social norms. Therefore, it is important to recognise that while politicians adapt to media logic by supplying negativity, they do so in a manner that aligns with normative expectations and can actually benefit voters (Geer 2006; Van Elsas and Fiselier 2023). In addition, this study also indicates that negativity among politicians is not as widespread as we may assume and is not increasing (see also Goovaerts and Turkenburg 2022).

Furthermore, this study provides support for the existence of a negativity bias in political news coverage, which plays a crucial role in ensuring the quality of democracy (Soroka 2014). Specifically, when the media delivers politicians' criticisms, it empowers voters to make well-informed decisions during elections, potentially increasing satisfaction with democracy (Ridge 2022; Tuttnauer 2022; Van Elsas and Fiselier 2023) and their turnout at elections (Schuck et al. 2016). Consequently, the media and journalists prioritising politicians who engage in negativity, even if it doesn't always result in higher audience engagement, can be seen as a positive indication of effectively functioning democracy.

One issue, however, is that incivility also gathers attention, howbeit, to a lesser extent than general negativity usage (Appendix C). As such, journalistic routines within newsrooms, such as the pressure to publish stories quickly (e.g. Bartholomé et al. 2015), may amplify incivility, even

when it's rarely present in practice. For instance, because incivility is easily distinguishable in a parliamentary debate from civil discourse, journalist's time constraints may lead to the rapid dissemination of such rhetoric, unlike more beneficial general negativity.

Addressing these practices and allocating additional resources to modify existing newsroom routines could help reduce the urgency to publish the most attention-grabbing yet potentially harmful political content in the news. This is crucial because uncivil rhetoric has been demonstrated to diminish the quality of political debates (Marien et al. 2020), leading to decreased levels of political trust (Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg 2022). Consequently, when citizens are exposed to political incivility in the news, it may reinforce their resentment of politics (e.g. Fridkin and Kenney 2011; Gervais 2017; Hopmann et al. 2018; Reiter and Matthes 2021; Walter and Ridout 2021).

Yet, one should be cautious in generalising these findings, as they only apply to the multi-party and non-liberal media model of Belgium. Still, there are reasons to expect that the results from this paper do apply to other systems, like the US. For instance, the two-party system tends to be more negative (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær 2010), and the commercial media landscape enhances the negativity bias (e.g. Sacerdote et al. 2020). Therefore, this paper aims to stimulate a broader debate regarding the link between politicians' negativity usage and the influence of media, driven by audience engagement, in reinforcing such behaviour. Acquiring a deeper understanding of this subject is crucial as it enables us to gain insights into the quality of democracies, which necessitates the presence of negative political communication (Geer 2006). Additionally, this knowledge helps us comprehend the challenges faced by contemporary

democracies, such as declining political trust and escalating affective polarization. By delving into these aspects, we can foster greater awareness and facilitate potential solutions for these issues.

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