Going Negative: Valence Attacks in Multi-Party Systems

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Theory

Research question: What determines valence attacks in multi-party systems?

Argument:
- Valence attacks are a high-risk strategy in multi-party systems.
- However, they occur frequently (between 4.5 and 16.6 times per day).
- Political parties are concerned about backlash effects, spoiler parties, and coalition bargaining costs.
- I argue that political parties are more likely to use valence attacks when the attacks appear *legitimate* because it decreases the risk of unintended consequences.

- Three factors increase the perceived legitimacy:
    1. Attacks on incumbents appear more legitimate because voters are continuously exposed to critical discussions of the government's record in office.
    2. Attacks on incumbents appear more legitimate when they focus on issues and hence more closely resemble the predominant programmatic electoral competition.
    3. A party can use its issue ownership to make attacks appear more legitimate.

Hypotheses:
H1: Incumbents are more likely to be the target of the attacks.
H2: Incumbents are more likely to get attacked on issues.
H3: Attacks are more likely on issues that the attacker owns.

Data and Estimation Strategy

Data:
- Campaign Discussions from the *Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project.*
- Two elections each in ten European countries, between 2005-2015.
- Party dyads for each week in the one-month campaign period.
- Issue-ownership classification based on Seeberg (2017).

Table 1: Structure of the data set

Election	Week	Sender	Receiver	Valence Attacks (DV)				PM Party	
				Binary	Agg.	Issue	Non-issue	Sender	Receiver
UK 2015	15	Labour	Tories	1	25	12	13	0	1
UK 2015	16	Labour	Tories	1	16	3	13	0	1
UK 2015	15	Tories	Labour	1	30	12	18	1	0
UK 2015	16	Tories	Labour	1	28	12	16	1	0

Methods:
- DV: Valence statements in party-dyads, binary and weekly statement counts.
- Key IV: *Target is Incumbent*, a dummy for government participation before the start of the campaign period.
- Models: Logit for Model 1 and count models for dependent variables 2-6.
- All models are estimated with dyad robust standard errors (Aronow et al. 2015) and country fixed effects.

Figures and Results

Fig. 1 presents the distribution of all DVs. Panels 2-6 are subsets of the Attack category in panel 1. Panel numbers correspond to model numbers.

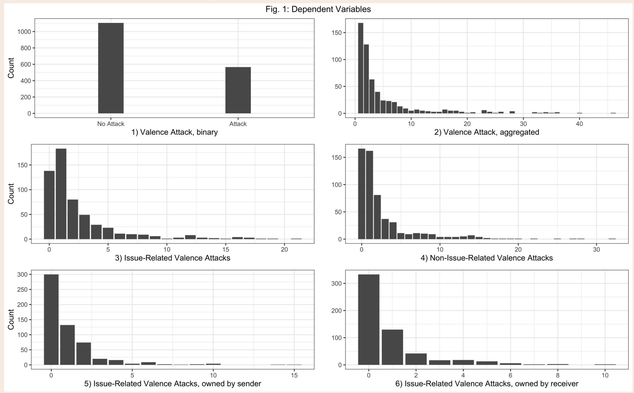


Fig. 2: Model 1 is a logit examining attack occurrence and Model 2 is a zero-truncated negative binomial regression examining attack intensity (Mullahy 1986).

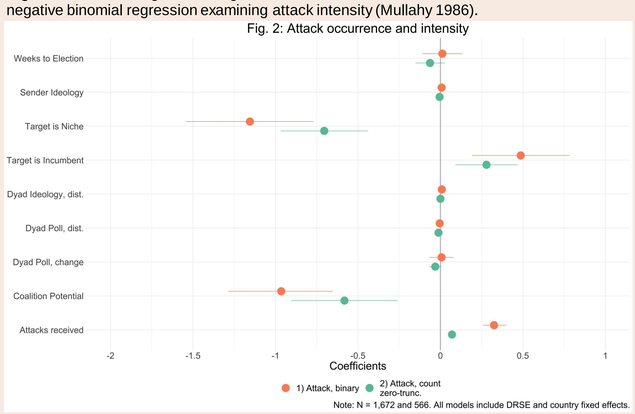
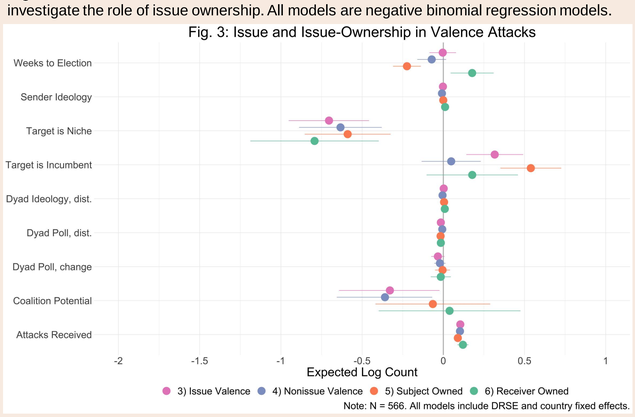


Fig. 3: Models 3 and 4 examine issue vs. non-issue valence attacks. Models 5 and 6 investigate the role of issue ownership. All models are negative binomial regression models.



Findings and Conclusion

Key Findings:
- Support for Hypothesis 1 in Models 1 and 2:
    - Odds of receiving an attack are 71% higher for incumbents.
    - The Incident Rate is 1.32 times higher for incumbents.
- Support for Hypothesis 2 in Models 3 and 4:
    - Parties are more likely to attack incumbents on issues than on nonissues. The Incidence Rate for incumbents is 1.37 times higher for issue attacks. There is no effect for nonissue attacks.
- Support for Hypothesis 3 in Models 5 and 6:
    - Parties are more likely to attack incumbents on issues owned by the attacker (IR 1.71).

Conclusions:
- Attack behavior is not driven by electoral performance or ideology.
- There is a strong element of reciprocity in attack behavior.
- Niche parties and potential coalition partners are significantly less likely to receive an attack in the first place. If attacked, they receive fewer attacks.

Future Research:
- Are valence attacks driven by sender or receiver characteristics?
- How do coalition formation dynamics affect a party's decision to attack competitors?
- What is the effect of valence attacks on vote choice (Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2020), but also turnout and satisfaction with democracy?

References

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