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Article

# How Partisanship Matters: A Panel Study on the Democratic Outcomes of Perceived Dirty Campaigning

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## Abstract

Uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques are increasingly relevant phenomena in politics. However, it remains unclear how they share an underlying component and how partisanship can influence their associations with democratic outcomes. We introduce the concept of dirty campaigning, which is situated at the intersection of research on negative campaigning and political scandals. Dirty campaigning involves violations of social norms and liberal-democratic values between elite political actors in terms of style and practices, such as uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques. In a two-wave panel study ( $N = 634$ ) during the 2021 German federal election campaign, we investigate the associations of perceived dirty campaigning by the least and most favorite party with distrust in politicians, trust in democracy, attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation, as well as perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy. We find that perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party increases perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy over time. In contrast, perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party decreases perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy as well as attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation over time. Perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy increase distrust in politicians over time and vice versa. Our findings suggest that the outcomes of dirty campaigning can depend on partisanship and can have important implications for the quality of democracy.

## Keywords

democratic outcomes; dirty campaigning; panel study; political incivility; political trust

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Negative Politics: Leader Personality, Negative Campaigning, and the Oppositional Dynamics of Contemporary Politics” edited by Alessandro Nai (University of Amsterdam), Diego Garzia (University of Lausanne), Loes Aaldering (Free University Amsterdam), Frederico Ferreira da Silva (University of Lausanne), and Katjana Gattermann (University of Amsterdam).

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## 1. Introduction

Uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques are prevalent phenomena in politics. Extant research has shown that they can contribute to a toxic political environment, undermine the integrity of elections, and harm the quality of democracy (Geer, 2006; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Mutz, 2015; Sydnor, 2019; Walter, 2021). Despite the progress made by previous research, two research gaps remain. First, it is unclear how uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques share

an underlying component. Prior work has advanced the conceptualization of these phenomena (e.g., Brooks & Geer, 2007; Hinds et al., 2020; Lösche, 2019; Stryker et al., 2016), but conceived them as independent of each other rather than developing a complementary framework to investigate them as a coherent concept. Second, there is a lack of research on how partisanship can influence the democratic outcomes of uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques. Previous studies on their democratic outcomes ignored the role of partisanship and instead focused on personal dispositions,

different communication channels, or different countries (Mutz, 2015; Otto et al., 2020; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). However, studying partisanship in this context is important, because it can lead to variability in individual reactions to campaigns (Druckman et al., 2019; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). Research on the role of partisanship investigated negative campaigning as an umbrella term rather than specifically uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques (e.g., Haselmayer et al., 2020; Nai, 2013; Somer-Topcu & Weitzel, 2022).

To address these research gaps, we introduce the concept of dirty campaigning as actions between elite political actors that violate social norms and values of liberal democracy in terms of style and practices and may include uncivil campaigning as well as deceitful campaign techniques (Hinds et al., 2020; Mutz, 2015; Stryker et al., 2021). In a two-wave panel survey ( $N = 634$ ), we examine how perceived dirty campaigning by the least and most favorite party is associated with distrust in politicians, trust in democracy, attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation, and perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy.

## 2. A Basic Conceptualization of Dirty Campaigning

Uncivil campaigning refers to the use of incivility between political elites (Chen, 2017; Mutz, 2015) and is conceived to be a subform of negative campaigning (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Haselmayer, 2019). Uncivil campaigning may involve forms of insults (i.e., name-calling or disrespect), discourse (i.e., interrupting political opponents), modality (i.e., sarcasm or ambiguity), or context (i.e., calls for political violence; Bormann et al., 2021; Mutz, 2015; Stryker et al., 2016, 2021). In this work, we rely on insult utterances and discursive forms as the most widely shared conceptualizations of uncivil campaigning (Mutz, 2015; Stryker et al., 2016, 2021). Therefore, we regard uncivil campaigning as communication of an elite political actor A against an elite political actor B, which includes norm violations in terms of utterances and discursive forms.

Deceitful campaign techniques involve non-communicative practices that are unethical and disproportionate. Research on such techniques is rather fragmented and broadly embedded in the literature on political scandals. Forms of deceitful campaign techniques may involve illegal campaign financing (Lösche, 2019), financing of news media for favorable coverage (Dragomir, 2017), or the creation of deepfakes (Meskys et al., 2020). We label this form of dirty campaigning deceitful campaign “techniques” instead of deceitful campaign “methods.” Campaign techniques imply a technical action, whereas campaign methods could also relate to the systematic use of dirty forms of campaigning, such as uncivil campaigning. We thus refer to deceitful campaign techniques as the use of non-communicative practices by an elite political actor A against an elite political actor B, which are unethical or disproportionate.

We argue that these forms share the underlying notion of campaign forms that violate social norms and values of liberal democracy in terms of style and practices. Uncivil campaigning violates the social norms of civil style in interpersonal exchanges (Mutz, 2015; Stryker et al., 2016; Walter, 2021), whereas deceitful campaign techniques violate the social norms of using practices that are ethical or proportionate (Gächter & Schulz, 2016). These norm violations can involve different degrees of severity and have different outcomes. Nevertheless, in the first place, they all have in common that they involve norm violations.

This argument can be extended to violations of the values of liberal democracy. Uncivil campaigning is considered to undermine democratic civility by contributing to a toxic political atmosphere and impairing public discourse (Chen, 2017; Flores et al., 2021). Deceitful campaign techniques are regarded to violate the principle of political integrity because they constitute an abuse of political power to achieve unethical or disproportionate goals (Grant, 1999; Thompson, 2000). Previous research demonstrated that uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques tend to have more negative than positive implications for democratic quality (Walter, 2021). Uncivil campaigning can decrease trust in politicians, congress, and government, as well as political participation intentions and policy support (Fridkin & Kenney, 2019; Mutz, 2015; Otto et al., 2020; Reiter & Matthes, 2021; Van ‘t Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2021). Deceitful campaign techniques can decrease positive evaluations and voting intentions toward the sponsor, as well as decrease trust in politicians and trust in democracy (Vivyan et al., 2012; Von Sikorski et al., 2020). Taken together, we define dirty campaigning as actions of an elite political actor A against an elite political actor B that violate social norms and values of liberal democracy in terms of style and practices.

Our concept of dirty campaigning provides a complementary framework, which is located at the intersection of research on negative campaigning and political scandals. For instance, uncivil campaigning may be conceived both as a subform of negative and dirty campaigning. It may be investigated within the theoretical framework of negative campaigning (i.e., civil and uncivil campaigning) and dirty campaigning (i.e., uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques). Deceitful campaign techniques may constitute a subform of political scandals rather than negative campaigning because they involve non-communicative practices instead of communicative actions between political actors.

### 2.1. Dirty Campaigning in Germany

Previous research has shown that dirty forms of campaigning are a permanent component of federal campaigns in Germany (Hopmann et al., 2018; Maier & Renner, 2018). However, compared to other countries, the amount of dirty campaigning appears to be relatively

low and has declined over time (Schmücking, 2015; Walter, 2014). The reasons for this development can be rooted in the multi-party system, which decreases the likelihood to use dirty campaigning against potential coalition partners (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010), as well as the strongly consensus-oriented political culture in Germany, which fosters democratic civility (Lijphart, 1999).

Despite these developments, the rise of the Alternative of Germany (AfD), a right-wing populist party, and their entry into the German Bundestag in 2017 have raised concerns that dirty campaigning could become increasingly relevant and that the electorate may become more polarized (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Nai, 2018). Evidence from previous research showed that speeches of the AfD in the German Bundestag contained more uncivil campaigning than speeches of the other parliamentary factions. In turn, the share of uncivil campaigning in speeches of the other parliamentary factions increased (Maurer & Jost, 2020).

Dirty campaigning was also common in the 2021 German federal election campaign (Dostal, 2021). For instance, a private company ran a false poster campaign against the Greens, associating them with “eco-terror” or “climate socialism” (Ruppert, 2021). The Social Democratic Party (SPD) used uncivil campaigning against the frontrunner of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Armin Laschet. They addressed one of his party members’ conservative religious beliefs, thus breaking a taboo in German campaigns (Monath, 2021). A survey also showed that the majority of German citizens perceived the 2021 campaign to be too aggressive (Gensing, 2021). This lends some evidence that dirty campaigning is still a prevalent phenomenon in German campaigns.

### 3. Dirty Campaigning and Democratic Outcomes

We investigate four democratic outcomes associated with dirty campaigning: distrust in politicians, trust in democracy, attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation, as well as perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning on the quality of democracy. Distrust in politicians is a very specific form of political trust, which involves the lack of confidence in politicians’ ability to “do what is right” (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358), to be unresponsive to public needs, or to be unethical (Easton, 1975; Warren, 2017). Trust in democracy is a diffuse form of political trust, which comprises support for democratic principles and values, as well as evaluations of the performance of democracies (Norris, 2011). Both forms are important indicators of democratic quality because citizens need to have faith in the policymaking of their elected representatives and the effective functioning of democracy (Hetherington, 2004; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). Attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation address the individual evaluation that the use of dirty campaigning requires stronger action from legislators, such as the creation or amendment of laws,

or the strengthening of previous laws. This aspect is democratically relevant, because the regulation of harmful campaign behavior, such as dirty campaigning, is an important legal instrument of a democracy (Marsden et al., 2020). The consequences of dirty campaigning for democratic quality are important to study from the perception of citizens (Lipsitz & Geer, 2017) and involve the perceived consequences for the integrity of elections and effective policymaking (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Norris, 2011).

#### 3.1. *The Outcomes of Perceived Dirty Campaigning by the Least and Most Favorite Party*

The new videomalaise theory (NVT; Mutz, 2015) argues that citizens perceive the use of uncivil campaigning as a violation of social norms, which can negatively influence attitudes toward politicians and democratic processes. Regarding the outcomes of perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party, the social identity theory (SIT; see Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that individuals assess their social identities by comparing their ingroup to specific outgroups. When individuals consider that their in-group status is made salient by the actions of an out-group, group categorizations are activated. Consequently, individuals may use heuristics (i.e., undesirable actions of an out-group) to develop evaluations toward the out-group (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). Partisanship may constitute such an important social identity that can affect how individuals evaluate actions by a political party they consider as least favorite (Druckman et al., 2013; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). A further explanation offers the directional goal of motivated reasoning theory. According to this theory, individuals are motivated to reach desired conclusions by giving greater weight to attitude-consistent information than attitude-challenging information (Kunda, 1990). Partisan-motivated reasoning can occur when individuals are primed to draw conclusions that are consistent with their party identification (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In other words, individuals may tend to support and favor actions by their most favorite party, whereas they oppose and dislike actions by their least favorite party.

Based on these theories, individuals may regard perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party as an undesirable out-group action. This may negatively influence democratic outcomes and increase distrust in politicians as well as decrease trust in democracy (Hetherington, 2004; Norris, 2011). Perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party may arguably increase citizens’ desire for stronger regulation of dirty campaigning. Individuals may also perceive dirty campaigning by the least favorite party to be harmful to electoral integrity and effective policymaking, which may increase the perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democratic quality (Mutz, 2015; Norris, 2014; Taber & Lodge, 2006). We thus hypothesize:

H1: Perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party (a) increases distrust in politicians and (b) decreases trust in democracy over time.

H2: Perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party increases (a) attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation and (b) perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy over time.

The NVT would suggest that perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party is considered a breach of social norms (Mutz, 2015), whereas SIT would assume that certain actions by this party are more accepted than those by other parties (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In this context, previous research showed inconclusive findings. For instance, uncivil campaigning by the most favorite party is not related to attitudes toward this party (Gervais, 2019), whereas uncivil partisan media can increase negative attitudes toward the most favorite party (Druckman et al., 2019). Given this inconclusive evidence and the conflicting assumptions of the NVT and SIT, the associations of variables of interest could arguably produce null findings, be less negative compared to the least favorite party, or even be positive. We thus pose a research question:

RQ1: How is perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party associated with distrust in politicians and trust in democracy over time?

RQ2: How is perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party associated with attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation and perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy over time?

### 3.2. The Outcomes of Perceived Harmful Consequences of Dirty Campaigning for Democracy

Based on input-performance approaches of democratic theory (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2015; Scharpf, 1999), citizens who perceive dirty campaigning to be harmful to democratic quality might associate dirty campaigning with politicians as their sponsors and thus have decreasing levels of confidence in them (Norris, 2014). Citizens with harmful perceptions of dirty campaigning for democratic quality may arguably have little faith in the performance of a democracy to effectively counter dirty campaigning, and thus lose trust in democracy (Norris, 2011). Furthermore, they could prefer a stronger regulation of dirty campaigning by lawmakers to limit its harmful democratic consequences (Meskys et al., 2020). We thus postulate:

H3: Perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy increase (a) distrust in politicians, (b) decrease trust in democracy, and

(c) increase attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation over time.

### 3.3. The Outcomes of Political Trust

According to the trust-as-heuristic thesis (Rudolph, 2017), citizens who distrust politicians do not believe them “to do what is right” (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358) and thus may advocate that dirty campaigning by politicians requires stronger regulation. They may also perceive that their use of dirty campaigning impairs democratic performance and thus perceive dirty campaigning to have negative consequences for democratic quality (Norris, 2014; Warren, 2017). Citizens with high levels of trust in democracy may assume that democracies are sufficiently responsive to regulate dirty campaigning, which decreases their individual need for further regulation (Marsden et al., 2020; Norris, 2011). Similarly, they may believe that effective democratic regime performance would diminish the perceived negative consequences of dirty campaigning for the quality of democracy (Hetherington, 2004). We postulate:

H4: Distrust in politicians increases (a) attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation and (b) perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy over time.

H5: Trust in democracy decreases (a) attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation and (b) perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy over time.

Figure 1 depicts our hypothesized model.

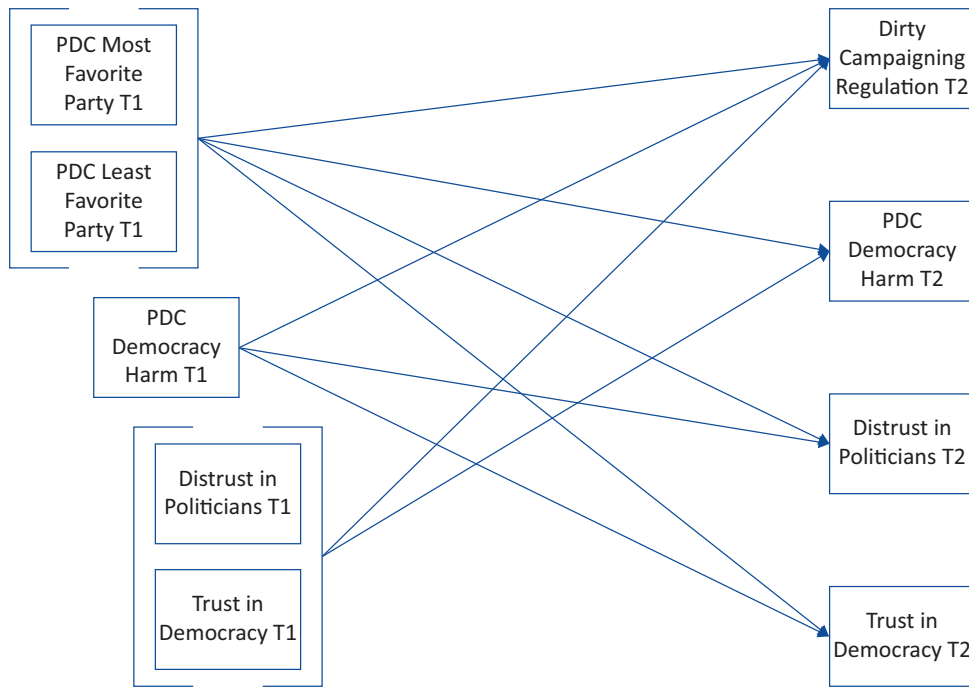
## 4. Method

### 4.1. Procedure

We conducted a two-wave online panel survey during the 2021 German federal election campaign. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Communication, University of Vienna (approval ID: 20210713\_053). Data are openly available (Reiter & Matthes, 2022). Dynata, a professional polling company, collected the survey data at two points in time between 29 July–4 August 2021 and 13–22 September 2021, with the election date on 26 September 2021.

### 4.2. Sample

We used a quota sample of the German electoral population based on age (ranging from 18 to 80 years,  $M = 53.41$ ,  $SD = 14.27$ ), gender (48.4% of the respondents identified as female), and education (13.7% lower education, 56.6% medium education, 29.7% higher education). To ensure high data quality, we excluded “speeders”



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model. Notes: PDC stands for “perceived dirty campaigning”; square brackets indicate arrows of each independent variable on dependent variables.

and performed attention checks (for complete details of excluded responses see the Supplementary File, Table A1). Our final sample size was  $N = 634$ . The retention rate of the responses of the final samples between wave one and wave two was 67.66% (for complete details of systematic differences of samples between both waves, see Supplementary File, Table A2).

4.3. Measures

Frequency distribution of the least and most favorable party are reported in Table 1. Complete details of the descriptive statistics for our measures are reported in Table 2. We employ McDonald’s Omega for reliability estimation of three or more items. We use the OMEGA macro for SPSS with Hancock’s algorithm (HA) and 1,000 bootstrapping samples to generate 95% confidence inter-

vals (CI; Hayes & Coutts, 2020). For reliability estimation of two items, we use the Spearman-Brown coefficient. If not stated differently, we employed a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) for the measurements of the variables.

To measure *perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party*, we created a filter variable asking the participants about their least favorite party in the German Bundestag, followed by two items to assess their perception of dirty campaigning by the selected party (items based on Reiter & Matthes, 2021): “The [FILTER PARTY] is disrespectful to other parties”; “The [FILTER PARTY] uses deceitful campaign techniques, for instance illegal campaign financing.” We then computed a new variable consisting of that mean value per participant. For *perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party*, we applied the same procedure by asking about the most

**Table 1.** Frequency distribution of the least and most favorite party.

Political party	Least favorite party		Most favorite party	
	T1	T2	T1	T2
CDU/CSU	34	29	170	131
SPD	12	12	116	160
AfD	410	397	85	94
FDP	14	15	83	88
The Left	41	60	74	77
The Greens	123	121	106	84
Total	634	634	634	634

Note: T1 stands for “Time 1” and T2 for “Time 2.”

favorite party. We measured *attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation* with three items (based on Nelson et al., 2021): “Dirty campaigning should legally be more regulated”; “The sponsors of dirty campaigning should be prosecuted more vigorously”; “Dirty campaigning should be legally penalized more strongly.” To measure *perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy*, we used six items (derived from Norris, 2014), two of which were: “Dirty campaigning makes election campaigns look manipulated”; “Dirty campaigning contributes to a hostile political atmosphere.” We measured *distrust in politicians* with four items (derived from Craig et al., 1990), two of which were: “Politicians in Germany are more concerned with their own interests than with actual policies”; “Politicians in Germany rarely keep their promises to the people.” We measured *trust in democracy* with four items (based on Norris, 2011), two of which were: “Democracy is the right form of government for Germany”; “I am satisfied with the way democracy works in Germany.” To close any potential “back-door paths” which may influence the association between the variables of interest, we

purposefully controlled for *demographics* (age, gender, educational level), *ideology*, and *perceived civil negative campaigning* (Rohrer, 2018; for complete details see Supplementary File, Table A3).

#### 4.4. Data Analysis

We ran four OLS regression models (model 1:  $R^2_{Adj.} = .34$ ,  $F(12, 621) = 27.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ; model 2:  $R^2_{Adj.} = .42$ ,  $F(12, 621) = 39.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ; model 3:  $R^2_{Adj.} = .56$ ,  $F(12, 621) = 68.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ; model 4:  $R^2_{Adj.} = .62$ ,  $F(12, 621) = 88.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with lagged dependent variables. We also included autoregressive paths to explain changes in the dependent variable from T1 to T2. We observed no model specification error (Ramsey, 1969) in all four models (model 1:  $F(3, 618) = 1.15$ ,  $p = .327$ ; model 2:  $F(3, 618) = 2.51$ ,  $p = .058$ ; model 3:  $F(3, 618) = 1.05$ ,  $p = .372$ ; model 4:  $F(3, 618) = 0.17$ ,  $p = .919$ ). We also detected no indication of multicollinearity, as the VIF-values for the predictors in all four models were reported lower than 2.5 (Alin, 2010).

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of measures.

Variable	Reliability coefficient	Mean	Standard deviation
Perceived dirty campaigning least favorite party	T1: $\rho = .81$	T1: $M = 5.15$	T1: $SD = 1.69$
	T2: $\rho = .77$	T2: $M = 4.90$	T2: $SD = 1.66$
Perceived dirty campaigning most favorite party	T1: $\rho = .73$	T1: $M = 2.51$	T1: $SD = 1.31$
	T2: $\rho = .69$	T2: $M = 2.43$	T2: $SD = 1.32$
Attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation	T1: $\omega = .93$ , 95% CI [.92, .95]	T1: $M = 5.43$	T1: $SD = 1.42$
	T2: $\omega = .94$ , 95% CI [.92, .95]	T2: $M = 5.41$	T2: $SD = 1.44$
Perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy	T1: $\omega = .91$ , 95% CI [.89, .92]	T1: $M = 5.31$	T1: $SD = 1.28$
	T2: $\omega = .90$ , 95% CI [.88, .92]	T2: $M = 5.36$	T2: $SD = 1.26$
Distrust in politicians	T1: $\omega = .88$ , 95% CI [.86, .90]	T1: $M = 4.86$	T1: $SD = 1.45$
	T2: $\omega = .89$ , 95% CI [.87, .91]	T2: $M = 4.87$	T2: $SD = 1.47$
Trust in democracy	T1: $\omega = .75$ , 95% CI [.69, .79]	T1: $M = 4.73$	T1: $SD = 1.35$
	T2: $\omega = .72$ , 95% CI [.65, .78]	T2: $M = 4.77$	T2: $SD = 1.36$
Age	—	T1: $M = 53.41$ T2: $M = 53.41$	T1: $SD = 14.27$ T2: $SD = 14.28$
Gender	—	T1: $M = 1.48$ T2: $M = 1.49$	T1: $SD = .50$ T2: $SD = .50$
Medium education	—	T1: $M = .57$ T2: $M = .58$	T1: $SD = .50$ T2: $SD = .49$
High education	—	T1: $M = .30$ T2: $M = .31$	T1: $SD = .46$ T2: $SD = .46$
Ideology	—	T1: $M = 4.73$	T1: $SD = 1.75$
Political interest	T1: $\rho = .87$	T1: $M = 5.61$	T1: $SD = 1.49$
	T2: $\rho = .85$	T2: $M = 5.59$	T2: $SD = 1.47$
Perceived civil negative campaigning	T1: $\omega = .87$ , 95% CI [.85, .89]	T1: $M = 3.90$	T1: $SD = 1.18$
	T2: $\omega = .88$ , 95% CI [.86, .90]	T2: $M = 3.98$	T2: $SD = 1.19$

## 5. Results

Results of a t-test revealed a significant difference in the means of perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party at T1 ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ) compared to the most favorite party at T1 ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ,  $t(633) = 32.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### 5.1. Hypotheses Tests

Table 3 and Figure 2 depict our results. H1a and H1b were rejected because we found no significant association of perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party at T1 with distrust in politicians at T2 and trust

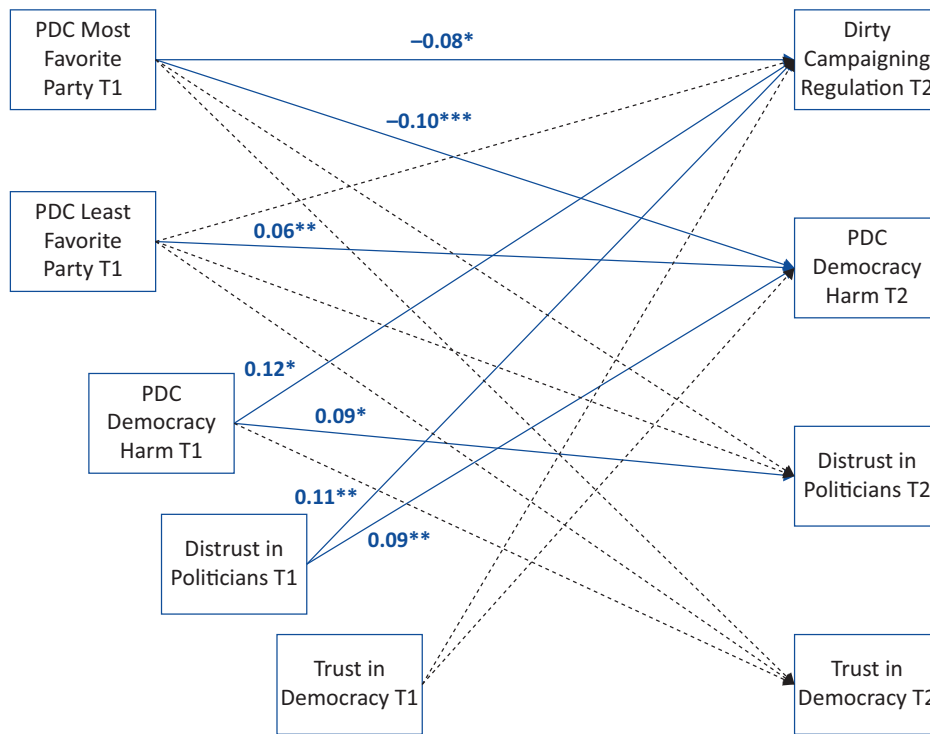
in democracy at T2. H2a was not supported because the results revealed no significant association of perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party at T1 with attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation at T2. H2b was confirmed by showing a significant positive association of perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party at T1 with perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T2 (see Figure 3). An increase (or decrease) by one  $SD$  in perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party at T1 increases (or decreases) the predicted value for perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T2 by 0.10 units. Regarding RQ1, the results revealed no significant association of perceived

**Table 3.** Results of OLS regression analysis.

	Dirty campaigning regulation (T2)	Perceived dirty campaigning democracy harm (T2)	Distrust in politicians (T2)	Trust in democracy (T2)
Female (T1)	0.10 (0.10)	0.12 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.07)
Age (T1)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Medium education (T1)	-0.20 (0.14)	0.06 (0.12)	-0.11 (0.12)	0.03 (0.10)
High education (T1)	-0.22 (0.15)	0.04 (0.13)	-0.20 (0.13)	0.00 (0.11)
Ideology (T1)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.05** (0.02)
Political interest (T1)	0.06 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.10*** (0.02)
Perceived civil negative campaigning (T1)	—	—	-0.08* (0.04)	0.06 (0.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning most favorite party (T1)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.10*** (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning least favorite party (T1)	0.02 (0.03)	0.06** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Dirty campaigning regulation (T1)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.13*** (0.04)	—	—
Perceived dirty campaigning democracy harm (T1)	0.12* (0.05)	0.44*** (0.04)	0.09* (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Distrust in Politicians (T1)	0.11** (0.04)	0.09** (0.03)	0.64*** (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Trust in democracy (T1)	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.14*** (0.04)	0.69*** (0.03)
Constant	1.35** (0.48)	1.20** (0.39)	1.86*** (0.42)	0.93** (0.36)
Adj. $R^2$	0.34	0.42	0.56	0.62
F	27.99	39.24	68.77	88.07
N	634	634	634	634

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



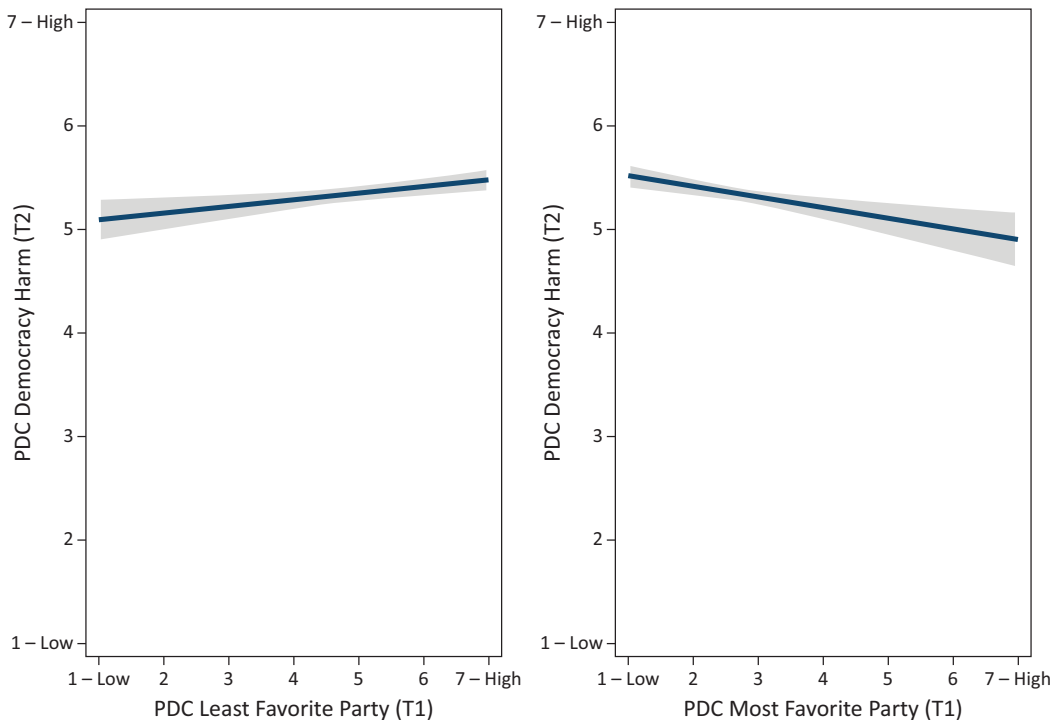


**Figure 2.** Associations of hypothesized model. Notes: Figure based on Table 3; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

dirty campaigning by the most favorite party at T1 with distrust in politicians at T2 and trust in democracy at T2.

For RQ2, the results indicated a significant negative association of perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party at T1 with attitudes toward dirty cam-

aigning regulation at T2 and perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T2 (see Figure 3). An increase (or decrease) by one SD in perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party at T1 decreases (or increases) the predicted value for



**Figure 3.** Associations of perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party (left graph) and the most favorite party (right graph) with perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy. Notes: Grey area represents 95% confidence interval; figure based on Table 3.

attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation at T2 by 0.10 units. An increase (or decrease) by one *SD* in perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party at T1 decreases (or increases) the predicted value for perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T2 by 0.13 units.

Confirming H3a and H3c, we observed a significant positive association of perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T1 with distrust in politicians at T2 (see Figure 4) and attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation at T2. H3b was rejected because the results revealed no significant association of perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T1 with trust in democracy at T2. H4a and H4b were confirmed because we observed a significant positive association of distrust in politicians at T1 with attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation at T2 and with perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T2 (see Figure 4).

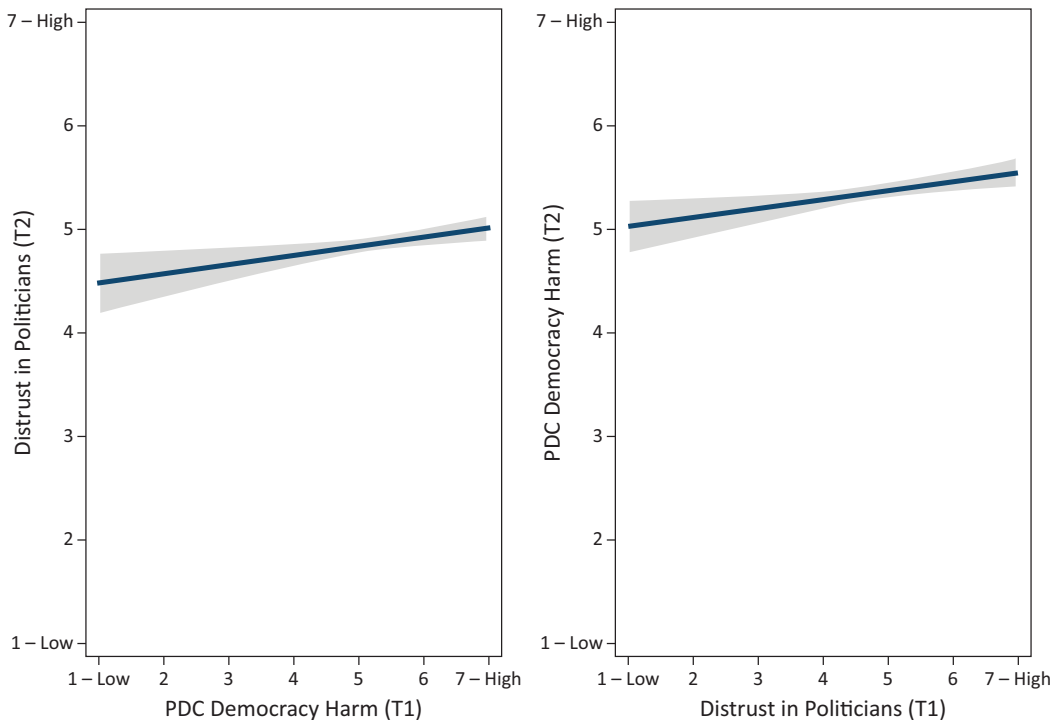
H5a and H5b were rejected because trust in democracy at T1 showed no significant associations with attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation at T2 and perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy at T2.

## 6. Discussion

Uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques are increasingly relevant in politics and have received growing attention in research. However, it is unclear how they share an underlying component and how par-

tisanship may affect their associations with democratic outcomes. In this article, we introduce the concept of dirty campaigning, defined as actions between elite political actors that violate social norms and values of liberal democracy in terms of style and practices (Grant, 1999; Mutz, 2015; Stryker et al., 2016), and may involve uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques. In a two-wave panel study during the 2021 German federal election campaign, we investigated how perceived dirty campaigning by the least and most favorite party is associated with democratic outcomes. Dirty campaigning in Germany has become more prevalent due to rise of the AfD and their entry into the German Bundestag, thus making it an important case to study (Maurer & Jost, 2020; Walter, 2014).

When discussing findings, we should not only focus on significant p-values but also the size of the beta coefficients (Funder & Ozer, 2019). For our study, these effect sizes involve values from  $-.08$  to  $.12$ , which are generally considered to be small (Ferguson, 2009). However, they do not occur at the level of single events but indicate change over time. In the context of our study, these findings demonstrate that perceived dirty campaigning by the least and most favorite can influence democratic outcomes over the course of a campaign. Furthermore, tests for model specification error and multicollinearity prove the robustness of our findings. Our findings may be generalized to other countries to a certain extent, because we investigated individual perceptions of campaigns on the micro level instead of objective characteristics, such as dirty campaigning by political parties, on



**Figure 4.** Associations of perceptions of harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy with distrust in politicians (left graph) and vice versa (right graph). Notes: Grey area represents 95% confidence interval; figure based on Table 3.

the mesolevel. Objective characteristics and systemic factors may influence individual perceptions about the campaign, but ultimately these individual perceptions shape the outcomes of dirty campaigning.

Regarding our hypothesized associations, we find that perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party increases perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democratic quality but is not associated with attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation over time. Perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite party decreases perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy and attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation over time. These findings demonstrate that perceived dirty campaigning by the least favorite party may constitute a violation of social norms by an out-group party (Mutz, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which is perceived to be harmful to the quality of democracy (Norris, 2014). In contrast, perceived dirty campaigning by the most favorite appears to outweigh the violation of social norms in favor of in-group party thinking (Hogg, 2016). Thus, they may associate dirty campaigning by the most favorite party with a decreasing need for the regulation of dirty campaigning and positive consequences for the quality of democracy.

Perceived dirty campaigning by the least and most favorite party is not directly associated with outcomes related to political trust. We may argue that citizens do not link dirty campaigning to diffuse levels of political support, such as trust in democracy (Hetherington, 2004; Norris, 2011). Instead, they may turn to more specific levels of political support like distrust in politicians. Although we lack the data to investigate mediated associations, we found a positive association of distrust in politicians with perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy. This may suggest that the associations of perceived dirty campaigning by the least and most favorite party with distrust in politicians can be mediated by perceived harmful democratic consequences of dirty campaigning.

Our findings also show that perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democratic quality increase distrust in politicians and vice versa over time. This suggests, following the input-performance approach (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2015; Scharpf, 1999), that citizens associate the harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democratic quality with politicians as sponsors, which increases distrust in them. In turn, distrust in politicians may function as a heuristic for increasing perceptions of harmful democratic consequences of dirty campaigning (Rudolph, 2017). These findings may suggest a reciprocal relationship between perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democracy and distrust in politicians over time. Furthermore, we find that perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democratic quality increases attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation. This finding can also be explained by the input-performance approach, because citizens who perceive dirty campaigning to be harmful

to democratic quality may advocate a stronger regulation of dirty campaigning (Marsden et al., 2020). Also, distrust in politicians predicts stronger attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation. Citizens who distrust politicians may not have the confidence that politicians avoid undesirable behavior, such as dirty campaigning, and therefore demand stronger regulation (Rudolph, 2017). These findings are important because they demonstrate that specific forms of political trust can be associated with attitudes and perceptions toward dirty campaigning and may even form reciprocal associations.

Contrary to our assumptions, perceived harmful consequences of dirty campaigning for democratic quality are not associated with trust in democracy. We may speculate that such perceptions can be related to more specific instead of diffuse levels of political trust (Norris, 2011). Our findings also indicate non-significant associations of trust in democracy with attitudes toward dirty campaigning regulation and the perceived harmful democratic consequences of dirty campaigning. We may speculate that more specific instead of diffuse forms of political trust are associated with regulating politicians as sponsors of dirty campaigning and perceptions of harmful democratic consequences of dirty campaigning (Easton, 1975; Hetherington, 2004).

Our study contributes to previous research by paving the way for a theoretical framework of dirty campaigning. It can be understood as a complementary framework, which is situated at the intersection of research on negative campaigning and political scandals. Our conceptualization still leaves space for further development, as it may go beyond uncivil campaigning and deceitful campaign techniques and involve other facets we have not considered in this study. Nevertheless, our concept provides a first approach under which general aspects of campaign actions among elite political actors may count as dirty.

We also contribute to previous research by demonstrating that the outcomes of dirty campaigning may not be uniform across citizens and that individual variation can depend on partisanship (Druckman et al., 2019; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). From a micro-level perspective, partisans in their perception may find dirty campaigning by their most favorite party to be beneficial for the quality of a democracy. However, from a macro level perspective—that is the implications for key components of the quality of a democracy, such as electoral integrity and effective policymaking (Lijphart, 1999; Norris, 2014)—these findings appear rather concerning than beneficial. Citizens may downplay dirty campaigning by their most favored party and overrate dirty campaigning by their least favorite party, which can amplify partisan biased information processing (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Citizens may also adopt a partisan “double standard” by forgiving norm-violating behavior and democratic transgressions of their most favorite party compared to other parties (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2022).

### 6.1. Limitations and Future Research

As with all survey research, we measured individual perceptions instead of actual behavior. This means that respondents may over- or underestimate the extent of dirty campaigning, although we statistically controlled for important third variables and autoregressive associations. However, when studying the outcomes of dirty campaigning, the underlying logic is that only subjective impressions of respondents matter, as they shape how respondents think and act. Also, our study involved two panel waves, which does not allow us to test complex mediation paths across time or to examine within- and between-person effects (Hamaker et al., 2015). Therefore, future research should involve experimental designs or studies with three or more panel waves. Moreover, cross national-research in Western Europe and beyond is highly warranted. The conceptualization of dirty campaigning may also involve facets other than uncivil campaigning or deceitful campaign techniques, which could be investigated in future studies.

### 7. Conclusion

Dirty campaigning has become increasingly relevant in recent years and there is empirical evidence that such forms can foster democratic backsliding. Our findings from a two-wave panel study demonstrate that partisanship can be important to study the democratically relevant outcomes of dirty campaigning. Citizens tend to perceive dirty campaigning by the least favorite party as harmful and dirty campaigning by the most favorite party as beneficial for the quality of democracy. Although these findings may suggest that dirty campaigning can have positive democratic outcomes in the perception of citizens, this can hold problematic implications for the quality of democracy. Citizens may downgrade dirty campaigning by their most favorite party and overrate dirty campaigning by their least favorite party, thus indicating a partisan perceptual bias. Political parties may use dirty campaigning to make electoral gains, which can contribute to a more toxic political climate.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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