

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ATTACK POLITICS

Perceptions, Evaluations, and Effects

*Alessandro Nai, Lukas P. Otto and Chiara Vargiu*

Designed cover image: Getty Images

First published 2025

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2025 Alessandro Nai, Lukas P. Otto, and Chiara Vargiu

The right of Alessandro Nai, Lukas P. Otto, and Chiara Vargiu to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Nai, Alessandro author | Otto, Lukas P. author | Vargiu, Chiara author

Title: The psychology of attack politics : perceptions, evaluations, and effects /

Alessandro Nai, Lukas P. Otto, and Chiara Vargiu.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2025. |

Series: Global perspectives in political psychology |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2025004788 (print) | LCCN 2025004789 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032283845 hbk | ISBN 9781032283838 pbk | ISBN 9781003296591 ebk

Subjects: LCSH: Advertising, Political--Psychological aspects |

Political campaigns--Psychological aspects | Communication in politics |

Political psychology | Negativity (Philosophy)--Political aspects

Classification: LCC JF2112.A4 N35 2025 (print) | LCC JF2112.A4 (ebook) |

DDC 320.01/9--dc23/eng/20250520

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025004788>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025004789>

ISBN: 9781032283845 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781032283838 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003296591 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003296591

Typeset in Times New Roman

by Newgen Publishing UK

# CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>List of tables</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>Preface and acknowledgments</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1 Introduction	1
1.1 <i>Attack politics is a shady business</i>	3
1.1.1 Defining attack politics	4
1.1.2 All the shades of attack politics: Negativity, incivility, and intolerance	5
1.1.3 Navigating the spectrum of attack politics	7
1.2 <i>A constructivist approach to attack politics</i>	8
1.2.1 What is constructivism?	9
1.2.2 Studying attack politics from a constructivist perspective	11
1.2.3 The logic of attack politics: Perceptions, evaluations, and their effects	12
1.2.4 Message-, person-, and context-level influences	13
1.3 <i>Structure of the book</i>	16
2 Perceptions: Attack politics in the eye of the beholder	20
2.1 <i>Seeing attack politics for what it is</i>	21
2.2 <i>Experimental evidence of message perceptions and their drivers</i>	29
2.2.1 A multicountry experiment	29
2.2.2 Perceptions of negativity, incivility, and intolerance	31

2.3	<i>Candidate and message effects: An exploration via a conjoint experiment</i>	34
2.3.1	A conjoint experiment: Testing the effects of contextual variables	34
2.3.2	Message effects	38
2.3.3	Perceptual influences of partisanship and gender	40
2.3.4	Personality and message characteristics	41
2.4	<i>Concluding remarks</i>	44
3	Evaluations: Attack politics is a matter of taste	45
3.1	<i>Evaluating political attacks: Commonality, moral legitimacy, and entertainment value</i>	46
3.1.1	Political attacks as common	47
3.1.2	Political attacks as morally legitimate	48
3.1.3	Political attacks as entertaining	48
3.2	<i>Message evaluations and their drivers: Evidence from a multicountry experiment</i>	49
3.2.1	Evaluations of negativity, incivility, and intolerance	49
3.2.2	Perceptions and evaluations	51
3.2.3	Profile differences	52
3.2.4	Country differences	56
3.3	<i>The role of message context: Evidence from a conjoint experiment</i>	57
3.3.1	Main effects of the message	58
3.3.2	Social acceptance and social control: Legitimate when others support it?	59
3.3.3	The Dark Triad and negativity, incivility, and intolerance	61
3.4	<i>Concluding remarks</i>	62
4	Candidate likeability and backlash	64
4.1	<i>Winning that damn' election</i>	65
4.1.1	A large-scale dataset to measure negativity and incivility in elections worldwide	67
4.1.2	Negativity and incivility worldwide	68
4.1.3	Winning an election by going negative and uncivil?	72
4.2	<i>Candidate likeability</i>	74
4.2.1	Candidate likeability and ideology	77
4.2.2	Candidate likeability and populist attitudes	80

4.3	<i>Experimental evidence</i>	82
4.3.1	Direct effects	83
4.3.2	The mediating role of perceptions and evaluations	85
4.4	<i>Concluding remarks</i>	89
5	Demobilization and radicalization	92
5.1	<i>A (de)mobilizing effect?</i>	93
5.1.1	Attack politics and interest in the election	95
5.1.2	Attack politics and turnout	96
5.2	<i>Attack politics and political violence</i>	99
5.2.1	Negative attitudes toward the outgroup	100
5.2.2	Supporting political violence	103
5.3	<i>Beyond politics</i>	114
5.4	<i>Concluding remarks</i>	117
6	Conclusion	120
6.1	<i>Main findings at a glance</i>	121
6.1.1	Not all attacks are alike	121
6.1.2	We are not all equal before attack politics	122
6.1.3	Context matters	123
6.1.4	Perceptions and evaluations drive (some of) the effects of attack politics	124
6.2	<i>What does this all mean?</i>	126
6.2.1	For academics	126
6.2.2	For practitioners	129
	<i>References</i>	131
	<i>Appendices</i>	155
	<i>Appendix A: Additional materials for Chapter 2</i>	155
	<i>Appendix B: Additional materials for Chapter 3</i>	171
	<i>Appendix C: Additional materials for Chapter 4</i>	185
	<i>Appendix D: Additional materials for Chapter 5</i>	239
	<i>Index</i>	273