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**“Negative Political Advertising:**

**It’s All in the Timing”**

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## **Abstract**

Negative political advertising is a common feature of election campaigns in liberal democracies, whether in the milder form of ‘contrast ads’ or the more aggressive form of ‘attack ads’. Despite a substantial volume of scholarship, whether such advertisements generate persuasion effects (persuading voters of the deficiencies in the subject of the ads) or backlash effects (diminishing the standing of the candidate/party promulgating the ads) remains a still-unresolved question.

This ‘persuasion or backlash’ question may well reflect the implicit assumption in many of the research designs, and their associated (and consequently mis-specified) models: that causality runs from negative political advertising to vote intention. This article tests that assumption, and finds it wanting. Testing for endogeneity indicates a bi-directional causality between negative political advertising and vote intention; each causes the other, but with differential temporal profiles. For electoral scholars (and campaign strategists) this means the decision(s) to engage in negative political advertising is not just *if, by whom* or *how*, but also *when*.

## **Introduction**

Negative political advertising is a common feature of elections in liberal democracies. In their milder form, such advertising takes the form of ‘contrast ads’, usually involving the candidate/party producing the advertising comparing their own performance/ policies/ promises more favourably than those of their political opponents; voters tend to regard such advertising fair and reasonable, and informative in coming to their vote decision. However, a more aggressive (and seemingly more pervasive) form of negative political advertising is the ‘attack ad’, criticising with varying degrees of negativity (and sometimes truthfulness) the performance, the policies and even the character of the opposing candidate/party.

While negative political advertising is intended to have a persuasion effect (encouraging the voter to support the candidate/party doing the advertising), it can also have a backlash effect (where it has the reverse impact of that intended) – for example, amongst voters who dislike negative political campaigning or where the content of the advertisement is seen to be excessive in tone (‘mudslinging’) or discredited (when the content is known or shown to be false and misleading).

An implicit assumption underpinning much of the scholarship of negative political advertising (and the associated modelling) is the direction of causality runs from negative political advertising to vote intention. Comparatively little scholarly attention has been given to reverse causality (vote intention causes negative political advertising), or bi-directional causality (each cause the other in a circular manner), and/or whether such causality has a temporal distribution which differs in its political context. In short, there is endogeneity between negative political advertising and vote intention. This article seeks to help to fill that important gap in our knowledge of campaign and electoral behaviour.

### **The Literature**

A negative advertisement is one which focuses on an opposing candidate or party, criticising their programs, achievements and qualifications (Lau and Pomper, 2001; Stevens, 2012), while a positive advertisement focuses on the sponsor of the advertisement praising their own programs, achievements and/or qualifications. Negative advertisements are intended to motivate risk avoidance by voters, given the tendency of individuals to give greater priority to the minimisation of costs ahead of the maximisation of gains (Stevens, 2009).

Negative political advertising, however, is not homogenous in form, but rather can come in a number of forms/ styles. At one level, negative advertisements can be content focused, taking the form of ‘attack ads’ which, as the nomenclature signals, sees one candidate/party being sharply critical of their political opponent, or they can be ‘contrast ads’ where one candidate/party compares (usually unfavourably) their opponents’ achievements/ agenda/ performance to their own (Ridout et al, 2014). At another level, negative advertisements

can be tone-focused, taking forms ranging across considered and rational in tenor, through to shrill, irrational or ‘mudslinging’ (Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Pattie et al, 2011). Amongst the emotions negative political advertisements elicit are greater degrees or more intense feelings of disgust, anger, anxiety and/or hatred, and lesser degrees or intense feelings of enthusiasm, hope and/or pride (Stevens 2012).

Negative political advertising should not necessarily be regarded as ‘black mark’ against, or a signalling a deficiency in, the democratic processes, but rather an integral part of an effective election campaign where a candidate/party is able to point out the shortcomings or the weaknesses in their opponents’ experience or policies (Geer, 2006; Jackson and Carsey, 2007; Pattie et al, 2011). Either way, negative political advertising (indeed, any political advertising) can be pro-democratic, allowing the sponsoring candidate/party/ third party organisation to by-pass the editorial selection/ filtering role of the news media, enabling them (the sponsors) to communicate direct with the electorate, in a manner and imparting a message of their own design, content and tone (Kaid, 2012).

A fulcrum debate within the political advertising literature revolves around whether negative political advertising damages the candidate/ party doing the advertising more than the candidate/party subject to the advertising. If Candidate/ Party X runs a negative political advertisement criticising or highlighting the actual or supposed shortcomings of Candidate/Party Y, does X or does Y suffer more political damage, measured in loss of voter support? If the former suffers relatively greater electoral damage, then the negative political advertising has had a ‘backlash’ effect; if the latter suffers greater electoral damage then it had a “persuasion” effect.

Despite a substantial volume of scholarship, the matter (persuasion vs backlash) remains unresolved. While a number of studies have found negative political advertising to have a beneficial effect for the party initiating the advertising (the persuasion effect: for example, by diminishing the standing of the target candidate/party in voters’ eyes: Kaid and Boydston, 1987; Perloff and Kinsey, 1992; Kaid, 1997; Pinkleton, 1998), others have found a backlash effect (Garramone, 1985; Lau et al, 1999; Lau, Sigelman and Rovner, 2007;

Brooks and Murov, 2012; Banda and Windett, 2016), for example by generating voter sympathy for the target (Hill, 1989; Martinez and Delegal, 1990; Haddock and Zanna, 1997; Pattie et al, 2011). However, such an effect can be contextual with ‘backlash’ for a negative campaign being greater for incumbents than challengers, where voters are less tolerant of political negativity and/or where the voter regarded the core message of the advertisement as irrelevant (Fridkin and Kenney, 2011), or at most short-lived (Weaver Larisey and Tinkham, 1999).

Not all negative political advertising is initiated by (or indeed direct against) competing candidates/parties, with new players such as political action groups – whether business, labour-union, environment, or social activist in orientation – taking on roles as players on the political stage. Where such groups engage in negative political advertising they can act as de facto champions of a favoured candidate or critics of the disfavoured candidate, with the negative advertising by such ‘independent’ groups often being more politically effective than that conducted by candidates/parties themselves. This reflects the tendency for voters not to associate a negative advertising campaign run by a third group with the beneficial candidate/party, and hence the lesser likelihood of backlash (Garramone, 1985; Shen and Wu, 2002; Brooks and Murov, 2012; Weber, Dunaway and Johnson, 2012). In short, a candidate/ party may be tactically advantaged by getting their friends and allies to ‘do their dirty work’ for them (Dowling and Wichowsky, 2015).

The electoral impact of negative political advertising, whether on turnout or on vote intention, may be mediated by its tone (Geer, 2006). Where negative advertising is presented in a suitable manner, containing information relevant and useful to voters, its impact is likely to be quite different (for example, ‘persuasion’) than when the content is regarded as irrelevant and/or it’s style is harsh or ‘mudslinging’ (for example, ‘backlash’: Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011).

Broader media and political context can also be important, with the negativity of news media coverage and reporting of election campaigns likely to magnify perceptions of negative campaign tone (Ridout and Fowler, 2012), which may well have a greater impact

on elections (when measured by turnout) than paid (negative) election advertising (Jackson and Sides, 2006).

Similarly, the platform for engaging in negative political advertising is not limited to the conventional (print, radio and television) media, but has more recently expanded to take in social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Such platforms have several distinct advantages for candidates, especially challengers, and those with lesser resources. These include more effective control over their messaging to potential voters, a much lower cost of production and distribution, and the capacity to bypass the editorial filtering of conventional media. They also afford the user the capacity to cross-reference the negative messages of other political actors (eg political action groups) using mechanisms such as hyperlinks to other social media platforms or websites (Auter and Fine, 2016)

The impact of negative political advertising may not be uniform across voter groups, with studies finding independent (uncommitted or non-aligned) voters tend to be more affected than their partisan colleagues – who are largely unaffected by such advertisements (Fridkin and Kenny, 2011; Stevens, 2012). In the United States' political system, negative campaigning tends to be associated more with: challengers than incumbents; Republicans ahead of Democrats; candidates in open seats; candidates with limited rather than greater resources; 'underdog' rather than prevailing candidates; and (not wholly surprisingly), candidates who themselves are the targets of negative/attack campaigns (Lau and Pomper 2001a and 2004; Auter and Fine, 2016).

At the same time, more sophisticated and politically engaged voters appear to be less susceptible to negative advertising than their lesser sophisticated/ politically engaged counterparts, while conservatives, males or younger voters tend to be more tolerant of negative campaigns than their liberal, female or older colleagues (Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Jackson and Sides, 2006; Fridkin and Kenny, 2011).

Similarly, negative political advertising may not be uniformly temporal; that is, have the same impact on voter behaviour across time. Scholars have found candidates who initiate negative political advertisements can experience a short-run improvement in voter support

(Bartels, 2014), but can suffer in the longer term where they run relatively more negative campaigns than their opponents (Banda and Windett, 2016). This work suggest more aggressive candidates could gain tactical advantage by provoking their opponents to engage in negative advertising earlier in the campaign.

Another potential temporal consideration is the likely 'first mover advantage' for a candidate/party to engage in negative political advertising before his/her opponents. This tactical manoeuvre likely reflects the tendency for the adverse messaging of the initial negative advertising to have a greater, and more durable, persuasive impact on voters (benefiting the sponsor of the advertisement) than does any rebuttal or counter-attacking advertising (Weaver Larisey and Tinkham, 1999; but see Garramone, 1985;, and Roddy and Garramone, 1988, for a counterinterview).

These tactical considerations reflect the inherent endogeneity problem involved in assessing political advertising strategies, with the actions (actual or expected) of one candidate/ party (say, the incumbent) not likely being independent of those of another (the challenger: Stratmann, 2009; Jones and Jorgensen, 2012). That is, whether actual and/or expected trends in vote intention drive advertising strategies (for example, the timing and/or the intensity of negative advertising) – vote intention 'causes' advertising – or whether causality runs the other way – advertising 'causes' vote intention'; what is sometimes known as 'Granger-causality'.

The impact of negative political advertising (indeed, of any political advertising) may be mediated by the platform used – television, radio, print, even internet-based mediums, with the candidates and related political parties placing their television advertising within program genres most likely to be viewed by targeted voter-groups (Ridout et al, 2012). This audience/voter targeting by program genre is intended to amplify the political message being sent out to 'our' support base (for example, left-of-centre parties advertising within programs with a liberal or social justice theme; right-of-centre parties within programs with conservative or family values/ rule of law themes). This micro-targeting of voter-audiences also extends to television news, especially of a local nature and in the morning



and evening timeslots (Ridout et al, 2012), and to program genres viewed by targeted voter groups by socio-demographics (for example, as a general statement, sports programs for males; food and lifestyle shows for females).

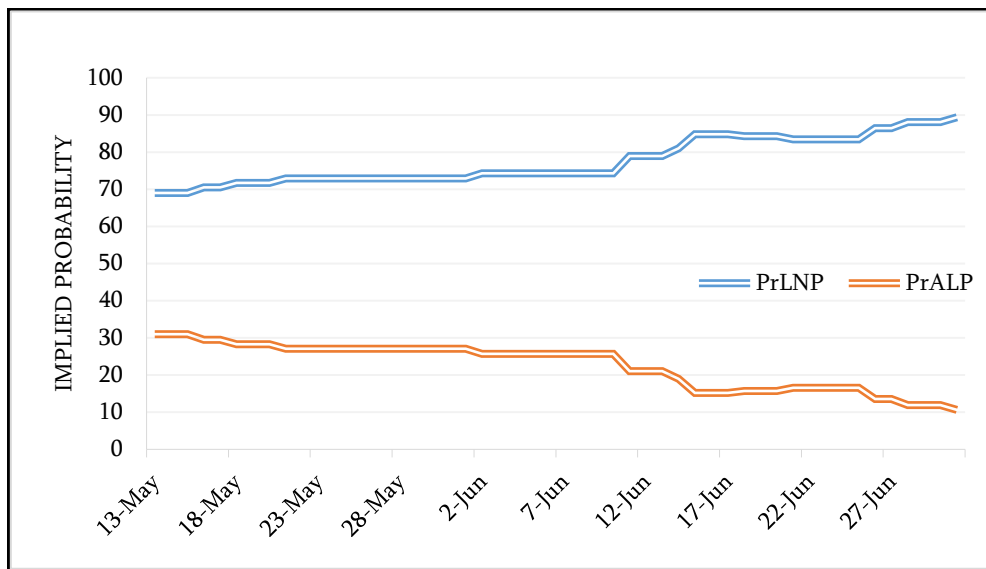
Their impact may also be mediated by the emergence, and ongoing rise, of fact-checking platforms, such as those run by mainstream media outlets (for example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, in Australia). These fact-checking entities rate, and publish, their assessments of political advertisements, with qualitative evaluations such as ‘true’, ‘largely true’ through to the more colourful ‘liar, liar, pants on fire’. Such fact-checking platforms impact the likelihood of voters accepting the claims made in political advertisements, are particularly influential with more sophisticated voters, and those with lesser tolerance for negativity, while adverse fact-check reports (those finding the claims in the advertisement to be false, or overstated) have a greater impact on voters than positive reports (which confirm the content of the advertisement: O’Sullivan and Geiger, 1995; Min, 2002; Fridkin et al, 2015)

### **The Data**

The data sets used in this analysis are drawn from two sources. The ‘voting’ data is derived from betting markets for the 2016 Australian (Federal) election operated by SportsBet, a high profile commercial betting house. The data points cover the period from Friday 13 May 2016 (soon after the election date was formally announced: Sunday 8 May 2016) through to Saturday 2 July 2016 (election day). The data points were originally reported by SportsBet as pay-out amounts for a \$A 1 bet for either the ALP or the LNP, with these amounts reflecting the betting market odds and thus the probability of the particular party, winning the then forthcoming election. For example, a \$A 1 bet on the LNP winning placed on Wednesday 1 June 2016 (that is, about a month before the election) would have paid out \$A1.30 if the LNP won, while a similar bet on the ALP winning placed on the same day would have paid out \$A 3.50 if the ALP won. The prevailing pay-out amounts recorded at the end of each day were then converted to their implied probabilities (in the

above example, LNP = 73 per cent; ALP = 27 per cent). Graph 1 reports the implied vote probabilities for the ALP and for the LNP for the (N = 50 daily) period under review.

**Graph 1: Implied Vote Probabilities**

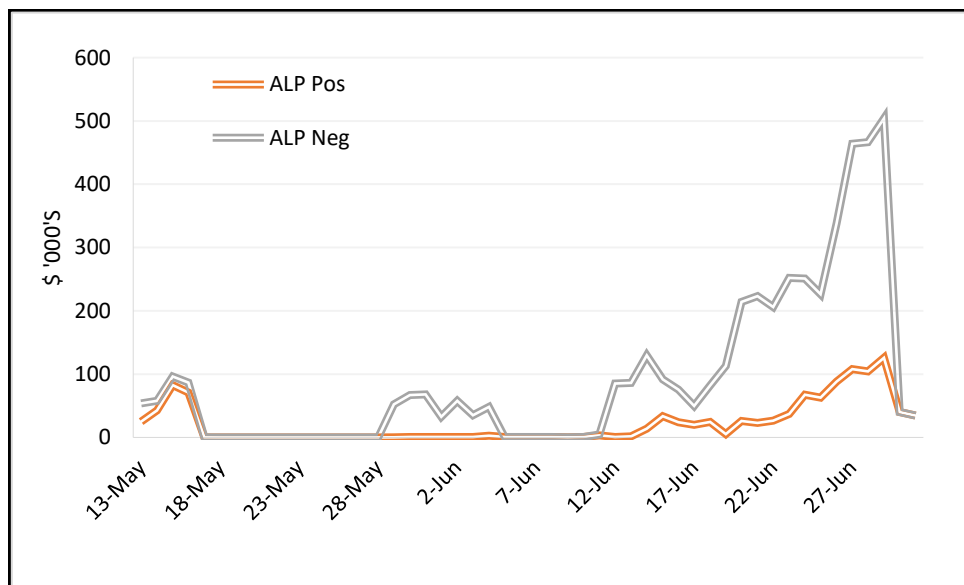


Two features stand-out from a visual review of Graph 1. The first is the stability of the implied probabilities of each of the two major parties (PrLNP = probability of the LNP; PrALP = probability of the ALP; PrLNP + PrALP = 100) winning the then forthcoming federal election, between Friday 13 May and Saturday 11 June when PrLNP drifted up from 69 per cent to just over 74 per cent (while PrALP drifted down from 31 per cent to 26 per cent). The second stand-out is the break in the implied probabilities which seems to have occurred around Saturday 11 June, when the PrLNP rose to 79 per cent and then drifted upward to just over 89 per cent on Friday 1 July (the day before election). The PrALP, in mirror, declined from 21 per cent to just 11 per cent over the same period. More formal testing for a structural break (Wald Test) confirms such a break occurred in both of the series from Saturday 11 June (SWald for PRNP = 97.39, and  $p = 0.00$ ; SWald for PRALP = 89.97, and  $p = 0.00$ ), or some 20 calendar days before the election.

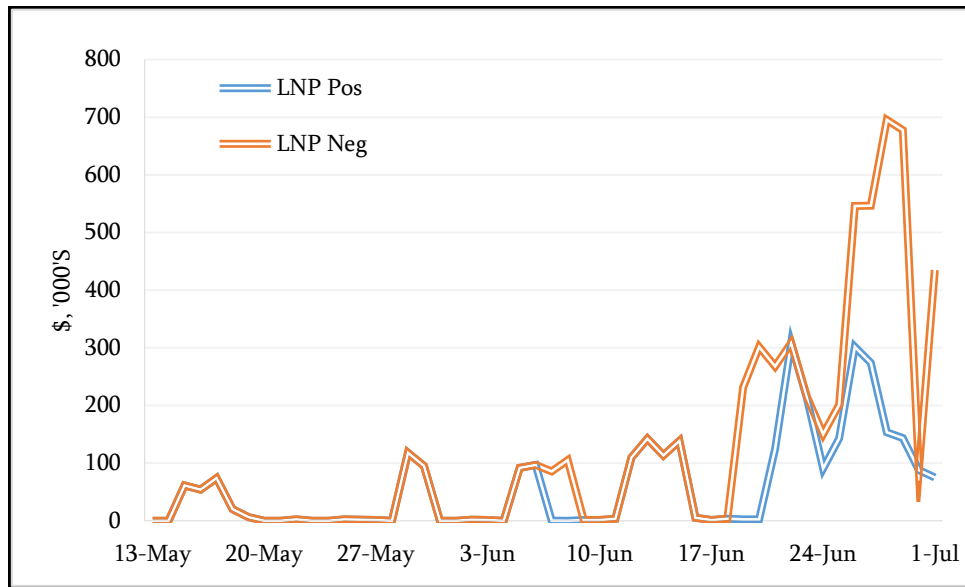
The advertising spending data were collected (and kindly provided) by Ebiquity, a market research house. The data points for the advertising spending data cover the same period as for the 'voting' data, and take the form of a daily recording of the spending, in nominal money (dollar) terms, by the ALP and by the LNP on both positive and negative advertising

across print, radio and television platforms on the particular day. Ebquity characterises a positive/ negative political advertisement as one which supports or promotes/ attacks or criticises a political party, its achievements, its leadership and/or its policies. The classification of an advertisement as either positive or negative was at the judgement of Ebquity. For example, on Saturday 25 June (that is, a week before election day) the ALP spent \$63,113 on positive advertising and \$162,960 on negative advertising; for the LNP, the figures were \$143,005 and \$58,308 respectively. To be clear: the ad spend data used in this study are day-specific (that is, amounts spent on a particular day), and are non-cumulative (that is, running totals aggregated across the campaign). Graph 2 reports the daily positive and negative ad-spend by the ALP over the period under review, while Graph 3 does the same for the LNP.

**Graph 2: Daily Ad Spend by ALP**



**Graph 3: Daily Ad Spend by the LNP**



Looking first at Graph 2, the ALP spent little or nothing on a daily basis on either positive or negative advertising between the middle of May and the middle of June (ostensibly, the first phase of the campaign), with what little ad-spending it did undertake (for example, at the early stages of the campaign) being negative in orientation; seeming adopting a ‘holding our fire’ approach. Turning to Graph 3, the LNP adopted a fairly similar approach, spending little or nothing on either positive or negative advertising over the same period (mid-May to mid-June), with what little ad-spending it did undertake being of a positive nature (consistent with its incumbency status, and the need to defend the seats it held).

However, this situation changed around the middle of June, and thereafter, when the ALP initiated activated a generally net negative advertising campaign. Over the last two weeks of the election (that is, from Saturday 18 June) the ALP spent around 4 times more on negative than on positive advertising (a priori a rational strategy for an Opposition party). Interestingly, the LNP also ran a generally net negative advertising campaign over the last two weeks of the election, spending more than 14 times more on negative than on positive advertising (essentially trying to dissuade voters from supporting the ALP/Opposition,

rather than selling the LNP’s own achievements/ leadership/ policies etc). Table 1 reports the dates for the potential breakpoints in each of the four advertising spending series.

**Table 1: Breakpoints in Advertising Spending**

<b>Varname</b>	<b>Breakpoint</b>	<b>Breakpoint</b>	<b>SWald</b>	<b>SWald</b>
	<b>E minus</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Stat</b>	<b>p-val</b>
	<b>(days)</b>			
<b>SPLNPPOS</b>	9	Wed, 22 June	31.16	0.00
<b>SPLNPNEG</b>	12	Sun, 19 June	21.46	0.00
<b>SPALPPOS</b>	22	Thurs, 9 June	44.49	0.00
<b>SPALPNEG</b>	11	Mon, 20 June	20.84	0.00

The overarching message from a review of Table 1 is both the LNP (Government) and the ALP (Opposition) evidenced marked (and statistically significant) structural breaks in their advertising spending, signalling shifts in their election tactics, from passive to more active advertising campaigns. Looking at the dating of the structural breaks suggests the ALP (Opposition) moved first from passive to active advertising – on average, around 16 days before election day (EMinus) - shifting upward its positive advertising 22 days before the election day, delaying its step-up in negative advertising until 11 days before the election day. By comparison, the LNP (Government) were slower to shift from passive to active advertising – on average, around 10 days before election day – shifting upward on positive advertising 9 days and on negative advertising 12 days before election day. Looked at another way, both major parties appear to have ‘gone negative’ about the same time – around 11 to 12 days before the election.

### **Modelling and Analysis**

A key issue in the scholarship on negative political advertising is the seemingly scant attention (with a small number of exceptions: Jones and Jorgensen, 2012; Stratmann, 2009) given to the question of endogeneity between such advertising and vote intention. In broad

terms, the existent literature generally assumes the direction of causality runs from negative political advertising to vote intention - ideally, for the user of such advertising, creating a persuasion effect which benefits their electoral prospects (rather than a backlash effect which hurts them). However, this singular focus overlooks the potential for endogeneity – that is, while negative political advertising can have a causal effect on vote intention, so vote intention can have a causal effect on negative political advertising. In the simplest of terms, ‘when our vote support declines during a campaign, we engage in negative political advertising to undermine their (our opponents) campaign’. And, as such, endogeneity could thus become circular – negative political advertising drives vote intention which in turn drives negative political advertising, and so on. Failure to consider endogeneity brings with it the heightened risk of building and promulgating mis-specified models and making misinformed inferences.

Tables 2 and 3 address the endogeneity issue at two levels: Table 2 in the aggregate (that is, in a single all-time window), and Table 3 in a disaggregated manner (that is, across a series of sequential time windows), gaining insights from Granger-causality. (The mnemonics are the same as those used earlier.)

**Table 2: Endogeneity - in the Aggregate**

<b>From</b>		<b>To</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>p</b>
prlnp	->	splnpneg	2.99	0.22
splnpneg	->	prlnp	1.35	0.51
prlnp	->	spalpneg	0.80	0.67
spalpneg	->	prlnp	4.66	<b>0.10</b>

Several messages emerge from a review of Table 2: first, vote intention for the LNP (in the current case, the governing party) does not appear to Granger-cause spending on negative political advertising by either the LNP ( $\chi^2 = 2.99$ ;  $p = 0.22$ ) or by the ALP (main opposition party;  $\chi^2 = 0.80$ ;  $p = 0.67$ ); second, negative political advertising by the LNP does not Granger-cause vote intention for the LNP ( $\chi^2 = 1.35$ ;  $p = 0.51$ ); however, and third, it would

appear negative political advertising by the ALP may be endogenous to vote intention for the LNP ( $\chi^2 = 4.66$ ;  $p = 0.10$ ) – that is, movements in LNP vote intention may motivate negative political advertising by their political opponents.

**Table 3: Endogeneity – Across Time**

	Panel 1	Panel 1	Panel 2	Panel 2	Panel 3	Panel 3	Panel 4	Panel 4	
	Wald	p	Wald	p	Wald	p	Wald	P	
lag = 1	0.20	0.66	0.18	0.67	3.92	<b>0.05</b>	0.28	0.60	
lag = 2	0.96	0.62	3.69	0.16	4.31	0.12	0.42	0.81	
lag = 3	1.63	0.65	3.98	0.26	3.69	0.30	3.93	0.27	
lag = 4	2.02	0.73	4.35	0.36	3.77	0.44	4.43	0.35	
lag = 5	3.39	0.64	13.48	<b>0.02</b>	4.23	0.52	28.20	<b>0.00</b>	
lag = 6	8.22	0.22	15.13	<b>0.02</b>	4.40	0.62	27.08	<b>0.00</b>	
lag = 7	25.34	<b>0.00</b>	15.22	<b>0.03</b>	9.00	0.25	50.96	<b>0.00</b>	
lag = 8	30.36	<b>0.00</b>	8.29	0.41	50.12	<b>0.00</b>	67.08	<b>0.00</b>	
	Panel 1:	Ho: splnpneg does not Granger-Cause prlnp							
	Panel 2:	Ho: spalpneg does not Granger-Cause prlnp							
	Panel 3:	Ho: prlnp does not Granger-Cause splnpneg							
	Panel 4:	Ho: prlnp does not Granger-Cause spalpneg							

The time periods reported in Table 4 can ostensibly be divided into two sub-periods: those for lags of between 1 and 4 days; and, those for lags of between 5 and 8 days. Looking first at the 1 to 4 day lag periods, we see a clear absence of endogeneity between negative political advertising by either the LNP or the ALP, and vote intention for the LNP – the relevant Wald Statistics and associated p-values fell well short of conventional levels of statistical significance. Turning to the 5 to 8 day lag periods, however, a general picture of endogeneity does emerge, with: spending by the LNP on negative political advertising being endogenous to vote intention for the LNP at lags of 7 and 8 days (Panel 1); spending by the ALP on negative political advertising being endogenous to vote intention for the LNP at lags of between 5 and 7 days, inclusive (Panel 2); vote intention for the LNP is endogenous to spending by the LNP on negative political advertising at a lag of 8 days Panel 3); and, vote intention for the LNP is endogenous to spending by the ALP on negative political advertising at lags of 5 to 8 days (Panel 4). Taken together, a review of Table 3

paints a picture of lagged endogeneity between negative political advertising (by either the incumbent LNP, or the opposition ALP) and vote intention for the LNP, and of a circularity in this endogeneity between negative political advertising and vote intention for the government party.

## **Conclusion**

Negative political advertising is an integral part of almost any modern election campaign. For all intents and purposes, it is not a matter of *if* a candidate/party will engage in negative political advertising, but rather *who* and *how* during the campaign. Will such advertising take the form of ‘attack ads’ or ‘contrast ads’; will they be overtly funded and identified with the candidate/party, or undertaken by some or other third entity (say, a business or social activist group) antipathetic to a candidate/party; and, what role will mediating actors, such as fact-checking platforms, play in augmenting or diminishing the credibility of the negative political advertising. And, then there is the long standing, but still not fully resolved, question of whether negative political advertising has a persuasion or a backlash effect.

An implicit assumption in much of the literature on negative political advertising is the direction of causality: that negative political advertising has a causal effect on vote intention. The literature, with only a few exceptions, has not given due attention to the potential for a reverse direction of causality – that is, aggregate vote intention has a causal effect on negative political advertising: when vote intention for candidates/parties weakens they are more likely to engage in negative political advertising. Or, there is a (non-virtuous) circulatory between negative political advertising and vote intention where, for example, a drop in voter support motivates negative political advertising which generates a further drop in voter support and/or negative political advertising in response, and so on and so on. In short, there is endogeneity in the negative political advertising and vote intention relationship.

This article has sought to fill this important gap in the literature, finding there is a real and meaningful endogeneity problem which appears to have been largely overlooked in



scholarly assessments of the electoral impact of negative political advertising, suggesting the underlying models may well be mis-specified and need to be revisited. In doing so, it is important to consider the temporal nature of such endogeneity; it does not appear to be immediate or near term, but can take several days – a long time in any, let alone a hotly contested – election campaign. For candidates/parties, and their strategists, it would appear negative political advertising is not a matter of *if*, or *by whom* or *how*, but also of *when*.

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