

The role of civil society in local election campaign- The initiation of Electoral Code of Ethics by Agria Universitas Association in Eger, Hungary and its impact on local election's campaigns and political actors' cooperation during election periods from 2010 to 2018

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Abstract. The case study centers on Agria Universitas Association, a civil society organization formed in 2007 in the city of Eger, Hungary, and their initiative called Electoral Code of Ethics (hereinafter referred to as ECE). ECE was compiled to prepare for the National Assembly and Municipal Elections in 2010. Candidates for local elections formulated the most important ethical standards and conformed to these standards during the election periods from 2010 until 2018. The objective of this study is to show how this initiative affected the local election campaign and the cooperation of local political actors. The case study employs the qualitative methods with the view to gaining in-depth insight into the new initiation of the civil society. First, the author collected the number of politicians who signed the ECE and the total number of candidates in election campaigns to see the reception of politicians towards the ECE over the years. The ECE was continuously introduced during 3 elections of National Assembly members in 2010, 2014 and 2018. Besides, in order to investigate to what extent, the ethical code of election can affect the number of negative campaigns, the author collects the number of negative campaigns recorded in 3 voting districts from 2010 to 2018 during the elections when the ECE was applied and compares them with the total number of electoral campaigns in the same years to see whether the negative campaign number declines after each election period.

The findings from this study have shown that ECE has succeeded in raising the standard of local election campaigns as it strengthened the democratic political culture and contributed greatly to maintaining the transparency of elections. It is also evident that public actors engaging in this initiation worked on the basis of mutual consent regardless of their political party affiliation. Before every election from 2010 to 2018, ECE was signed candidates in all three voting districts. It can be inferred from this study that a non-partisan and professionally credible initiative can be accepted by all political actors. Candidates also considered it important to uphold the principles of a democratic political culture and ethical conduct in the election campaign.

Key words: civil society, negative campaign, electoral code, local election's campaign, political actors' cooperation

Abbreviation:

ECE: Electoral Code of Ethics

AUA: Agria Universitas Association

Introduction

1. Civil society's role in local democracy/Code of conduct for elections

Civil society has long been regarded as an agent of change since it can actively participate in analyzing policy, monitoring state performance and motivating citizens to express their values and norms. Civil society also plays an important role as a watchdog and advocate to support strengthening local democracy (Cheema, 2011).

In general, civil society can ensure accountability before and after a local government is elected in numerous approaches, one of which is using political dialogue methodologies. In a publication on Codes of Conduct for political parties in elections organized by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FEFA) (2017), it is stated that, “dialogue facilitates consensus, strengthens legitimacy, builds trust, promotes reconciliation and enables the formation of productive coalitions between important actors. A negotiated electoral code of conduct (CoC) has proved particularly useful in enabling political parties to reaffirm their political and ethical commitments to fair play in the electoral competition” (p. 9). Besides the rules of elections, code of conduct contributes to the “free and fair” quality of election. According to Goodwin-Gill (1998), electoral rules are enforced to maintain a “free” election, yet it is a Code of Conduct that keeps the election “fair”. He also stated that, “a Code can reiterate the relevant rules but may also go further, indicating the sorts of conduct to be discouraged, promoting a climate of tolerance and cooperation, and encouraging issues-, not personalities-related campaigning”. (p.4).

In this paper, the author aims to discover to what extent an electoral code of conduct can affect election campaigns and facilitate coalition among political actors. With the hope to examine that question, this research paper presents a case study on the electoral code of ethics (ECE) initiated by Agraria Universitas Association (AUA) in Eger, Hungary from 2010 to 2018.

2. Negative campaign

It is undoubtedly stated that election campaigns are turning more negative in various forms. However, the ideas of diminishing one's component by smearing them with libel, scandals and accusation have been initiated since 64BC in the Roman Empire and later became popularized in the US during the 19th century (Halsemayer, 2019). Since then, negative campaigning has become a norm whenever it is election time. The definition of negative campaign and methods on how to measure it have been long debated in the 1990s (Nai and Walter, 2015). According to Geer (2006), negative campaign is “any criticism levelled by one candidate against another during a campaign” (p. 23).

According to Gregory (2015), negative campaign is when candidates deliberately humiliate their opponent by calling them stupid, evil, inexperienced, and irresponsible through advertisements and speeches. A quick glance at any major elections in Europe and America can spot numerous character insults, pejorative phrases, obscene statements and rumours about people's private life. In Hungary, election campaigns have witnessed a high rise of negative campaigns after the regime changed due to the transformation of the party system as well as the professionalisation of campaigns (Nábelek, 2014). One of the most common reasons behind smear campaigns lies in cognitive psychology, which is that our brain gives more attention to the negative news than the positive ones (Soroka, 2014). Negative campaign is always treated as an electoral strategy aiming at maximizing a party's vote first and foremost (Halsemayer, 2019)

3. Consequences of negative campaigns

According to an EU-funded study, CNCC (Comparative Negative Campaign and its Consequences), candidates who adopt negative campaigning eventually become less attractive to voters and it may cause voters to favour a third party (European Commission, 2016). In the same way, negative campaigning is thought to aggravate voters' dissatisfaction and lower voters' turnout (West, 2016). Since negative campaigning diminishes voters' trust, it can also take a toll on the quality of representative democracy (European Commission, 2016).

Literature Review

AUA is a non-profit and independent organisation established in 2008. Their aim is to bolster relationships among decision makers and to cultivate young talents in Hungary. In 2010, AUA developed a code of ethics for local elections in the whole county after the successful implementation of this code in Eger city and later it was applied by Heves county and other neighboring towns.

After the change of regime in 1990, elections in Hungary have been fraught with several acts of defamation, offensive speech and infringement of the private lives of political leaders. Never before did the public witness such vigorous and aggressive attacks not only to electoral candidates' personality, but also to the Hungarian nation, or other national, ethnic, religious community, etc. during election campaigns. Over time, people started to associate election campaigns with slander and negative advertisements since the political culture was not well-maintained. Furthermore, the political domain in the country also found itself overwhelmed by severe and growing polarisation as political actors showed little to respect each other. After a host of attempts to tackle offensive speech, Hungary only managed to adopt a regulation on offensive speech to the Civil Code that took effect on 15 March 2014.

With the hope to improve political culture in the region, AUA issued ECE, a voluntary and non-binding agreement for all candidates to adopt during the campaigns. Building public trust in the validity of elections also has the potential to translate into greater confidence in the political system as a whole (Atkeson & Saunders, 2007). Those who commit an act of violation of the code do not have to take legal consequences but have to bear the moral and ethical judgement of electorates. The aim of this initiative is to establish the ethical standards for electoral candidates to follow during the campaign with the hope to restore trust in politics, public actors and also stimulate harmony and fairness for the election campaign.

By signing the ECE, the candidates confirm their commitment to the law of Hungary and ethical norms established here. In this way, they contribute to maintaining purity, legitimacy and reducing defamation in political campaigns.

The content of ECE can be summarized as follows:

1. The signatories shall refrain from baseless, unsubstantiated, and self-serving claims. They do not make unfair and defamatory statements about other candidates. They respect each other's privacy and family and do not make these the subjects of the campaign.
2. The signatories are obliged to indicate their names and the name of their party affiliation. They shall refrain from removing, distorting or destroying other candidates' posters or any other campaign materials. Candidates shall refrain from disturbing other candidates' election rallies or events under any circumstances.
3. The signatories shall take responsibility to commit to these norms. Mayoral candidates shall do their utmost to ensure that the candidates nominated at the same time also comply with the Code of Ethics. In case of violation of this Code of Ethics, any signatory may issue a notice of violation.

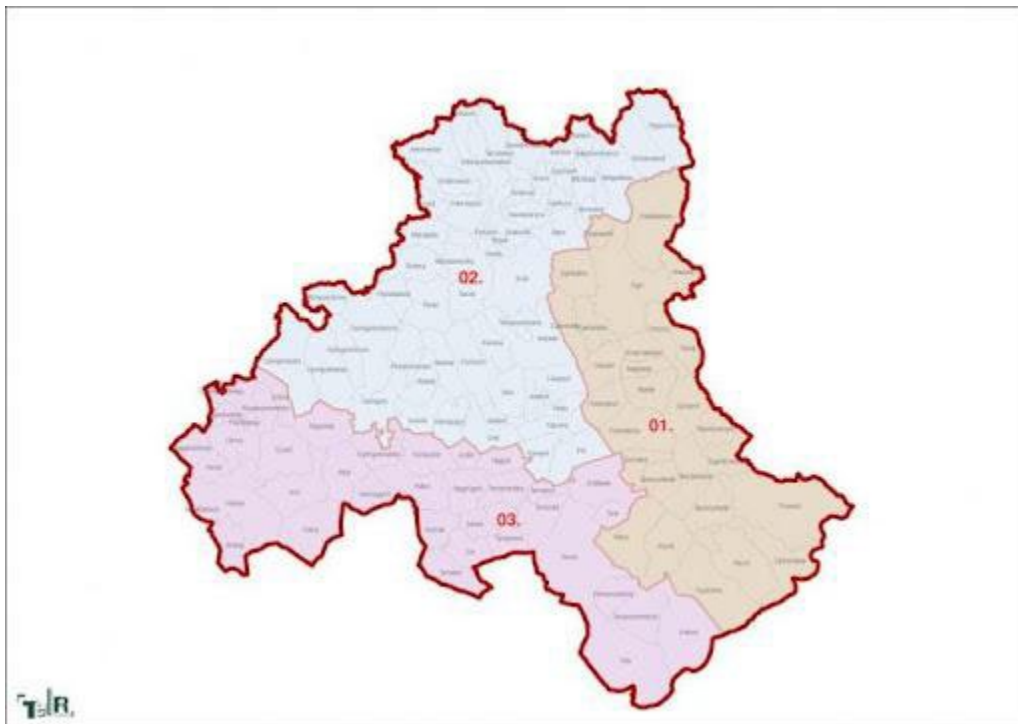
As can be seen from the Code, there is an emphasis on mutual respect for each other's private life and family as well as refraining from false statements or facts in order to lower one candidate's estimation during the campaign.

In this article, the author attempts to find answers to these two questions:

- a. Can the ECE affect the number of negative campaigns in the elections in which this code is introduced?
- b. Can the ECE facilitate the coalition among the political actors?

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, the author collected the number of politicians who signed the ECE and the number of negative campaigns over the years. The ECE was continuously introduced during 3 elections of National Assembly members in 2010, 2014 and 2018. In Heves county where the Code was applied, there are three voting districts, namely voting district 1, 2 and 3. This arrangement is only used during the election period and not to be confused with the administrative division.



Picture 1: 3 voting districts in Heves county
(Source: térport.hu)

The number of total candidates and the number of those who signed ECE in each district over 3 election seasons was collected and analyzed. The author hoped to see the growing number of signees, which can be inferred that ECE was becoming widely accepted and acknowledged over time.

Besides, in order to investigate to what extent, the ethical code of election can affect the number of negative campaigns, the author collects the number of negative campaigns recorded in 3 voting districts from 2010 to 2018 during the elections when the ECE was applied and compares them with the total number of electoral campaigns to see whether the negative campaign number declines over the years. The number of negative campaigns and the number of signees that were collected by AUE after each election will be presented in this paper to discuss.

Before reviewing the figures, it is important to emphasize the importance of defining negative campaigns. The definition of it has been widely argued over decades since the mid-1990s. Each year, there are around 100 research articles on negative campaigns published (Halsemayer, 2019). In this case study, when collecting data about negative campaigns, the author uses the definition of Geer (2006) due to its “simple and straightforward”

explanation. “Any type of criticism counts as negativity” (Geer, 2006, p.23). Therefore, the remainder of the campaigns, focusing on the party’s policy or their record in the government, is supposed to be positive (Benoit, 1999). With these definitions, there is a clear-cut dichotomy with no gray area which is illustrated by Halselmayer (2019) in the figure below:

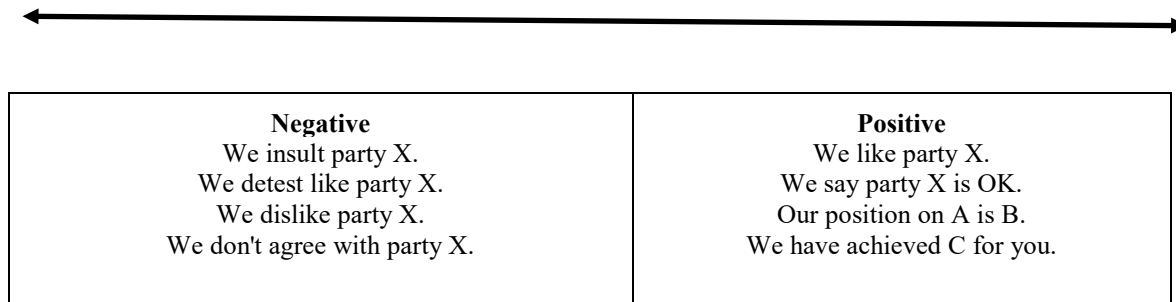
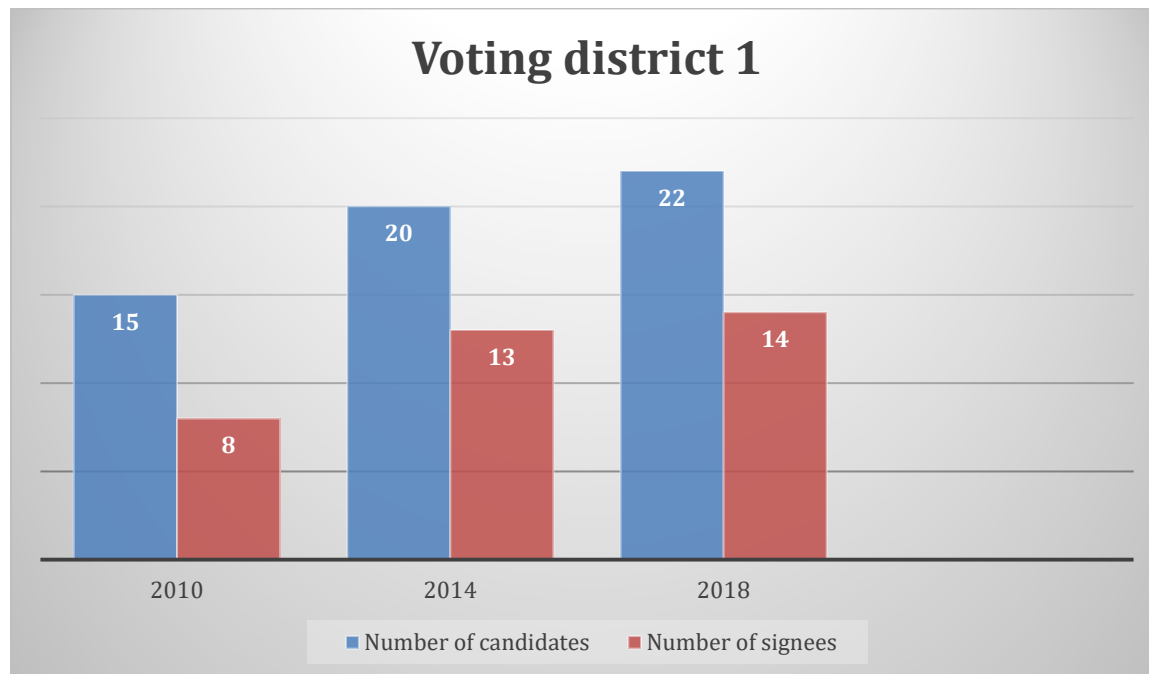


Fig.1. Polarised definition of negative campaign

Findings and discussion

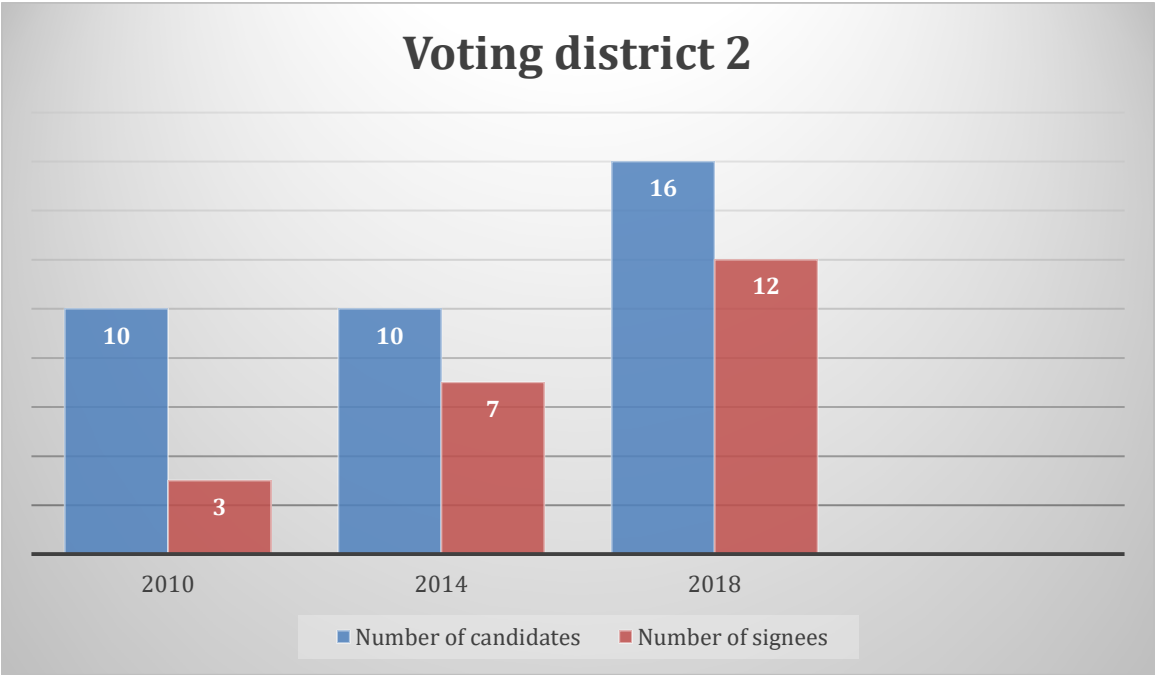
1. Number of ECE signees compared to the number candidates during the elections

In this section, all the results collected to answer the research questions are presented and analyzed. The number of candidates for the National Assembly and the number of ECE signees throughout 3 election seasons are presented in the 3 graph below.



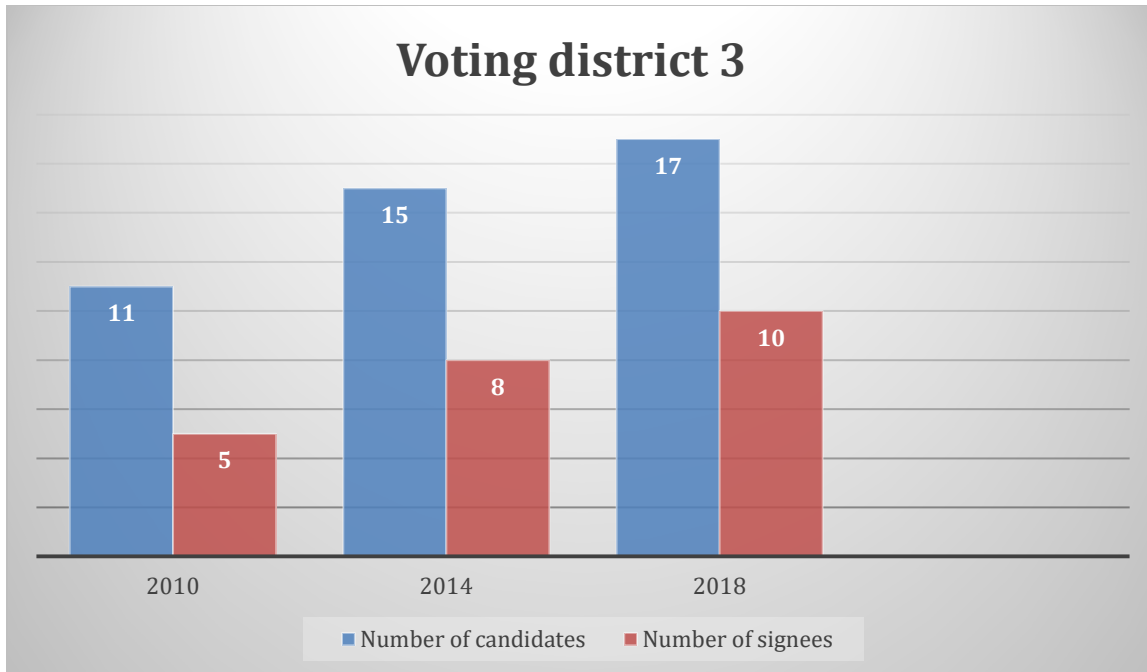
Graph 1: Number of candidates and number of ECE signees in voting district 1

Voting district 1 witnessed an increase in the number of candidates for the National Assembly elections as well as the number of candidates who agreed to sign ECE. The number of politicians signing the code has always accounted for half of the total number of candidates (in 2010) and more than half of that (in 2014 and 2018).



Graph 2: Number of candidates and ECE signees in voting district 2.

The upward trend can also be seen in district 2. In 2010, there were 10 candidates and only 3 of them signed the Code, but in the next seasons, the number of signees accounted for more than 70% of the total number of candidates.

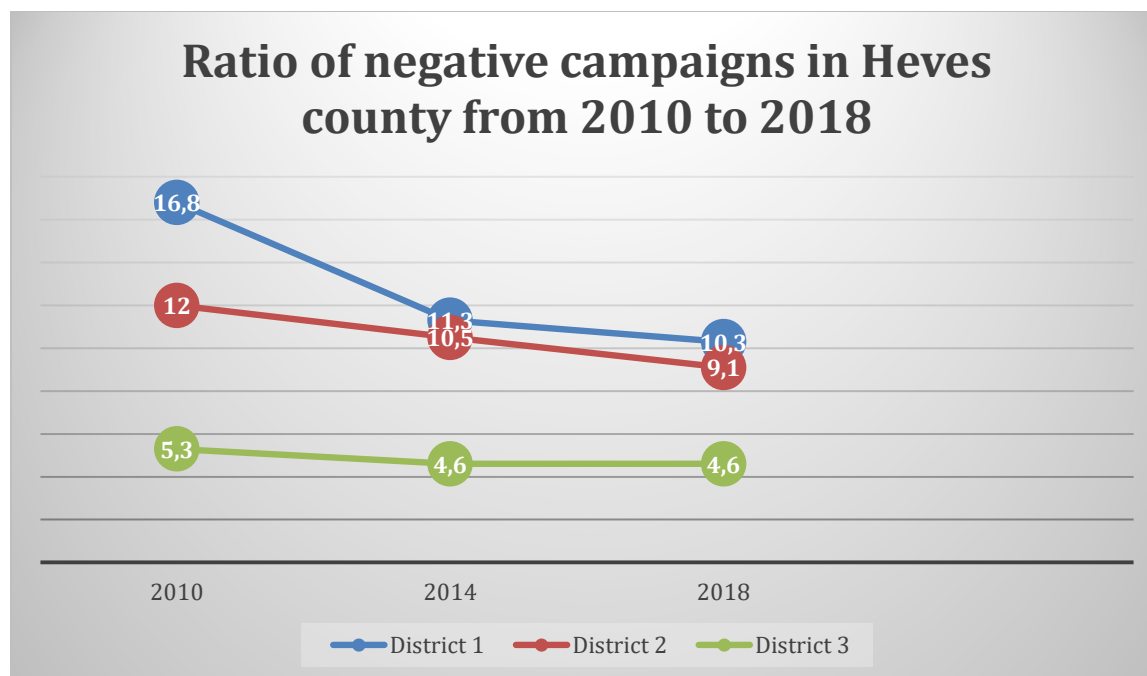


Graph 3: Number of candidates and ECE signees in voting district 3

Regarding voting district 3, in 2010, there were 5 among 11 candidates signing ECE. In the next election campaign, half of the candidates committed to the electoral code and around 59% of the candidates in 2018 signed ECE. In conclusion, there was an increasing number of signees in all 3 voting districts throughout 3 election periods. This shows that over the years, more and more politicians acknowledged the importance of such an electoral code of conduct. In each election period, there is a signing ceremony at the center of the voting districts where all candidates who decide to sign the code gather and commit themselves to maintaining a political culture with better harmony and cooperation. When politicians come together and agree to keep their campaigns negative-free, this ceremonial and symbolic uniformity shows a consolidated coalition among them.

2. Ratio of negative campaigns when ECE was adopted

The number of negative campaigns in 3 voting districts of Heves county was recorded according to the definition of Geer (2006), as previously mentioned. This number was then divided by the total number of campaigns during the whole election period and multiplied the result by 100. The author hoped to see the decreasing trend in the number of negative campaigns in each voting district. The percentage of negative campaigns in each voting district from 2010 to 2018 is presented in the line chart below.



Graph 4: Changes of negative campaigns in Heves county from 2010 to 2018

In general, there is a decreasing trend in all 3 voting districts during the years. The most prominent drop is seen in district 1 from 2010 to 2014 when the ratio of negative campaigns was reduced from 16.8% to 11.3%. In 2018, negative campaigns dwindled to only 10.3%, which was not a drastic change compared to the previous drop. In voting district 2 and 3, the fall in number of negative campaigns was not so distinct. Negative campaigns district 2 went down from 12% in 2010 to 10.5% in 2014 and 9.8% in 2018. District 3 is the one with much fewer negative campaigns compared to the other two and the number of negative campaigns were subjected to only a slight change. It went down from 5.3% in 2010 to 4.6% in 2014 and remained the same in 2018. From the result presented, it can be inferred that there was a decline in the ratio of negative campaigns over 3 election periods though not drastic. The author assumes that the reason for this lies in the size of the voting districts and the tradition of using negative campaigns during the elections. District 2 and 3 have less population and fewer candidates than district 1, and negative campaigns were not too common here. However, over time, the number of negative campaigns recorded decreased so it can be concluded that ECE contributed to maintaining tolerance and harmony of political culture during elections.

Conclusion

After 3 election periods from 2010 to 2018, it can be seen the initiation of ECE was widely supported by local candidates. There was an increasing number of candidates who agreed to sign ECE in all 3 voting districts. When more candidates attended the signing ceremony and committed themselves to negative-free campaigning in front of the public, the press and media, they showed a symbolic coalition to maintain political culture with harmony and mutual respect instead of attacking and smearing each other. Besides, the 3 voting districts in Heves county which adopted ECE witnessed the fall of negative campaigns during 3 elections, though the changes were modest. The most prominent change can be found in voting district 1, where there were most candidates among the 3. Voting district 2 and 3, though did not have a drastic drop in number of negative campaigns, yet there was a constant decline after each election period.

Although the result gave proof to support the hypotheses of the author, this research with small sample sizes cannot extract enough generalization about the effect of an electoral code of conduct. There should be more case studies on

a larger scale to investigate how ethical code can promote coalition among politicians and contribute to maintaining a receptive and reliable political culture. The second major drawback of this study is that it did not present the number of negative campaigns in Heves county before ECE was introduced. During the election periods before 2010, the action of negative campaigning was not mentioned due to the fact that related data was not obtainable. There was no statistics about negative campaigning in Heves county before the initiation of AUE. It was only until AUE launched ECE then the number of negative campaigns started to be collected and recorded. If there had been numbers of negative campaigns before 2010 mentioned in the article, it would have been more persuasive to draw a comparison and contrast between the number of negative campaigns before and after ECE was applied. This could have demonstrated better the effect of ECE on numbers of negative campaigns. Since this subject has a growing interest to write about, it is suggested that studies about negative campaigns in the future can look at other definitions of negative campaigns to have a more extensive analysis. The definition used in this article is cited from Geer (2006) which says any criticism used against other candidates or parties is negativity. This definition is fairly clear and straightforward. However, in practice, a wide spectrum of slander is used during campaigns. It comes from all forms of content, tones of messages, or word uses. Therefore, it is suggested that other studies should use different definitions in order to extend their views on the subject.

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