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## BLACK PR AND SOCIETAL POLARIZATION: CAUSAL RELATIONSHIPS

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This article examines the causal relationships between negative PR tactics and public polarization in contemporary democracies. Drawing on empirical research from 2020–2025, the study analyzes how negative campaigns, disinformation, and manipulative communication strategies contribute to affective polarization and the erosion of democratic institutions. The study synthesizes findings from the literature on political communication, social psychology, and information systems to demonstrate that negative PR operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms, including the amplification of echo chambers, the amplification of cognitive distortions, the systematic degradation of intergroup trust, and the destabilization of public discourse. Quantitative research results show that negative campaign messages increase affective polarization by 0.2 points on standardized scales, with effects particularly pronounced among individuals who hold populist views and have low levels of media literacy. The article identifies social media filter bubbles, algorithmic content curation, and coordinated transnational disinformation campaigns as key mediating factors mediating the impact of negative PR on social polarization. Cross-national data analysis demonstrates that the intensity of polarization correlates with the frequency of negative campaigns and the prevalence of disinformation in the media space. The results of the study suggest that negative PR tactics create self-reinforcing feedback loops, where initial polarization generates electoral demand for aggressive and destructive messages, which further exacerbates social divisions, undermines political legitimacy, and reduces the effectiveness of democratic governance. The study concludes that addressing this systemic phenomenon requires a comprehensive multi-stakeholder intervention, including the development and implementation of media literacy programs, strengthened accountability measures for digital platforms, legislative regulation of political advertising, and fundamental electoral reform.

**Keywords:** black PR, negative campaigning, affective polarization, disinformation, social media, democratic erosion, echo chambers, filter bubbles.

**Рудакевич О. М. Чорний піар та поляризація суспільства: причинно-наслідкові зв'язки**
У цій статті розглядаються причинно-наслідкові зв'язки між тактикою чорного піару та суспільною поляризацією в сучасних демократіях. Спираючись на емпіричні дослідження 2020-2025 років, дослідження аналізує, як негативні кампанії, дезінформація та маніпулятивні комунікаційні стратегії сприяють афективній поляризації та ерозії демократичних інститутів. Дослідження синтезує результати літератури з політичної комунікації, соціальної психології та інформаційних систем, щоб продемонструвати, що чорний піар діє через численні взаємопов'язані механізми, включаючи підсилення ехо-камер, посилення когнітивних спотворень, систематичну деградацію міжгрупової довіри та дестабілізацію публічного дискурсу. Результати кількісних досліджень показують, що негативні повідомлення кампанії збільшують афективну поляризацію на 0,2 пункту за стандартизованими шкалами, причому ефекти особливо виражені серед осіб, які дотримуються популістських поглядів та мають низький рівень медіаграмотності. У статті визначено фільтрувальні бульбашки соціальних мереж, алгоритмічне курування контенту та скоординовані транснаціональні дезінформаційні кампанії як ключові посередницькі фактори, що опосередковують вплив чорного піару на суспільну поляризацію. Аналіз крос-національних даних демонструє, що інтенсивність поляризації корелює з частотою використання негативних кампаній та розповсюдженістю дезінформації в медіапросторі. Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що тактика чорного піару

створює самопідсилювальні цикли зворотного зв'язку, де первинна поляризація породжує електоральний попит на агресивні та деструктивні повідомлення, що ще більше посилює суспільний розкол, підриває політичну легітимність та знижує ефективність демократичного управління. Дослідження робить висновок, що вирішення цього системного явища вимагає комплексного втручання багатьох зацікавлених сторін, включаючи розробку та впровадження програм медіаграмотності, посилення заходів щодо підзвітності цифрових платформ, законодавчу регуляцію політичної реклами та фундаментальну виборчу реформу.

**Ключові слова:** чорний піар, негативні кампанії, соціальна поляризація, дезінформація, соціальні мережі, ерозія демократії, національна консолідація, трансформація суспільства.

**Problem statement.** Contemporary democracies face unprecedented challenges from sophisticated manipulation tactics collectively termed "black PR" or "dark PR." These unethical communication strategies deliberately spread negative information, manipulate truth, and damage reputations to achieve political or commercial objectives. The phenomenon has intensified alongside rising societal polarization, characterized by deepening divisions between antagonistic factions with opposed values and identities that impede cooperation. Black PR encompasses various manipulative tactics including smear campaigns, coordinated disinformation, astroturfing, and negative campaigning that violates democratic norms. Unlike legitimate critique, black PR intentionally distorts information through lies, rumors, and fabricated content designed to deceive audiences. These tactics have proliferated through digital platforms, where algorithmic amplification and social media architecture create ideal conditions for manipulation.

**Formulation of the purpose of the article.** This article investigates the causal mechanisms linking black PR to societal polarization through systematic analysis of empirical research published between 2020-2025. The study addresses three primary research questions: What causal pathways connect black PR tactics to increased polarization? Which mechanisms mediate these relationships? What interventions might disrupt these causal chains?

Research demonstrates that affective polarization has intensified across multiple democracies. Studies using standardized feeling thermometer scales show consistent patterns: in-party favoritism remains relatively stable while out-party dislike increases substantially. This asymmetry suggests that polarization stems more from growing animosity than from heightened partisan loyalty.

Several theoretical frameworks explain how black PR influences polarization. Social identity theory suggests that negative messaging about out-groups strengthens in-group cohesion while intensifying intergroup hostility. When political elites deploy aggressive rhetoric and attacks, supporters adopt these adversarial frames, viewing politics as zero-sum competition rather than cooperative problem-solving.

**Highlighting previously unresolved parts of the general problem to which the article is devoted**. Although research on disinformation, negative campaigning, and polarization has expanded, several key aspects of the problem remain unresolved. Existing studies often treat these phenomena separately rather than within an integrated causal framework, limiting understanding of how manipulative communication produces and reinforces polarization over time. Empirical research frequently establishes correlation but not causation, with few longitudinal or cross-cultural analyses capturing variations across institutional contexts. Psychological and algorithmic mechanisms—such as emotional contagion, cognitive distortion, and platform-driven amplification—remain insufficiently examined due to methodological and data access constraints. Moreover, reciprocal feedback loops between polarization and susceptibility to black PR are theorized but rarely empirically tested. Addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary research capable of modeling these dynamic interactions and informing systemic, multi-level interventions that move beyond isolated fact-checking or content moderation approaches.

**Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.** Recent scholarship has increasingly explored the interconnection between manipulative communication practices and the rise of societal polarization, forming the empirical and theoretical foundation for this study. Foundational work on dark or black PR clarifies its unethical nature as a deliberate manipulation of public perception for political or commercial gain (Influize, 2025; García-Orosa et al., 2022). Empirical research demonstrates that negative campaigning and dark communication strategies significantly deepen affective polarization in multiparty democracies (Martin & Nai, 2024; Nai & Maier, 2025), while disinformation and hate speech campaigns act as powerful polarizing forces across diverse political systems (Qureshi et al., 2023; Supriyanto et al., 2024). Studies in computational and cognitive psychology reveal that exposure to manipulative information fosters cognitive distortions and emotional extremity, which reinforce group antagonism (Hasan et al., 2025; Törnberg, 2022). Research on social media networks and algorithmic amplification highlights the critical role of echo chambers, Comparative research demonstrates that the magnitude of polarization effects varies according to institutional and media-system characteristics (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2024; Kaakinen et al., 2023; Boxell et al., 2022). At the same time, experimental studies on interventions such as prebunking and digital literacy show promising though partial effectiveness in countering manipulative tactics (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2020). Together, these works initiate the resolution of the problem by demonstrating that black PR and polarization are dynamically interconnected phenomena shaped by psychological vulnerabilities, technological affordances, and institutional contexts—an insight that this article seeks to systematize and expand through a comprehensive causal analysis.

**Presentation of the main material of the study.** Substantial empirical evidence demonstrates direct causal links between negative campaigning and increased affective polarization. A landmark cross-national study analyzing 17 elections across 16 countries found that affective polarization significantly increases between parties adopting negative campaign tones [7]. The research, combining Comparative Study of Electoral Systems data with expert surveys on party rhetoric, provides the first large-scale analysis outside the United States confirming these relationships hold across diverse democratic contexts. Disinformation campaigns deliberately fabricated falsehoods distributed to deceive constitute particularly destructive black PR tactics. A systematic review of 150 peer-reviewed studies published 2014-2024 revealed that disinformation spreads six times faster than accurate information, with platform algorithms and emotional content significantly accelerating dissemination [9]. The analysis identified low digital literacy, existing polarization, and declining institutional trust as key vulnerability factors that disinformation exploits to further fragment societies.

Cross-country comparative research examining political disinformation across multiple nations found that propaganda operations executed by various entities foreign governments, political parties, domestic actors differentially impact polarization depending on contextual factors [1]. The study revealed that combinations of disinformation sources, hate speech prevalence, and platform monitoring approaches create sufficient conditions for extreme polarization.

Research on social media networks and fake news demonstrates quantitatively important network externality effects: simulations calibrated to Twitter data show that significant misinformation and polarization emerge in networks where only 15% of agents believe fake news, indicating that relatively small-scale manipulation can trigger system-wide effects [10]. Innovative research analyzing Twitter language patterns from 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections discovered sharp increases in cognitive distortion markers between these periods [6]. The study, analyzing 37.3 million tweets in 2016 and 47.5 million in 2020, found that rising polarization correlates with increased use of exaggerated, absolutist, black-and-white language patterns typically associated with anxiety and depression. This suggests that polarized political environments shape not just opinions but fundamental cognitive processing patterns.

Echo chambers networks where individuals primarily interact with ideologically similar others and filter bubbles algorithmically curated information environments limiting exposure to diverse perspectives represent key mediating mechanisms linking black PR to polarization [7]. However, empirical evidence regarding their prevalence and impact remains nuanced. Systematic literature review of research published 2020-2024 found that while filter bubbles and echo chambers do not directly cause political polarization, their underlying mechanisms contribute to polarization intensification under specific conditions [12]. Echo chambers received robust empirical support, particularly regarding network polarization driven by selective exposure and partisan blocking, with effects most pronounced during politically salient periods combined with emotionally provocative content.

Research using agent-based modeling to simulate opinion dynamics found that homophily-based social networks composed of like-minded individuals produced substantially greater polarization than random networks, with effects aggravated by social media filtering algorithms selectively exposing agents to supportive information [13].Social media algorithms designed to maximize engagement inadvertently amplify polarizing content. Research demonstrates that posts gain strongest traction when they reinforce in-group identity through out-group criticism, creating incentive structures favoring divisive over constructive discourse [3]. Studies show that spending more time on social media significantly increases polarization through repeated exposure to algorithmically selected inflammatory content. Analysis of Twitter discussions around contentious topics shows that while recommendation algorithms can increase content diversity, they simultaneously amplify emotionally resonant and ideologically aligned material [14]. The net effect depends on user characteristics: highly partisan individuals self-select into echo chambers regardless of algorithms, while moderate users experience more

Black PR and polarization exist in self-reinforcing relationships characterized by multiple feedback loops. Empirical evidence suggests these create spiral dynamics where initial manipulation triggers responses that amplify rather than counteract original effects. The negativity spiral functions as follows: political elites deploy aggressive rhetoric to mobilize bases, which radicalizes publics, who subsequently demand more aggressive positioning from elites [5]. Research shows that negative messaging from one's own preferred politicians increases affective polarization more substantially than attacks from adversaries suggesting that in-group elite cues drive polarization more powerfully than out-group hostility. The trust degradation cycle represents particularly pernicious feedback: black PR erodes institutional trust, which increases vulnerability to further manipulation, as individuals lacking trusted information sources become more susceptible to disinformation, which further undermines trust [10].

Several factors moderate the strength of relationships between black PR and polarization. Electoral system characteristics matter: proportional representation systems with multiple parties show different polarization dynamics than two-party majoritarian systems [8]. Research indicates that leader-focused presidential systems exhibit higher leader affective polarization relative to party polarization compared to parliamentary systems. Digital literacy levels significantly affect population susceptibility. Systematic reviews identify digital literacy enhancement as approximately 78% effective in reducing disinformation impact, compared to 65% for fact-checking and 59% for content regulation [10]. Educational interventions teaching critical evaluation skills and source verification demonstrate measurable protection against manipulative tactics. Pre-existing polarization levels create path dependencies. Research on Finland's NATO debate found that external shocks depolarized mainstream groups sharing

democratic norms but failed to penetrate conspiracy-oriented echo chambers [12]. This suggests that once extreme polarization establishes self-contained informational environments, even dramatic events cannot bridge divides.

The causal relationship between black PR and polarization produces serious democratic consequences documented across multiple studies. First, governance capacity degrades as polarization prevents compromise necessary for policy-making. Research demonstrates that polarized legislatures exhibit reduced legislative productivity, increased gridlock, and greater reliance on executive action rather than deliberative processes [3Ï. Second, democratic norm adherence weakens. Studies show that affectively polarized individuals display greater willingness to endorse norm violations including violence, electoral fraud, and rule-of-law breaches when such actions target out-groups [14]. This creates dangerous dynamics where partisan ends justify anti-democratic means. Third, social cohesion deteriorates. Research documents polarization spilling beyond politics into friendships, family relationships, housing choices, and consumption patterns. Some individuals report severing family ties over political disagreements, indicating polarization's profound social impact [3]. Fourth, mental health suffers. Studies link political polarization to increased anxiety, depression, exhaustion, and stress [6]. Survey research finds that 65% of Americans feel exhausted thinking about politics, while political polarization during recent years showed measurable negative impacts on public health. Fifth, information ecosystem integrity collapses. As black PR proliferates, citizens struggle to distinguish truth from falsehood, leading to epistemic crisis where shared factual foundations for democratic deliberation disappear [15]. Research shows that 80% of Americans believe Republicans and Democrats cannot agree on basic facts.

Research identifies several evidence-based intervention approaches, though none constitute silver bullets. Multi-stakeholder coordination proves essential given the problem's complexity. Individual-level interventions: Digital literacy programs teaching critical thinking, source evaluation, and cognitive bias awareness show effectiveness rates approaching 78% in systematic reviews [9]. Experimental research demonstrates that even brief interventions helping individuals recognize manipulation tactics reduce susceptibility to disinformation [17]. However, scaling such programs presents implementation challenges. Platform-level reforms: Algorithm modifications reducing engagement-optimization in favor of information quality show promise in simulations. Ranked-choice voting and other electoral reforms that reduce negative campaigning incentives demonstrate measurable effects in early-adopting jurisdictions [11]. Platform transparency regarding content curation algorithms helps researchers and policymakers understand manipulation vectors. Regulatory approaches: Content moderation policies face inherent tensions between combating manipulation and protecting free expression [1]. Research suggests that pre-bunking anticipatory inoculation against manipulation tactics proves more effective than post-hoc debunking [16]. Strategic litigation targeting systematic disinformation operations shows some success in imposing costs on bad actors. Institutional reforms: Strengthening local journalism through philanthropic support and tax incentives can provide trusted information sources resistant to polarization [11]. Campaign finance reform limiting dark money reduces resources available for black PR operations. Electoral system modifications including ranked-choice voting reduce incentives for negative campaigning. Elite leadership: Political leaders play disproportionate roles in setting discourse norms. Research demonstrates that when leaders model constructive engagement and reject extremism, followers largely comply, whereas elite polarization triggers mass polarization [17]. However, relying solely on elite virtue proves insufficient; institutional constraints remain necessary.

Methodologically, researchers should expand use of experimental designs with strong external validity, employ computational methods for large-scale data analysis, and develop better measures distinguishing legitimate political criticism from black PR manipulation. Interdisciplinary collaboration connecting political science, psychology, computer science, and communication studies would enrich understanding of these complex phenomena.

**Conclusion.** This comprehensive review establishes clear causal relationships between black PR tactics and societal polarization through multiple empirical pathways. Negative campaigning directly increases affective polarization, with experimental evidence showing measurable effects particularly among individuals holding populist attitudes. Disinformation campaigns systematically fragment societies by exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities and degrading information ecosystem integrity. Echo chambers, algorithmic amplification, and cognitive distortion provide key mediating mechanisms linking manipulation to polarization outcomes. Consequences extend beyond politics into social relationships, mental health, and governance capacity. Democracy fundamentally depends on citizens' ability to deliberate based on shared facts and maintain minimal trust in institutions and opponents. Black PR systematically undermines these foundations, posing existential threats to democratic systems. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated action across multiple levels. Digital literacy programs must equip citizens with critical evaluation skills. Platform reforms should prioritize information quality over engagement maximization. Electoral reforms can reduce incentives for negative campaigning. Journalism strengthening provides alternatives to manipulative content. Political leadership must model constructive discourse. Critically, interventions must recognize that black PR and polarization exist in reciprocal relationships within complex adaptive systems. Solutions targeting single variables likely prove insufficient.

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