Negativity in Democratic Politics

This book explores the political implications of the human tendency to prioritize negative information over positive information. Drawing on literatures in political science, psychology, economics, communications, biology, and physiology, this book argues that "negativity biases" should be evident across a wide range of political behaviors. These biases are then demonstrated through a diverse and cross-disciplinary set of analyses, for instance: in citizens' ratings of presidents and prime ministers; in aggregate-level reactions to economic news, across seventeen countries; in the relationship between covers and newsmagazine sales; and in individuals' physiological reactions to network news content. The pervasiveness of negativity biases extends, this book suggests, to the functioning of political institutions – institutions that have been designed to prioritize negative information in the same way as the human brain.

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Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology is dedicated to furthering theoretical and empirical research on the relationship between the political system and the attitudes and actions of citizens.

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Causes and Consequences

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Preface

> One mouse dropping ruins the whole pot of rice porridge.
>
> – Chinese proverb

Modern politics is overwhelmingly negative in tone. Everyday political reporting focuses on conflicts in the legislature, on major policy issues that have thus far been ignored, on political problems at home and abroad. It is accepted wisdom that following a brief post-election "honeymoon," governing parties and candidates tend to suffer a gradual decline in approval. (It is apparently nearly impossible to both govern and maintain support for governing.) Campaigns are regularly strewn with attack ads, and even when they are not, journalists debate whether or when the campaign will "go negative."

Why is modern politics so negative? And what are the consequences of that negativity? These are the two questions driving the work in this book. The answers have at their root theories drawn from disparate fields in the social and physical sciences – theories that try to describe and explain the negativity biases that seem to be so prevalent in social, economic, and political interactions. But the application of these theories is, in this case, entirely focused on politics.

The discussion should begin, however, with a clear statement of what exactly a negativity bias is. What follows is not a definition, but rather a short illustrative story. This is, for me at least, a useful illustration of the kind of negativity biases I wish to examine:

> Elizabeth is a 35-year-old interior designer, invited to a party where she makes a new acquaintance, Sara. When Elizabeth meets new people she immediately (and largely unconsciously) ranks them on four dimensions. Each of those dimensions ranges from −10 to +10, where zero is neutral, −10 is entirely negative, and +10 is entirely positive. There is no particular reason to believe that Sara will be a bad person, and Elizabeth is initially optimistic. She enters the room assuming that Sara is roughly +2 on all four dimensions.

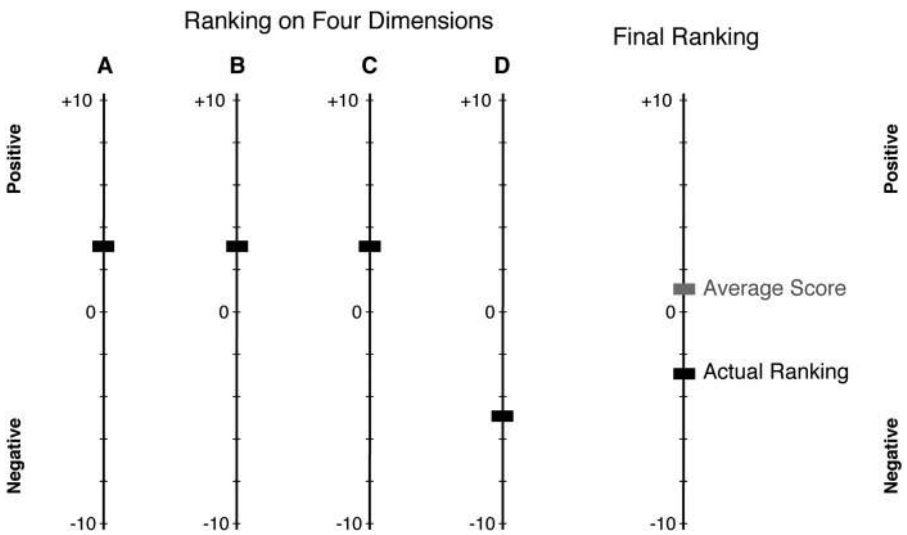

FIGURE 0.1. Impression Formation

Having spoken for several minutes, Elizabeth begins to revise her assessments of Sara. Sara is, as it turns out, a +3 on three of the four dimensions: she dresses well (dimension A), she is polite (dimension B), and she is clearly very knowledgeable about art and design (dimension C). But in the course of conversation Sara declares that she only drives foreign cars. Elizabeth's entire family works for General Motors. On this – support for the North American automotive industry (dimension D) – Elizabeth's assessment of Sara drops to −5.

What is Elizabeth's overall assessment of Sara? The obvious answer is that it is an average of Sara's scores on all four dimensions: +3, +3, +3, and −5. Overall, then, an average score is +1. (See Figure 0.1.) But Elizabeth's overall assessment of Sara is actually −3, because Elizabeth has a stronger reaction to negative information than to positive information. The three scores of +3 thus have a smaller impact on her overall assessment than does the one score of −5. And while all this numerical rating of Sara is largely unconscious (Elizabeth does not actually tally numbers in her head as she meets people), the rating itself has real-world behavioral consequences. Elizabeth is not a big fan of Sara. In spite of Sara being well dressed, polite, and knowledgeable, she drives a Volkswagen. So Elizabeth makes an excuse and moves to the other side of the room.

The real strength of this story in illustrating the negativity bias is that it will ring true for almost all of us – not support for the American automotive industry, perhaps, but the tendency to allow a single bad trait to weigh heavily on our overall assessment of others, and more generally the propensity to react more strongly to negative information than to positive information. These tendencies have certainly been well demonstrated in psychology research on "impression formation"; and this is by no means the only domain in which

negative information seems to carry greater weight than positive information. A negativity bias has been evident across a wide range of social and natural sciences, from psychology and economics to anthropology, physiology, and evolutionary biology.

This book presents the argument that this negativity bias has potentially important implications for politics. Political attitudes and assessments regularly involve considerations of positive and negative information, after all. We assess political candidates, parties, policies, and policy outcomes in roughly the same way as the hypothetical Elizabeth assessed Sara. And in politics, as in impression formation, negative information carries more weight.

Note that what emerges in the chapters that follow is not an argument against a focus on negative information in the political sphere. It is, rather, an explanation for why media content, public opinion, and even the design of political institutions tend to be focused on negative information. Each of these is related – more or less directly – to the design and functioning of the human brain. That our brains show this tendency is understandable, and indeed often advantageous. But the negativity bias may also produce systematic inaccuracies in the ways people and governments receive or process information. For instance, negativity biases may allow citizens to monitor the economy effectively; they may alternatively lead citizens to overreact to comparatively small negative shifts in the economy. Governments may similarly do a great job of monitoring even minor concerns among their constituents, or they may overreact to small negative shifts in public opinion and produce inefficient and misdirected policy as a result. In short, there may be both positive and negative consequences of negativity in the political sphere. And while weighing the actual costs and benefits of negativity will require more research, this book takes one additional step, at least, toward better understanding the sources and effects of the negativity biases that characterize both political behavior and political institutions.

Chapter 1 gets the ball rolling by cataloging the rather overwhelming evidence of a negativity bias across a wide range of disciplines. Pulling this literature together not only helps make the case that a negativity bias exists; it provides an explanation for how and why the negativity bias got there. It also sets the stage for the chapters that follow – chapters that trace out the facts and consequences of asymmetric responsiveness to negative versus positive information in the political sphere.

Chapter 2 then reviews similar findings regarding the relative strength of negativity in the political sphere. Political scientists have not yet embraced asymmetry in the same way psychologists and economists have, but there is an accumulating body of evidence throughout the discipline that suggests a similar dynamic. This chapter reviews these rich but thus far somewhat scattered findings.

Chapter 3 turns to data analysis. This chapter presents a relatively simple analysis of U.S. presidential evaluations, built on models in the psychological

literature on impression formation. As past work in psychology suggests, negative domain-specific evaluations matter more to overall presidential evaluations than do positive domain-specific evaluations. The same is true outside the United States; here, ratings of Australian prime ministers serve as a test case. And U.S. election study data offer opportunities to examine additional issues as well, including individual-level heterogeneity in the negativity bias and the difficulty of identifying the difference between positive and negative in interval-level measures.

Chapter 4 then turns to aggregate-level survey data and an analysis of economic voting models across a wide range of advanced industrial democracies. Asymmetries are demonstrated across the developed world, and time series are used to consider not just the asymmetric impact of negative versus positive information but also the possibility that the asymmetry varies over time.

Chapter 5 focuses on media content. People are asymmetric in their attentiveness, so it should come as no surprise that mass media are as well. Analyses here suggest a bias in which news gets selected for publication, starting with a comparison of daily crime statistics (drawn directly from a police database) and news stories in Bloomington, Illinois. Analyses then turn to distributions of information in the real world and in media content on the economy and on foreign affairs.

Chapter 6 then connects findings in public opinion with findings in media. The chapter uses data from weekly newsstand sales of *Time* and *Maclean's*, alongside content analyses of covers, to show that negative covers sell more magazines – more to the point, that people *choose* negative over positive information. These findings are supported by results from psychophysiological experiments suggesting that viewers are highly activated by negative news content and barely activated by equivalently positive content.

Chapter 7 both reviews the preceding findings and tries to connect them with the design of representative political institutions. Media can be seen as catering to the way in which the human brain works – we are more interested in negative information, so audience-seeking media tend to provide more negative information. But media can also be viewed as behaving *like* the human brain. Our own minds are hardwired to focus on negative information; we have designed a mass media hardwired in roughly the same way. The mass media are not unique in this regard, however. This chapter argues that a wide range of political institutions are designed in exactly the same way – to largely ignore positive information but to react very strongly (and publicly) to negative information. Indeed, negative feedback and error correction are perhaps the principal means by which modern representative democratic institutions function.

The end result of all of this, I hope, is a view of the political process that is (ironically) less negative. A common account of politics today, certainly in the United States and Canada but elsewhere as well, is that it is consumed with negativity. Media reports are increasingly negative; politicians (and their

campaigns ads) are increasingly negative; and publics are increasingly negative in their treatment of politicians, their assessments of policy, and their views of the political system more generally. Politics is, this account goes, slowly descending into a bottomless pit of negativity.

The account offered in the chapters that follow provides a rather more optimistic, or at least more tempered, interpretation. First, evidence suggests that we are not destined to fall further and further into negativity, ad infinitum; indeed, the same (psychological or political) system that leads to a negativity bias in the first place likely also contains the mechanisms that constrain that negativity. But, second, even though politics may almost always be a predominantly negative endeavor, that may be for good reason. More to the point, given the common account, negativity in politics is not (entirely) the product of a few bitter and malicious individuals. It is, rather, a product of a general human tendency to prioritize negative information – a tendency that has been purposefully built into political institutions, and may well be a relatively effective way to manage large representative democratic governance.

None of this is to say that there are not costs to negativity in politics. A focus on negativity, as we shall see, may well produce all kinds of biases in politics. But in the case of this book, at least, it is not all bad news. There may be reasonable causes, and sometimes even positive consequences, of negativity in modern politics. It is to those causes and consequences, both positive and negative, that we turn in the chapters that follow.

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