Commentary/Hibbing et al: Differences in negativity bias underlie variations in political ideology

Abstract: The authors connect conservatism with aversion to negativity via the tendentious use of the language of threats to characterize conservatism, but not liberalism. Their reliance upon an objective conception of the negative ignores the fact that much of the disagreement between liberals and conservatives is over whether or not one and the same state of affairs is negative or positive.

One would anticipate that an attempt to identify the cause of the political differences between liberals and conservatives would carefully elaborate what those political differences are. The authors’ characterization, however, is devoid of specific political content: Conservatives are “supporters of tradition and stability”; liberals are “supporters of innovation and reform”. A distinction that represents the two “ubiquitous” (abstract), “primal mindsets” that “pervade human history” (sect. 1, para. 1). Perhaps, but what do these two mindsets have to do with liberalism and conservatism?

According to the authors’ characterization, the following are conservatives: Andre Siegfried (1939), who defended the French Democratic Tradition by arguing that “for a hundred and fifty years the Revolution has served a basic line of demarcation in the domestic politics of France,” and that its principles had to be “defended from a new enemy [i.e., Fascism] along a new battle front”; members of the Chinese Communist Party who in the name of the Communist tradition and stability opposed market reforms as dangerous innovations (Deng 2012); those who criticized the use of “enhanced interrogation” (referred to by critics as torture) during the Bush administration’s “War on Terror” as based upon a “truly innovative and quite radical view” (Lederman 2007) that “undermin[ed] the moral values and legal traditions on which America was founded” (McTigue & Merman 2006); and the following are liberals: defenders of Vichy France; Chinese communists who advocated market reforms (but not basic rights); advocates of the use of enhanced interrogation.

Inasmuch as there are liberal traditions (e.g., Hartz 1955), the stability of which liberals are concerned to defend, a concern with tradition and stability cannot be the defining attribute of political conservatives. Precisely how liberalism and conservatism should be defined is a vexed question, but the content of the article leaves no doubt as to what the authors intend by these terms: the political attitudes of 21st century American liberals and conservatives. As such, although we can look for historical antecedents of contemporary American liberalism and conservatism, they can no longer be mischaracterized as two ubiquitous, primal mindsets associated with an ancient and universal political division. The authors might object that I debase from a new enemy [i.e., Fascism] along a new battle front” members of the Chinese Communist Party who in the name of the Communist tradition and stability opposed market reforms as dangerous innovations (Deng 2012); those who criticized the use of “enhanced interrogation” (referred to by critics as torture) during the Bush administration’s “War on Terror” as based upon a “truly innovative and quite radical view” (Lederman 2007) that “undermin[ed] the moral values and legal traditions on which America was founded” (McTigue & Merman 2006); and the following are liberals: defenders of Vichy France; Chinese communists who advocated market reforms (but not basic rights); advocates of the use of enhanced interrogation.

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A fundamental – perhaps the fundamental – assumption underlying the authors’ theory is that the relationship between negativity bias (NB) and political conservatism is causal because conservative policies “seem naturally to mesh with heightened response to threatening stimuli” (sect. 6, para. 7). What is the basis of such a claim? Surely, someone who experienced acute aversion to a particular threat could believe that liberal policies were the better guarantor of public safety (or order and stability). For example, liberals do not perceive the threat posed by what the authors describe as a “bad guy with a gun” (sect. 6.2, para. 6) as any less of a threat than conservatives (as the intensity of both sides in recent debates over gun control in the US should make apparent). Rather, (many) liberals think the best way to deal with such a threat is stricter gun control whereas (many) conservatives think it is “a good guy with a gun” (Lapierre 2012). If both liberals and conservatives are equally averse to the threat, then greater or lesser aversion to negativity cannot be the source of their differences. Furthermore, is it the authors’ contention that the conservative, but not liberal political response to gun violence seems “naturally to mesh” with an acute aversion to the

Conservatives, liberals, and “the negative”

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greater reactivity to the negative means greater reactivity to nega-
the negative refers to what
incompatible with the authors

Some conservatives deny that global warming is a threat not
because, as the authors speculate, it is a “longer term and arguably
more amorphous” threat (sect. 6.2, para. 6) but because they deny
that it exists; others argue that although it exists it is not manmade,
or its dangers are overstated or are outweighed by the costs of
reducing greenhouse gases.

This points to an omnipresent form of political disagreement:
Depending upon their ideology, liberals and conservatives may
view one and the same state of affairs as negative or positive.
Hence (to generalize), the overturning of Roe v. Wade is a nega-
tive (threat) for liberals and a positive for conservatives; teaching
creationism in the public schools is a negative (threat) for liberals
and a positive for conservatives; denial of the right to same-sex
marriage is a negative (threat) for liberals and a positive for con-
servatives. In fact, most conservative policies can be characterized
as threats to liberals, just as most liberal policies can be character-
ized as threats to conservatives, a fact concealed by the authors’
tenentious use of the language of threats to characterize conserv-
ative, but not liberal positions.

What distinguishes political liberals and conservatives is not that
conservative but not liberal political views reflect (or mesh with) a
heightened aversion to negativity. Rather, conservatives and liberals
disagree both over the best way to deal with an agreed upon negative
(e.g., a bad guy with a gun) and over whether one and the same state
of affairs (e.g., prayer in public schools) is itself negative or positive.

Significantly, the omnipresence of such disputes appears
incompatible with the authors’ understanding throughout that
the negative refers to what really is (i.e., objectively) negative:
Greater reactivity to the negative means greater reactivity to nega-
tive events, negative stimuli, negative environments, and negative
states of affairs. Hence, their use of the language of perception:
Perceiving the negative is akin to perceiving the color blue.
Although the authors acknowledge that persons can be factually
mistaken about the existence of an objectively negative state of
affairs (just as poor lighting might lead one mistakenly to conclude
that a blue object is black), they fail to realize that some of the
most contentious debates in political life are over whether the
very same things are negative or positive.

Commentary/Hibbing et al: Differences in negativity bias underlie variations in political ideology

Hibbing and his colleagues provide an enlightening overview of
current research on the psychological foundations of ideology,
with a specific focus on how ideology may be rooted in individual
differences in negativity bias. Here, we focus on two points
underplayed in the target article. First, we highlight the conditional
nature of the relationship between negativity bias and ideology.
Second, we contend that the mechanism by which negativity bias
structures preferences is more complex. Although we agree that
negativity bias has important consequences for political attitudes,
we also suggest that its impact should vary as a function of (1)
issue domain and (2) political engagement, or the degree to
which citizens are interested in and informed about politics.

In the domain of social issues (e.g., gay marriage), variables associ-
ated with negativity bias should translate into conservatism among
both the engaged and unengaged (though the relationship may be
stronger among the engaged; Zaller 1992). Such “easy” issues
elicit symbolic associations relevant to negativity bias (e.g., threats
to traditional values) regardless of political knowledge. However,
ecological policy is “hard” – technical and unlikely to automatically
elicit emotionally laden symbolic associations (Carmines & Stimson
1980). We argue that in the domain of economic issues, engagement
should play a key moderating role. Among the engaged, economic preferences should serve a symbolic function,
expressing partisan and cultural affiliation. Two mechanisms are
responsible. First, cues from political-party leaders assign symbolic
meaning to party membership and party-endorsed issue positions.
For example, in an effort to reshape electoral competition long
dominated by the Democratic Party, Republicans embraced a
number of affect-laden concerns related to race and ethnicity,
crime, and religion, all issues directly related to negativity bias
(Hetherington & Weiler 2000). Second, elites strategically frame
economic issues in symbolic terms (“Obamacare is socialism”).
These frames convey the abstract meaning of issues in ways relevant
to negativity bias (e.g., rapid institutional change). However, since
symbol-laden elite signals like cues and frames are more likely to
be picked up by the highly engaged (Zaller 1992), it is only among
these individuals that negativity bias should influence partisan
sorting (Federico & Goren 2009; Federico et al. 2011) and lead to
the assimilation of party-approved issue frames.

By contrast, if less attentive citizens are unlikely to notice
(and therefore be influenced by) elite cues and frames, their eco-
nomic preferences are more likely to serve an instrumental function.
That is, the economic preferences of inattentive citizens should
reflect a more personal view of the stakes – that is, the extent to
which one desires government protection from the risks associated
with free markets. Given this largely instrumental outlook,

Context, engagement, and the (multiple)
functions of negativity bias

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Abstract: Hibbing and colleagues argue that political attitudes may be
rooted in individual differences in negativity bias. Here, we highlight the
complex, conditional nature of the relationship between negativity bias
and ideology by arguing that the political impact of negativity bias
should vary as a function of (1) issue domain and (2) political engagement.