Negativity in the Evaluation of Political Candidates

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - The most well accepted explanation for the negativity effect (greater weighting of negatives as compared to positives in the formation of overall evaluations) in the political domain is the perceptual figure-ground theory (also known as the salience explanation or the expectancy-contrast explanation, Fiske 1980; Klein 1991, 1996). This theory is based on the argument that people generally exhibit a person positivity bias whereby they have positive expectations of others (Sears 1983), including political candidates, and negatives contrast against these expectations. From Anderson's (1981) cognitive algebra theory through to the figure-ground explanation, non-motivational explanations for negativity dominate.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The most well accepted explanation for the negativity effect (greater weighting of negatives as compared to positives in the formation of overall evaluations) in the political domain is the perceptual figure-ground theory (also known as the salience explanation or the expectancy-contrast explanation, Fiske 1980; Klein 1991, 1996). This theory is based on the argument that people generally exhibit a “person positivity bias” whereby they have positive expectations of others (Sears 1983), including political candidates, and negatives contrast against these expectations. From Anderson’s (1981) cognitive algebra theory through to the figure-ground explanation, non-motivational explanations for negativity dominate.

However, research in marketing (e.g., Ahluwalia 2002; Ahluwalia, Ummava and Burnkrant 2001; Kirmani, Sood and Bridges 1999; Till and Shimp 1998) and social psychology (e.g., Brenel 2001; Ditto et al. 1998; Kunda 2000) has shifted toward the examination of how motivations affect judgments. For example, the cue diagnosticity approach suggests that negative information is weighted more heavily because negatives are more diagnostic or relevant than positives (Skowronski and Carlston 1989). When the person or object to be evaluated is hypothetical or fictitious (as in most experiments conducted in the impression formation paradigm), negative information is considered to be more relevant than positive information (Ahluwalia 2002). However, once the perceiver is familiar with the target, even a weak liking or preference is likely to invoke consistency motivation (Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla and Chen 1996) such that preference-inconsistent negative information about the target may no longer be considered as more relevant or diagnostic than preference-consistent positive information (e.g., Ahluwalia 2002). In other words, the relevance or diagnosticity assessment is subjective in nature, driven, in part, by the preferences of the perceiver (Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991).

This motivational view suggests that the negativity effect is not universal. Instead, a voter’s preferences should determine whether a candidate’s negatives are weighted most heavily. Consistent with this view, if one were to segment voters by their preference towards a given candidate, only those motivated to dislike the candidate should show a negativity effect; those who support the candidate would not be motivated to dwell on their candidate’s negatives any more than his positives. Thus, a negativity effect should only appear in evaluations where the candidate’s negatives are preference-consistent. That is, where preference for the opponent or against the candidate has already been formed.

To test this hypothesis, we analyzed National Election Study data results from both the 1992 and 1996 elections and found that the negativity effect is present only for voters who dislike the candidate. Thus, negative information about a candidate is given more weight only when it is preference-consistent for the voter. This effect is likely to be attenuated if preference for the opponent is weak and it disappears for swing voters and for those who prefer the candidate. When the data are aggregated, however, a negativity effect emerges. At a more general level, our results suggest that voters are more likely to vote for candidates than against them. Thus, our findings contradict the belief that voters typically weight a candidate’s weaknesses more than his strengths. It also questions the validity of the currently accepted belief that negative information is likely to be weighted more heavily than content equivalent positive information by swing voters. On the contrary, our results show that a negativity effect is more often absent than present in the evaluation of political candidates, and thus present a new perspective on negativity in politics.

Should these findings be interpreted to mean that negativity has no role to play in political campaigns? Not really. The absence of a negativity effect does not imply that negative information does not have any impact on voters; it simply means that it is not more effective than equally extreme positive information. In other words, if a candidate is the target of a negative ad, the ad is likely to attenuate his evaluation. However, this attenuation is expected to be of approximately the same magnitude as the enhancement likely to occur in response to an equally extreme positive ad featuring him. This is the result we expect to be true for swing voters and those who have at least a weak preference for the candidate.

One important caveat, however, is that if the negative information presented in an attack is more extreme than available positive information the candidate could offer in support of his own candidacy, then negative campaigning may be more persuasive than positive ads he can sponsor. It is noteworthy that most case studies that vouch for the effectiveness of negative campaigning deal with either extremely negative information or negative information about a salient issue presented in a very vivid manner (e.g., the Johnson-Goldwater campaign where the infamous daisy spot focused on the use of nuclear weapons; Bush’s 1988 campaign against Dukakis focused on the highly salient issues raised in the Willie Horton case). Thus, it may not be negativity per se that generated the impact in these campaigns, but rather the seriousness and salience of the issues covered in the negative ads. Further, the effects of extremely negative information are likely to be exacerbated because of the media coverage it receives, given the media’s penchant for negative news.

Most of the negative campaigning observed in the marketplace comprises of “mud-slinging” attacks that focus on a “small corner” of a candidate’s career and deal with trivial issues (Kamber 1997) and hence their value to the campaign is questionable. We argue that in the absence of extreme information on salient issues, negative campaigning may not hold any additional sway (compared to positive information) in persuading voters.

REFERENCES


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