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Negativity in the Evaluation of Political Candidates

Prior research has demonstrated a clear negativity effect (greater weighting of candidate weaknesses compared with strengths) in the evaluation of U.S. presidential candidates in each of the past six elections analyzed. The authors adopt a motivational view and question the robustness of this finding. They reanalyze past National Election Studies data along with new data and conclude that the negativity effect is not universal across voters; it is a robust effect only for voters who dislike the candidate. They argue that previous findings are due to aggregation of data across voters who vary in their motivations.

Millions of dollars are spent marketing political candidates during each election year. An increasing percentage of these dollars is spent on negative campaigning (Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1995; Devlin 1993; Lau and Sigelman 1998) because of the belief that negative information about political candidates is more influential than positive information in swaying voter preferences (Aragones 1997; Bunker 1996; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991; Klein 1991, 1996; Lau 1985; Pinkleton 1997). Consistent with this belief, media gurus often give negative news quadruple weight compared with positive news (as specified by the Merriam formula used to compute media impact; Kroloff 1988). It is because of this firm belief in the weight of negative information that political pundits continue to advocate its use, despite recent data that demonstrate that negativity in political campaigning disenfranchises voters and could lead to low voter turnout and involvement (Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1995).

The belief in the power of negative campaigning has its roots in impression formation studies conducted in the 1980s (e.g., Anderson 1981; Fiske 1980), which demonstrated a robust negativity effect—the greater weighting of negative compared with equally extreme positive information in the formation of overall evaluations—in a laboratory context. This belief gained wider acceptance in political marketing because of multiple case studies that supported it (e.g., the 1988 come-from-behind victory of George H.W. Bush) and empirical studies that demonstrated a negativity effect in the evaluation of presidential candidates (e.g., Klein 1991, 1996; Lau 1985). The latter stream of research consists of studies that analyzed voter interviews available through the American National Election Studies (NES) database for six past Presidential elections (1972, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992) and demonstrates a clear negativity effect for both the winning and the losing candidate in each election.

In the political domain, these studies have led to the conclusion that however popular the presidential candidate, his negatives matter more than his positives to the public, which in turn lends support to the adage that people do not vote for but against candidates (e.g., Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1995; Aragones 1997; Bunker 1996). These results also matter to marketers because they provide the strongest unchallenged source of "real" (as opposed to laboratory) data available in support of the negativity effect and have spurred an increase in the amount of negative product-related advertising (*Business Marketing* 1992). Recent theorizing in marketing and social psychology (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001) raises questions about the prevalence of a negativity effect. Specifically, whereas the negativity effect in political candidate evaluations is consistent with the perceptual figure-ground explanation of negativity (e.g., Fiske 1980), it is inconsistent with recent motivational explanations of information processing (e.g., Ahluwalia 2002; Ditto et al. 1998; Till and Shimp 1998), as well as with recent political events (e.g., high Bill Clinton evaluations during the Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair; the defeat of the more aggressively mudslinging Bush and Bob Dole in 1992 and 1996, respectively). Moreover, we believe that the increasing proportion of marketing dollars claimed by negative campaigning (West 1993) and its deleterious effects on voter turnout signal that the time has come to reassess the likelihood of a negativity effect in the evaluation of political candidates.

Conceptual Foundation

The Perceptual Figure-Ground Explanation

The most well-accepted explanation for the negativity effect in the political domain is the perceptual figure-ground theory (or salience explanation; Fiske 1980; Klein 1991), which is based on the argument that people generally exhibit a "person positivity bias" (Sears 1983) whereby they have positive expectations of others. For example,

prior research reveals that an overwhelming majority of individual political figures are evaluated positively (e.g., Klein 1996). Against this positive political background, negative information about a specific candidate is likely to stand out (Lau 1985). Thus, negative information may be perceptually more salient and therefore more readily processed and given more weight. It may also be perceived as more credible and more informative (e.g., Fiske 1980). As such, the figure-ground explanation implies a negativity effect for all candidates, irrespective of their individual popularity. Figure 1 presents this conceptual model.

The Motivational Explanation

Most research on negativity grew out of a cognitive approach to judgments. From Anderson's (1981) cognitive algebra theory to the figure-ground explanation, nonmotivational explanations for negativity dominate. However, research in marketing (e.g., Ahluwalia 2002; Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001; Till and Shimp 1998) and social psychology (e.g., Ditto et al. 1998; Kunda 2000) has shifted toward an examination of how motivations affect judgments. For example, the cue diagnosticity approach—a dominant cognitive explanation for negativity—suggests that negative information is weighted most heavily because negatives are often more diagnostic or relevant than are positives (Skowronski and Carlston 1989). When the person or object to be evaluated is hypothetical or fictitious (as in most experiments in the impression formation paradigm), negative information is considered more relevant than positive information (Ahluwalia 2002). However, when 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; Russo, Meloy, and Medvec 1998), such that preference-inconsistent negative information about the target may no longer be considered more rel-

evant or diagnostic than preference-consistent positive information (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001). Therefore, the formation of preferences invokes the biased processing of preference-inconsistent information through various defense mechanisms, such as generation of counterarguments (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001; Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, and Chen 1996), information distortion (Russo, Meloy, and Medvec 1998), source derogation (Ahluwalia 2000), and even selective avoidance of inconsistent information (Frey 1982). In other words, the relevance or diagnosticity assessment is subjective in nature and driven, in part, by the preferences of the perceiver (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991).

The motivational view therefore 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 we were to segment voters by their preference toward a given candidate, only those motivated to dislike the candidate should show a negativity effect; those who support the candidate should not be motivated to dwell on their candidate's negatives any more than his or her positives. Thus, a negativity effect should appear only in evaluations for which the candidate's negatives are preference consistent (see Figure 1).

An implication of this view is that swing voters should not demonstrate a negativity effect, because swing voters by definition do not have strong preferences for one candidate over the other and have not decided against any of the candidates. We presume that swing voters have moderately positive views of all candidates (those who dislike both candidates are likely to be disenchanted and not vote at all; Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1995), which renders negative information preference inconsistent. This prediction is in contrast to the perceptual figure-ground explanation, as well as prior research that explicitly examines undecided or

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Models of Negativity in the Evaluation of Political Candidates

Perceptual Figure-Ground Explanation

Motivational Explanation
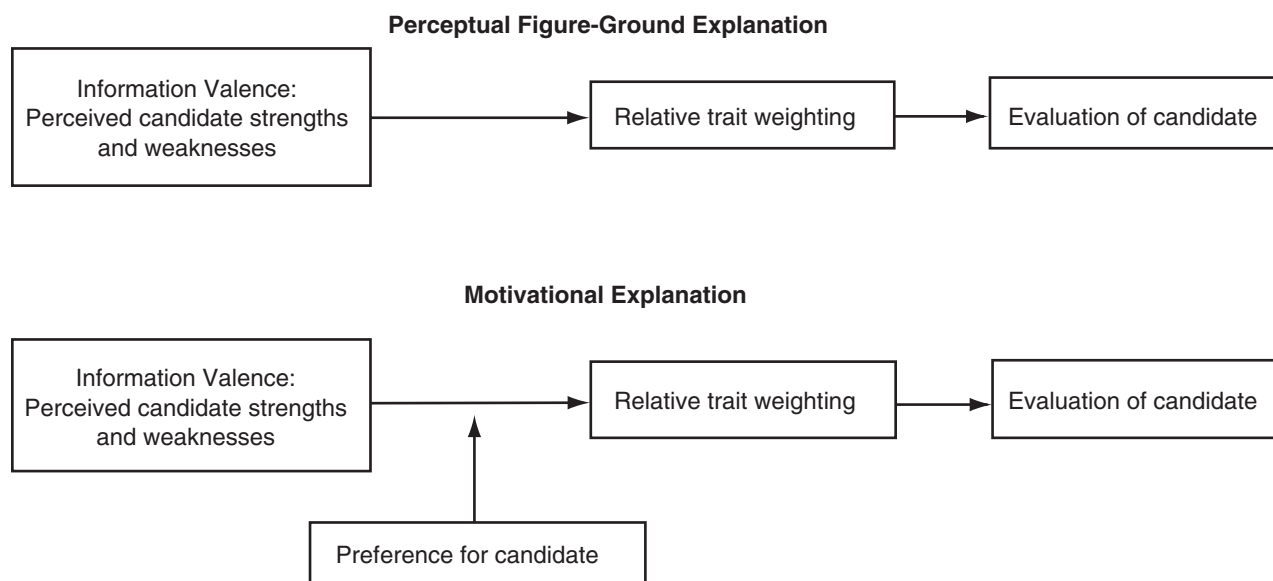
swing voters (Lau 1982). Specifically, in his analysis of 1980 NES data, Lau (1982) reports a stronger negativity effect for swing voters than for voters who had chosen a candidate (though this difference was not tested for statistical significance). Lau's findings have perpetated the belief that the negativity effect is likely to be stronger and, therefore, that negative campaigning is more effective when many voters are undecided during the initial phases of a campaign (e.g., primaries). This finding, however, could be an outcome of a variety of factors, including the differential importance of the negative and positive traits used in the 1980 NES survey.

The motivational explanation thus predicts a negativity effect for only one segment of voters: those who want the candidate to lose. When voters judge a disliked candidate or the opponent of their favored candidate, negatives are consistent with their desires and thus should receive the greatest weight. However, other voter segments are not likely to weight a candidate's weaknesses more heavily than his or her strengths. This prediction is in direct opposition to expectations based on the figure-ground explanation, which posits a negativity effect for all voter segments, as we discussed previously. Furthermore, the figure-ground explanation predicts that negativity is strongest for swing voters and those who prefer a candidate, namely, those judging candidates against generally positive expectations. The motivational view, however, predicts that negativity is absent for these voters.

We suggest that the finding of a negativity effect in prior research that has used the NES databases could be driven by a subset of voters: those who want the candidate to lose. When the data were aggregated across different segments of voters, an aggregate negativity effect emerged primarily because of this segment of voters. A more disaggregated view of the data may reveal differences across segments of voters. Therefore, we frame the first set of hypotheses in terms of the motivational explanation, as follows:

H_1: Voters who prefer a candidate are not likely to exhibit a negativity effect in evaluating the candidate.

H_2: Swing voters are not likely to exhibit a negativity effect in the evaluation of either candidate.

H_3: Voters who prefer the candidate's opponent are likely to exhibit a negativity effect in evaluating the candidate.

Although we do not make specific predictions about the strength of the voters' opposition or support, we might expect that those who are strong opponents of a candidate will show greater negativity than will weak opponents. Alternatively, all opponents, regardless of the strength of their opposition, might view negative information as preference consistent. To examine these two possibilities, we explore potential differences in negativity based on the strength of the opposition.

Furthermore, if an aggregate-level negativity effect is driven by voters who want the candidate to lose, negativity should not be found in aggregate analyses that are less likely to include this group of voters. The NES data are typically collected just before the election, when most voters have been exposed to substantial information about candidates. By this stage of the campaign, most candidates have acquired a sizable group of opponents. We argue that these opponents are likely to exhibit a negativity effect and drive its occurrence at the aggregate level. In the early phase of the campaign, however, most voters will not have formed strong preferences. Thus, negativity is less likely to emerge in data collected during the primary phase of the presidential race.

There is a caveat to this prediction. Even during the early phases of campaigning, a few candidates may have developed a significant group of opponents as a result of either their extreme platform or behavior or the polarization that occurred previously (e.g., a current vice president running for the presidency). We predict an aggregate-level negativity effect for only these candidates. In contrast, the perceptual figure-ground explanation would predict a negativity effect for all the candidates in the initial phases of a campaign. On the basis of a motivational explanation for negativity, we predict the following:

H_4: The likelihood of an aggregate-level negativity effect for a candidate will be related to the proportion of voters who dislike him or are motivated to view him negatively; the higher this proportion, the more likely is an aggregate-level negativity effect.

H_5: If the responses from voters except those opposed to a candidate are aggregated, no significant negativity effect will emerge for political candidates.

Summary

In summary, on the basis of recent motivational research in marketing (e.g., Ahluwalia 2002) and psychology (e.g., Kunda 2000), we hypothesize that voters are likely to weight a presidential candidate's weaknesses more heavily than his strengths only when they are motivated to view the candidate negatively (i.e., prefer the opponent and/or dislike the candidate). From a marketing perspective, this group is likely to be the least critical to persuade in a political campaign (e.g., it would be inefficient for a Democratic candidate to pursue diehard Republican voters). However, the segments that likely represent the biggest return on investment from persuasive communications—swing voters and those who have a favorable tendency toward the candidate—are not likely to be more sensitive to negative than to positive information. In addition, we argue that negative information is not likely to be more impactful than positive information in the primaries, when a substantial group of opponents has not emerged for most candidates. Thus, contrary to current belief, we predict somewhat limited benefits of negative compared with equally extreme positive information in the political domain.

We begin our inquiry with a close examination of prior evidence of negativity in political evaluations and speculate that assessments of negativity at an aggregate level mask substantial differences among different segments of the population. In Study 1, we begin with a reanalysis of data from the most recently published negativity effect study in this area, the 1992 presidential election (Klein 1996). We reanalyze this data by disaggregating it into relatively homogeneous groups based on candidate preferences to test H_1 through H_3. We repeat the same analysis for the 1996 NES data set to examine the generalizability of the effects. In Study 2, we test H_4 and H_5 by examining candidate eval-

uations during the 1988 primary season (the most recent NES study of primaries).

The NES and Negativity

The NES database consists of interviews conducted before and after each presidential election by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. These studies use a random probability sampling of eligible voters in the United States. The pre-election interviews (which contain the questions used in negativity analyses) are conducted in person from September to Election Day.

Since 1980, the NES interviews also have contained a trait inventory that asks respondents to rate the candidates on a set of traits. Lau (1982, 1985) analyzes the 1980 inventory, in which some of these traits were positively worded (e.g., intelligent) and others were negatively worded (e.g., dishonest). To allow for a more controlled approach (negative and positive items equivalent in extremity, relevance, and so forth), the trait inventory has used only positively worded traits (e.g., honest) since 1984. Respondents could rate the trait as a weakness or a strength of the candidate. Klein (1991, 1996) analyzes the NES data from the 1984, 1988, and 1992 elections to examine whether traits judged to reflect weaknesses were more predictive of final evaluations and voting than were traits that reflected strengths. Through regression analysis, Klein assessed the weight given to each trait in the evaluation of each candidate. The analysis revealed that traits for which the candidates received low ratings (candidate weaknesses) were given more weight than were traits for which they received high ratings (candidate strengths). This result was consistent for both the winning and the losing candidates for each of the three elections and thus supports a robust negativity effect. These findings, however, are based on an aggregate-level data analysis, in which responses from all types of voters, irrespective of their varying candidate preferences (e.g., opponents, supporters, swing voters), were combined in the assessment of negativity.

Study 1: Negativity for Different Segments of Voters

Data and Methodology

The data. In this study, we reanalyze the 1992 NES data set, along with new analyses of the 1996 NES data.[1] The NES database contains 2485 (response rate = 72%) interviews for the 1992 election and 1714 (response rate = 71%) interviews for the 1996 election.[2] The 1992 trait inventory

asked respondents how well ("extremely well," "quite well," "not too well," or "not well at all") each of the following nine attributes described each of the candidates: "intelligent," "compassionate," "moral," "inspiring," "provides strong leadership," "cares about people like you," "honest," "knowledgeable," and "gets things done." In the 1996 trait inventory, respondents rated Clinton on the same traits but rated Dole on all but two traits: "intelligent" and "compassionate." The overall evaluation of each candidate was assessed by a thermometer score that asked the respondents to indicate how favorably or unfavorably they were toward the candidate on a 0–100 scale (higher numbers indicate feelings of warmth or favorableness, lower numbers indicate feelings of coldness or unfavorableness, and a score of 50 is neutral).[3] For ease of interpretation, the four-point trait rating scales and the thermometer ratings were converted to a 0–1 scale, on which higher numbers indicate greater favorableness.[4]

For the analysis, five groups of voters were identified on the basis of two questions about voting choices. The first asked respondents which candidate they thought they would vote for in the upcoming election; the second asked them whether their preference for the chosen candidate was strong or not strong. Thus, for the 1992 election, the groups were as follows: strong preference Clinton, weak preference Clinton, undecided or swing voters, weak preference Bush, strong preference Bush. The swing voter group included respondents who chose the alternative "don't know" for the candidate choice question but stated that they intended to vote. Unfortunately, the 1996 survey did not include the "don't know" option, and therefore we were unable to identify swing voters through this method. Thus, we used an additional method to identify swing voters in both elections. With the thermometer difference approach, we identified the segment of swing voters by selecting respondents whose thermometer scores for the two candidates were within 10 points (on a 100-point scale) of each other. By definition, this segment comprises voters who have similar evaluations of both candidates and therefore are likely to swing from one candidate to another. We estimated the negativity effect for each candidate at the aggregate level, as well as at the group level (i.e., separately for each of the five groups of voters, with swing voters operationalized in two different ways in 1992).

Computation of trait weights (Stage 1). We estimated the weight given by respondents to each trait in the evaluation of a given candidate. To this end, we specified a regression equation by which we could predict a candidate's thermometer score on the basis of his trait ratings when race, sex, party identification, and political ideology were con-

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[1]Unfortunately, the 2000 NES data include only a short version of the trait inventory and thus do not allow for a test of our hypotheses.

[2]The sample size included in our analyses was actually smaller. To be included in a given regression analysis, the respondent had to have supplied responses to the thermometer score and trait ratings for a given candidate and answered all the control variable questions. Thus, for Clinton in 1992, the sample size was 1658, and for Bush, it was 2090. In 1996, the sample size was 1624 for Clinton and 1491 for Dole.

[3]The thermometer scores were solicited before the trait inventory. More than 100 questions about other issues (e.g., the Persian Gulf War, Senate and House races and candidates) separated the thermometer questions and the trait inventory.

[4]Thus, the trait ratings were coded as follows: "not well at all" = 0, "not too well" = .33, "quite well" = .67, and "extremely well" = 1. The thermometer score was divided by 100.

stant.[5] Following prior research (Ahluwalia 2000; Klein 1991, 1996), we used the unstandardized slope coefficient obtained for each trait as a measure of its weight in the overall evaluation. This parameter is insensitive to variance differences among the traits (Lewis-Beck 1980; Pedhazur 1997). We used this procedure to generate trait weights for each candidate for each of the five groups of voters, as well as for the entire voter sample.[6]

Estimation of the negativity effect (Stage 2). Next, consistent with prior research in the area, we examined the relationship between trait weights and trait ratings. A negativity effect would imply a negative relationship between trait weights, as estimated by the slope coefficients generated for each trait (Stage 1), and mean trait ratings. That is, a negativity effect is evident if the traits judged by voters to represent character weaknesses (low ratings) are weighted more heavily in the candidate's overall evaluation than are traits judged to represent character strengths (high ratings). In a univariate regression, we regressed trait weights on the trait ratings; we used the unstandardized slope coefficient as an indicator of the ability of the ratings to predict the weightings. Using this procedure, we estimated negativity for the

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[5]Klein (1991, 1996) generates separate regression equations, one for each trait (plus control variables), but reports (1996) that the relative weighting of the traits remains the same when the weighting coefficient of each trait is assessed by a regression equation that includes all the candidate's traits and the control variables.

[6]We conducted analyses to examine the trait rating scale linearity to ensure that the four-point scale had equal intervals. The scale was linear, and minor departures from linearity cannot account for the pattern of results reported.

aggregate and each of the subsamples for each of the candidates.

Results

1992 NES. Consistent with Klein's (1996) findings, a significant aggregate-level negativity effect emerged for both the candidates (Bush and Clinton). However, the group-based analysis reveals that, as hypothesized, the negativity effect occurs only for voters who exhibit a preference for the opponent (Table 1). Specifically, there was a significant negativity effect ($p < .05$) in the evaluation of Clinton for voters who had a strong preference for Bush. This effect approached significance ($p < .10$) for those voters who claimed a weak preference for Bush. A statistically significant negativity effect was obtained in the evaluation of Bush by voters who exhibited both strong and weak preferences for Clinton. The difference between the weak and the strong opponent groups was not significant for either candidate. Most other slopes had a negative sign but were smaller than the slopes of the opponent groups, and none approached significance, in support of H_1–H_3. The negativity effect is not significant for any of the swing voter groups (irrespective of the method used to identify them). Furthermore, if we remove the opponent groups from the aggregate analyses, so that only the supporters and swing voters remain, the aggregate negativity effect is no longer significant for either Clinton (b = −.30, $p > .40$) or Bush (b = −.47, $p > .11$).

In Figure 2, Panels A and B, we provide a graphical illustration of the relationship between the trait ratings and trait weights we used to examine negativity in judgments of Bill Clinton. Figure 2, Panel A, demonstrates the absence of the negativity effect for voters with a strong preference for Clinton, whereas Figure 2, Panel B, shows the negativity (negative relationship between trait weights and trait rat-

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TABLE 1
Regression Coefficients for the Negativity Analysis of the 1992 Election

| Segment of Voters	Evaluation of Clinton			Evaluation of Bush		
	b	Standard Error	n[a]	b	Standard Error	n[a]
Full sample	−.68**	.27	1658	−.53***	.13	2090
Strong preference for candidate	.23	.47	539	−.24	.36	382
Weak preference for candidate	−.35	.25	193	−.27	.16	227
Swing voters (candidate choice question)	−.91	.62	110	−.32	.39	157
Swing voters (thermometer difference approach)[b]	−.07	.23	382	−.03	.22	511
Weak preference for opponent	−.54*	.27	160	−.42**	.15	246
Strong preference for opponent	−.56**	.22	294	−.48***	.14	613

*$p < .10$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.

[a]Number of voters in the segment. The sum of n for the subsamples does not add up to the n of the full sample because only those who intended to vote could be asked which candidate they planned to vote for and therefore be included in the subsamples identified by the voting choice question. Although the means and trait weights are based on the sample sizes, note that the slope coefficients are based on the relationship between the nine trait ratings and the nine trait weightings.

[b]Respondents who gave similar thermometer scores (within ten points) to both candidates. This group includes almost all swing voters identified by the voting choice question, plus respondents who had similar candidate evaluations but did not intend to vote and respondents who may have been classified in the preference groups (using the candidate choice question) even though they had similar evaluations of the two candidates.

FIGURE 2
Relationship Between Trait Ratings and Trait Weights

A: Evaluation of Clinton by Voters with a Strong Preference for Clinton (1992 NES)
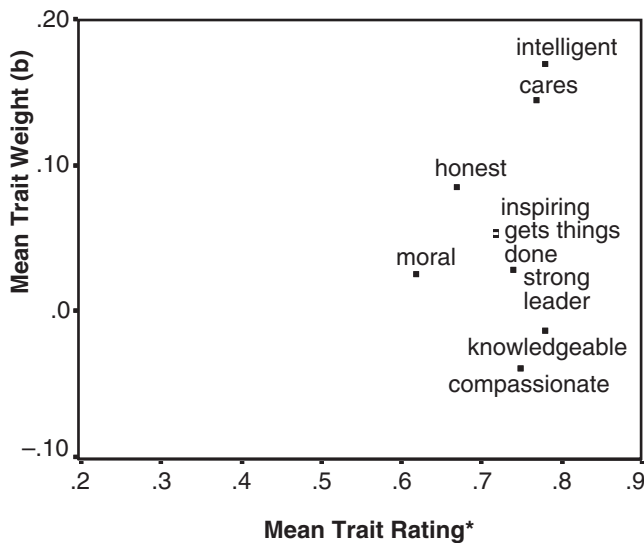
B: Evaluation of Clinton by Voters with a Strong Preference for Bush (1992 NES)
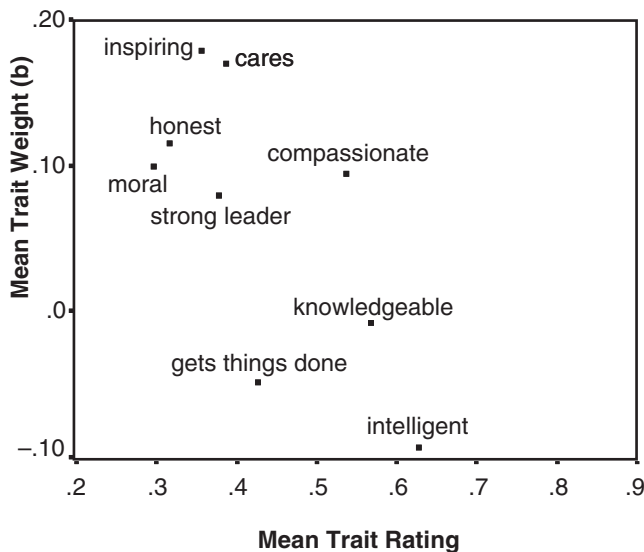
*Larger numbers indicate more positive trait ratings.

ings) effect in the evaluation of Clinton by voters who strongly preferred Bush.

1996 NES. As we reveal in Table 2, a negativity effect emerges at the aggregate level for both Clinton and Dole. The group-level analyses, however, reveal a significant negativity effect only for voters who preferred the opponent. This effect tends to be stronger for the group with a strong compared with a weak preference for the opponent (though

this difference is not statistically significant). The negativity effect is not significant for swing voters or for the groups who preferred the candidate. When the two opponent groups are excluded from the aggregate analyses for each candidate, a significant negativity effect fails to emerge for either Clinton (–.17) or Dole (–.30; both $ps > .30$).

Analyses of trait variance differences. A difference in the variance of negative versus positive traits could influence the slope coefficient of the negativity equation. For example, if the negative traits have a higher variance than the positive traits, the coefficients (weight estimates) for these traits may be inflated in the first-stage regression, increasing the likelihood of a negative relationship between trait ratings and trait weighs (the negativity effect) in the second-stage regression. To address this possibility, we used unstandardized regression coefficients to assess trait weights. Prior research has indicated that though beta coefficients are sensitive to differences in the variance of independent variables, unstandardized regression coefficients are not (Johnson and Gustafsson 2000; Lewis-Beck 1980; Pedhazur 1997) and are preferable in situations in which variances may differ. We find that for the groups for which we expected and obtained the strongest negativity effect (strong opponents), the correlation between trait rating and trait variance is either small and insignificant or in the opposite direction (i.e., negative traits had lower, not higher, variance), which increases our confidence in the finding of a negativity effect (i.e., it emerged despite the variance differences working against it). More important, the correlations between the mean trait variance and trait ratings were highly negative, which indicates a higher variance of negative traits (r's ranging from –.59 to –.95, all $ps < .10$) for all groups (supporters and swing) for which we had neither predicted nor obtained a significant negativity effect. As such, this negative relationship may increase the likelihood of a negative coefficient (and negativity effect), thereby working against our prediction of the absence of this effect. This likelihood could have contributed to the prevalence of negatively signed coefficients for these groups. However, a statistically significant negativity effect does not emerge for these voters, despite negative correlations between the ratings and weightings, which provides even stronger support for our predictions.[7]

Voting against candidates. Although we do not find a negativity effect for the supporter groups, the data do not rule out the tendency of people to vote against candidates. Simply stated, in a situation in which the voter is evaluating two candidates, the negative evaluation of the opponent (not the positive evaluation of the supported candidate) may

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[7]We also estimated the negativity equation (relationship between trait ratings and trait importance, using unstandardized b's), controlling for the variance in the trait ratings, with the following equation:

Trait importance (b) = α + b(trait rating) + b(trait standard deviation).

A negativity effect still emerged for the opponent groups, as we predicted. In addition, when variance was controlled, the sign of the unstandardized slope coefficient for the undecided group flipped from (nonsignificantly) negative to (nonsignificantly) positive for both of the 1992 candidates.

TABLE 2
Regression Coefficients for the Negativity Analysis of the 1996 Election

Segment of Voters	Evaluation of Clinton			Evaluation of Dole		
	b	Standard Error	n[a]	b	Standard Error	n[a]
Full sample	−.35*	.16	1624	−.73***	.13	1491
Strong preference for candidate	−.16	.18	600	−.33	.36	311
Weak preference for candidate	−.11	.19	180	.01	.16	147
Swing voters (thermometer difference approach)	.02	.06	316	−.39	.31	291
Weak preference for opponent	−.28*	.14	154	−.69	.15	168
Strong preference for opponent	−.44**	.11	315	−.63**	.14	544

*$p < .10$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.
[a]Number of voters in the segment.

drive the formation of preference. One way to determine whether people have a tendency to vote against is to assess whether their preference (and its strength) is determined to a greater extent by their dislike of the opposed candidate than by their liking of the supported candidate.

To this end, we estimated two logit regression models (one for each election). For each voter who had formed a preference (i.e., all voters except the swing voters), we used the overall evaluations of the supported and opposed candidates to predict the strength of the voters' preference for their chosen candidate (1 = "weakly prefer"; 2 = "strongly prefer the candidate"). These analyses help us assess whether the opponent's weaknesses, as opposed to the supported candidate's strengths, are more influential in strengthening a voter's preferences. If people have a tendency to vote against, the coefficient for the opposed candidate should be significantly larger than that for the supported candidate. There were 1638 cases in the 1992 regression and 1282 cases in the 1996 regression. Our analyses reveal that voter evaluations of the supported candidate explain significantly greater variance in the strength of preferences than do evaluations of the opposed candidate for both the 1992 (coefficient$_{(supported)}$ = .08, coefficient$_{(opposed)}$ = −.03, both $ps < .001$; t = 8.92, $p < .001$, for the difference between absolute values of the slope coefficients) and the 1996 (coefficient$_{(supported)}$ = .11, coefficient$_{(opposed)}$ = −.03, both $ps < .001$; t = 10.43, $p < .001$) elections. This result indicates that people do not have a tendency to vote against candidates. Their strength of preference is driven more by their liking of the supported candidate than by their dislike of the opposed candidate.

Another way to address this issue involves examining the mean thermometer scores. Voting against would translate into evaluations of opposed candidates that are disproportionately lower than the midpoint (neutral point of 50) of the scale compared with the magnitude by which evaluations of the supported candidate are higher than the midpoint. Analyses of the thermometer scores from the 1992 and 1996 data sets do not support such a tendency. In contrast, for all groups of voters who had formed a preference, the mean thermometer score for the supported candidate is farther above the midpoint of the thermometer scale than is the score of opposed candidate below the midpoint (statistically significant for six of eight groups with $ps < .001$ and directionally more distant for the remaining two groups).[8] That is, the supported candidate's evaluation is more favorable in magnitude than the opposed candidate's evaluation is unfavorable. Furthermore, the overall evaluation for both candidates is slightly above the midpoint for the swing voters (Bush = 55, Clinton = 52 [1992 candidate choice method]; Bush = 56, Clinton = 57 [1992 thermometer difference]; Dole = 58, Clinton = 57 [1996]), which suggests that they were not deciding on a candidate against whom to vote.

Discussion

The results from both the 1992 and 1996 elections converge in indicating that a negativity effect is not characteristic of all voters. Only those who prefer the opponent weight a candidate's weaknesses more heavily than his strengths. Thus, negative information about a candidate appears to be given more weight only when it is preference consistent. Although there is a slight tendency for strong opponents to show the greatest negativity, this effect is also significant for weak opponents, which suggests that any level of opposition makes negative information preference consistent. Negativity was not found for swing voters or those who prefer the candidate.[9] Although the full aggregated sample

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[8]Scores for the 1992 data set were as follows: strong Clinton supporters = +27 versus −16; weak Clinton supporters = +14 versus −6; weak Bush supporters = +17 versus −9; and strong Bush supporters = +32 versus −17 (all $ps < .001$). For 1996, the scores were strong Clinton supporters = +34 versus −9 ($p < .001$); weak Clinton supporters = +16 versus −7 ($p < .001$); weak Dole supporters = +15 versus −12 (not significant); and strong Dole supporters = +28 versus −27 (not significant).

[9]The findings for swing voters cannot be attributed to a lack of knowledge or low level of political interest. Analyses reveal that these voters were as knowledgeable about politics, not more skeptical about the government, and at least as likely to vote as the other groups.

exhibits negativity, this effect is not significant in the aggregate analyses when the opponent groups are excluded. At a more general level, our results suggest that voters are more likely to vote for candidates than against them, and the negativity effect is more often absent than present in the evaluation of political candidates. Thus, our findings suggest a new perspective on negativity in politics.

One point that requires further discussion relates to the possibility that voters base their trait ratings on their overall evaluation (halo effect). This possibility would be especially high if trait ratings immediately followed the overall evaluation question. The overall evaluation and trait ratings, however, were separated by dozens of other questions relating to House and Senate candidates, opinions about a wide range of issues (e.g., affirmative action, religion, foreign affairs), and various other topics. Furthermore, the negativity effect is not dependent on the mean level of trait ratings (lower or higher, as implied by a halo effect) but on the differential weighting of traits based on their favorability (Ahluwalia 2002; Anderson 1981). A negativity effect would not be more likely to emerge for a voter who rates the candidate lower (versus higher) on all traits; instead, it would be much less likely to emerge for a voter who exhibits a strong halo effect for his or her negative overall evaluation (giving all traits similarly low ratings). In such a situation, the voter is not necessarily weighting the candidate's weaknesses more than his or her strengths; he or she is rating every trait as a weakness. This rating reduces the possibility of a negativity effect, which requires both perceived strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, by definition, a halo effect is not consistent with the emergence of a negativity effect.[10]

The absence of a negativity effect in the 1992 and 1996 analyses for the voters who preferred the candidate is not likely to be a result of either smaller sample size or low power of the tests. The sample size was similar in the supporter and opponent cells for both candidates in both elections. When the data were aggregated across voters with strong and weak preferences for each candidate within each election—thus increasing the sample size—the negativity effect was still not statistically significant for either of the candidates for voters who preferred them. Similarly, even when the ratings of both candidates by swing voters were pooled (for the 1992 NES) or we examined our larger samples of swing voters (from the thermometer difference approach), the relationship between trait ratings and trait weights was still not significant. Thus, the absence of a neg-

ativity effect for all groups of voters, except those who preferred the opponent, appears to be a robust finding.[11]

Study 2: Negativity During Early Stages of the Campaign

Data and Methodology

The 1988 NES Super Tuesday study was also conducted by the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The study was conducted through telephone interviews between January 17 and March 8 (the early primary season). The sample size was 2076 respondents. The survey included a trait inventory and thermometer ratings for all the candidates.[12] To test the hypotheses, we assessed negativity for the primary candidates by the same technique used in Study 1.

We predict (H_4) that the larger the proportion of voters who dislike a candidate, the higher is the likelihood that an aggregate-level negativity effect will emerge. Furthermore, if this group of opponents is excluded from the data, an aggregate-level negativity effect should fail to emerge (H_5). The most conservative test of our hypothesis would be conducted by eliminating the strongest opponents. In the absence of the strength of preference measure used in Study 1, we operationalized this group as those who gave low thermometer scores to a candidate (≤ 20). We chose this cutoff on the basis of the NES analyses from Study 1, which reveal that the strong opponents group (as defined by the vote choice and strength of preference measures) has a mean thermometer score as low as 22 (for Clinton in 1996).

Results

Aggregate-level negativity analysis. As we show in Table 3, most candidates did not show a significant aggregate-level negativity effect during the primary; significant negativity emerged for only 3 of the 13 candidates, despite the large sample sizes (n > 600 for 10 of 13 candidates). A negativity effect had not yet emerged for Michael Dukakis, who went on to become the democratic nominee. Klein (1991), who analyzed the 1988 main election NES database, reports a significant aggregate-level negativity effect for Dukakis in the data collected just before the final election.

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[10]As further evidence against a halo explanation for our results, our analyses reveal a high correlation between the trait ratings of the strong supporter and strong opponent groups for each candidate ($r_{(Clinton\ 1996)} = .90$, $r_{(Dole\ 1996)} = .94$, $r_{(Clinton\ 1992)} = .77$, $r_{(Bush\ 1992)} = .85$, all $ps < .001$), which indicates that there was a high level of agreement between the two groups on the candidates' perceived strengths and weaknesses. Consistent with our prior arguments, these data suggest that though the opponents were in general agreement with supporters about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the candidate, a negativity effect emerged for the former group because the candidates' weaknesses were apparently more diagnostic than their strengths in voters' overall evaluations.

[11]Even the smaller samples in some cells are large enough to produce reliable estimates of trait weighting (Hair et al. 1998). Note also that our negativity analysis examined the relationship between trait ratings and trait means. Thus, we determined n in this analysis by the number of traits and did not vary it across subsamples.

[12]Respondents in the 1988 study were asked how well each of the following eight attributes described each candidate running in the primaries: "intelligent," "compassionate," "moral," "inspiring," "provides strong leadership," "decent," "cares about people like you," and "knowledgeable." Relative to later NES studies, "decent" appeared in this survey, and "honest" and "gets things done" did not. Respondents indicated that the trait described the candidate "a great deal," "somewhat," "little," or "not at all."

TABLE 3
Negativity Coefficients by Candidate With and Without Strong Opponents: Super Tuesday 1988

Candidate	Negativity Coefficient Including Opponents (unstandardized b)	n[a]	Negativity Coefficient Excluding Opponents (unstandardized b)	n[a]
George H.W. Bush	−.45**	1626	−.31	1478
Gary Hart	−.33***	1579	−.19	1124
Jesse Jackson	−.65	1582	−.16	1281
Bob Dole	−.22	1305	−.09	1264
Pat Robertson	−.68***	1285	−.57***	956
Alexander Haig	−.36*	523	−.24	448
Michael Dukakis	−.22	862	−.05	815
Dick Gephardt	−.36	822	−.38	773
Paul Simon	−.17	720	−.17	671
Jack Kemp	−.32	691	−.25	645
Al Gore	−.38	635	−.29	604
Bruce Babbitt	−.35	248	−.35	223
Pierre Dupont	−.24	217	−.37	198

*$p < .10$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.
[a]Number of voters who rated the candidate.

To test H_4, we predicted the negativity coefficient (the unstandardized slope coefficient for the relationship between trait ratings and trait weightings) using the proportion of voters classified as opponents; we find that the higher the proportion of opponents for a candidate, the greater is the negativity effect ($b = −.61$, $p < .05$).

Next, to confirm that the opponents were driving the emergence of an aggregate-level negativity effect in these data (H_5), we ran a new set of aggregate negativity analyses following the same technique but with the strong opponents excluded. As we show in Table 3, with the exception of Pat Robertson,[13] a significant negativity effect failed to emerge for any of the candidates when opponents (who were motivated to view the candidate negatively) were not included in the analyses. This result suggests that a majority of the voters in the primaries are not motivated to weight a candidate's weaknesses more heavily than his strengths. (Note that the absence of negativity in the primaries is not due to voters' inability to distinguish the candidates' relative strengths and weaknesses; ranges of trait ratings in the primaries were similar to those of the general election candidates examined in Study 1.)

Discussion

The findings of Study 2 support H_4 and H_5. The lack of a significant negativity effect for most candidates at this stage of the campaign supports our theorizing. More important, we find that the aggregate-level negativity effect is likely a function of the proportion of strong opponents. Negativity is likely to be a hallmark of this group of voters, and their presence appears to drive the aggregate-level finding. Candidates who have not yet developed a group of opponents who are highly motivated to focus on their negatives are not likely to be subject to a significant aggregate-level negativity effect. As such, these opponent groups are most likely to emerge when either the candidate is associated with some controversial policies or personal issues or the voters are faced with a choice between a preferred candidate and an opponent during the final phases of a campaign (as examined in Study 1). In short, the findings of this study further support our central proposition: Only voters motivated to dislike the candidate exhibit a negativity effect in their evaluations.

General Discussion

Consumer behavior researchers have long been interested in both the evaluation (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000; Klein 1991, 1996; Morwitz and Pluzinski 1996; Simmons, Bickart, and Lynch 1993) and the marketing (e.g., Homer and Batra 1994; Newman and Sheth 1985) of political candidates. They have come to market candidates much as they market brands (McManus 1996; Newman 1994; Upshaw 1996).

One empirical finding that has had a substantial impact on the marketing of brands, as well as of political candidates, is the negativity effect. Evidence of a significant negativity effect in six recent presidential elections has provided support for attack strategies in political campaigns and negative product advertising (Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1995; Pinkleton 1997). Prior theorizing and data also suggest a negativity effect for swing voters.

Political pundits apparently advocate negativity, despite its potential ill effects on voter turnout and involvement, because they expect voters to weight negative information more heavily in their evaluations than they do positive information. Prior research is consistent with this expectation, and several salient case studies—such as Bush's victory in the negative 1988 campaign—attest to negativity's effectiveness. In contrast, our research suggests that the influence of negative information is overstated. The time

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[13]Even when we removed participants who gave Robertson thermometer ratings of 20 or less from the sample, he was still left with a substantial number of opponents (50% gave a score of less than 50).

has come to reassess the role of negative information in political evaluations and reexamine the old adage that people only vote against, and not for, candidates.

The NES data from two elections (1992, 1996) and the Super Tuesday data (1988) converge in suggesting that the negativity effect is much less prevalent in the evaluation of political candidates than previously believed; it is significant only in judgments of candidates who the voter is motivated to dislike. This motivation may occur because the voter either has a preference for an opponent or simply dislikes the candidate. Our analysis indicates that this subset of the electorate drives the aggregate-level negativity effect obtained in previous research.

In Study 1, we find a significant negativity effect only for the preferred candidate's opponent. It did not emerge for either swing voters or those who preferred the candidate. In Study 2, we again find that the aggregate-level negativity effect is dependent on the presence of strong opponents. These findings indicate that swing voters and those judging their preferred candidate are less likely to exhibit a negativity effect.

We could argue in favor of negative advertising on the basis of the notion that some voters may become strong opponents because of their exposure to negative candidate information. Thus, a promising strategy would be to create a large group of opponents through negative advertising. Elections research suggests, however, that initial preferences are derived from perceived candidates' positions on high valence issues, party affiliation, and other long-standing ideologies (see Kinder 1998). Furthermore, our results for swing voters (Study 1) and the vast majority of primary voters (Study 2) show that negative candidate information is not given greater weight than is positive information before preferences are formed. In addition, preference strength is better predicted by evaluations of the preferred candidate (presumably based on positive information) than by evaluations of the opposed candidate (potentially based on negative information). Together, these arguments suggest that negative attack advertisements are not more likely than positive advertisements to turn undecided voters into opponents.

We do not find a significant positivity effect in any of our analyses. The tendency toward low (but nonsignificant) levels of negativity implies the possible combined effects of both cognitive and motivational forces and suggests the need to understand relative rather than alternative roles of cognitive and motivational explanations. Negative information is perceptually more salient and therefore likely to garner more attention (e.g., Jones and McGillis 1976). However, the manner in which it is processed (e.g., discounted, supported) and how much weight it receives in overall impressions depends on the motivation of the perceiver. Although a consistency motivation that accompanies a weakly positive attitude may be adequate to attenuate negative information's perceptual advantages, a strong attachment (and high motivation) may be needed to completely reverse them (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001).

Our research paradigm is somewhat different from that of impression formation studies (e.g., Anderson 1981; Fiske 1980), in that we use the voters' self-reported trait ratings and overall candidate evaluations to compute the negativity effect. Although our paradigm is not the most prevalent method for estimating a negativity effect (given the predominance of experimental research that uses unknown targets), it is well established in and consistent with prior field research that has examined the negativity effect in the context of familiar targets (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000; Klein 1991, 1996; Lau 1982). Furthermore, we measured all candidate traits with the primarily positively worded traits used in the NES surveys to avoid confounds associated with the differential wording of items. However, this method may underrepresent the extremity of some negative beliefs. Additional research should examine the extent to which such a bias is likely. Scales with bipolar endpoints (dishonest/honest) may be better able to capture the full range of voter beliefs.

Implications for Political Marketing Management

Our findings challenge the accepted wisdom that negative campaigning is an effective means of persuading critical voters who either have weak preferences or are undecided (Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1995; Lau 1985). Whereas political pundits predict that attack advertising will become more common as more independents and swing voters dominate the U.S. electorate (Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1995; Lau and Sigelman 1998), our findings suggest that the wisdom of this strategy should be reassessed because these target audiences are not motivated to dwell on negatives. The disparagement communicated in negative advertisements will be music to the ears of voters who already dislike the candidate, but preaching to the choir is not the optimal objective of campaign spending.

We note that the absence of a negativity effect does not imply that negative information does not have any impact on these voter segments; it simply means that it is not more effective than equally extreme positive information. If a candidate is the target of a negative advertisement, the advertisement is likely to attenuate his or her evaluation (e.g., Pinkleton 1997). However, this attenuation will be of approximately the same magnitude as the enhancement likely to occur in response to an equally extreme positive advertisement. We speculate that if the negative information presented in an attack is more extreme than the available positive information the candidate offers in support of his or her candidacy, or it corresponds to a particularly salient issue, negative campaigning may be more persuasive than positive advertising, especially for swing and weak preference voters. However, most negative campaigning in the marketplace consists of mudslinging attacks that focus on a small corner of a candidate's career and address trivial issues (Kamber 1997), and therefore its value to the campaign is potentially questionable. Examples abound of situations in which negative campaigning about minor issues failed to influence voter groups. For example, Steve Forbes and Lamar Alexander (1996 primaries) launched negative campaigns against Bob Dole based on narrow issues; Dole emerged as the front runner. In the 2004 Iowa caucus, the two candidates who ran negative campaigns (Howard Dean and Dick Gephardt) finished solidly behind those who promoted more positive campaigns (John Kerry and John Edwards). Even in the general elections, the main attacker

has not always emerged as the winner: Consider Bush (1992) and Dole (1996).

In summary, our research suggests that campaign managers might not want to target the opponent's negatives for the sake of negativity. The absence of a negativity effect implies that only when the content of negative information is of an extreme or compelling nature (compared with possible positive information) is it likely to be more effective than its positive counterpart in changing the preferences of the most malleable swing voters.

Implications for Nonpolitical Marketing Management

Our research provides a stringent test of the negativity hypotheses. Voting contexts are different from brand judgments (for which some limitations of the negativity effect have been uncovered; Ahluwalia 2002): Voters are faced with a choice (instead of a judgment), the target is a person (instead of a product), and data are collected in naturalistic settings in which the salience advantages of negative information are magnified (instead of in laboratory contexts in which subjects are directed to process all information, which attenuates the salience advantage). Therefore, a negativity effect should be much more likely to emerge in political candidate research than in experiments that focus on brand judgments. That a significant negativity effect does not emerge for multiple voter segments even within this context presents a greater challenge to the pervasiveness of this effect in the marketplace.

Although extending our findings from the political to the product domain is necessarily speculative, some analogies can be made that could be tested in further research. For example, swing voters are comparable to low-loyalty and switcher segments. Our findings suggest that these consumers will not weight the brand's negatives more heavily than its positives. Thus, attack advertising targeted to these groups to steal market share from the competition will not be more effective than a positive campaign.

The finding that a negativity effect was absent for lesser known candidates in the 1988 primaries has implications for competition with new products and brands. Attacking a new entrant might be less productive than simply promoting the positives of an existing brand, unless the established brand enjoys a base of strong supporters who will represent strong opponents to a new offering. This group will carefully consider negative information about the new entrant. For its part, attack advertisements by the new entrant will be most effective if they are targeted at those consumers who already are dissatisfied with current offerings. Therefore, a proper understanding of the size and passion of segments that represent different loyalty levels is essential in the battle for market share.

Our findings are consistent with those of other studies that find that a positive corporate image and strong consumer loyalty offer some protection to a firm faced with negative publicity (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001). For example, recent research in corporate social responsibility finds that a prior positive corporate image protects the corporation from the impact of negative information exposed during a crisis (Klein and Dawar 2004). Our research suggests that an understanding of the strength of consumer preferences for a brand or corporation is important for designing effective strategies to respond to negative publicity.

In conclusion, our research joins a growing number of studies that examine the effect of motivations on information processing (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001; Kunda 2000; Till and Shimp 1998). We find that though negative information may have perceptual advantages, a focus on cognitions alone cannot explain its role in complex naturalistic environments in which people are driven by a variety of motivations (Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, and Chen 1996). Our results suggest the fruitfulness of reexamining other findings in marketing that are based on a strictly cognitive information processing perspective.

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