How encompassing is the effect of negativity bias on political conservatism?

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Abstract: We argue that the political effects of negativity bias are narrower than Hibbing et al. suggest. Negativity bias reliably predicts social, but not economic, conservatism, and its political effects often vary across levels of political engagement. Thus the role of negativity bias in broad ideological conflict depends on the strategic packaging of economic and social attitudes by political elites.

Hibbing et al. provide a masterful review of the literatures documenting psychological, behavioral, and physiological differences between liberals and conservatives. Moreover, they propose an elegant thesis to account for these literatures' main findings: that conservatives are more attuned and responsive to aversive stimuli than are liberals, and individual differences in dispositional negativity bias account for differences in
conservative versus liberal political attitudes. We comment here on three key aspects of this thesis: the structure of political attitudes, the relations of negativity bias (as broadly conceptualized by Hibbing et al.) with social and economic political attitudes, and contextual moderators of the links between negativity bias and political attitudes. These considerations, we argue, suggest that dispositional influences on political attitudes, and therefore political preferences, are organically drawn toward conservative sociocultural attitudes. If such individuals become politically engaged (as in the case of activists), then they are frequently exposed to political discourse indicating that conservative sociocultural attitudes should be packaged with conservative economic attitudes, which they ultimately come to adopt. This study and others like it (e.g., Malka & Soto 2011) suggest that some dispositional effects on political attitudes are not organic, but rather are contingent upon exposure to discursive messages about the packaging of political attitudes.

Taked together, the findings reviewed in this commentary support several conclusions about the relations between dispositional negativity bias and political attitudes. As proposed by Hibbing et al. those individuals high in negativity bias do appear to be organically drawn toward conservative social attitudes such as restrictive immigration policies, harsh treatment of criminals, and social and moral traditionalism. However, such individuals do not appear to be organically drawn toward conservative economic attitudes. Instead, the effects of negativity bias on economic attitudes are contingent upon contextual factors such as culture and exposure to political discourse. More generally, the bottom-up structuring of sociocultural and economic attitudes compelled by dispositional influences might differ from, and even compete with, the top-down attitude structuring promoted by political discourse (e.g., Hatemi et al. 2012). Conservative economic and sociocultural preferences do not seem to be bound together through the bottom-up influence of negativity bias.

### Political ideology is contextually variable and flexible rather than fixed

Hibbing et al. argue that the liberal–conservative continuum is (a) universal and (b) grounded in psychological differences in sensitivity to negative stimuli. Our commentary argues that both claims overlook the importance of context. We review evidence that the liberal–conservative continuum is far from universal and that ideological differences are contextually flexible rather than fixed. Hibbing et al. make two overarching claims: (a) the liberal–conservative continuum is an “ancient and universal” lens that people use to make sense of their social world (sect. 1, para. 1), and (b) the psychological explanation for the liberal–conservative continuum is that liberals are less sensitive and responsive to negative stimuli than conservatives. These claims are consistent with a scientific commitment to parsimony and alluring in their simplicity. Both of these claims, however, ignore a foundational psychological principle: Context matters. This commentary will address a