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Threat bias, not negativity bias, underpins differences in political ideology

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specific neural pathways that underlie political attitudes and behavior; it may also challenge longstanding assumptions about the stability of both biological and ideological processes.

Political infants? Developmental origins of the negativity bias

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Abstract: The negativity bias in human cognition emerges in infancy and continues throughout childhood. To fully understand the relationship between differences in attention to negative stimuli and variance in political ideologies, it is critical to consider human development and the process by which early individual differences in negativity unfold and are shaped by both genes and environment.

Hibbing et al. propose a fascinating account of how individual variation in the negativity bias explains variations in political ideology. This account raises a critical question: What explains individual variation in the negativity bias? The authors present an evolutionary hypothesis to explain this individual variation, but this need not mean that the variation is innate and present from birth (Gottlieb 2007; McClintock 1979). To fully understand the foundations of individual variation in the negativity bias, it is equally important to consider the emergence of the bias in human ontogeny. The authors review two important studies that tie early psychological attributes to later political attitudes (Block & Block 2006; Fraley et al. 2012); we propose that research exploring how biological and environmental factors contribute to the early development of, and variability in, the negativity bias could be profitably integrated with this approach.

Research in developmental psychology reveals that the negativity bias guides human cognition as early as infancy and continues throughout childhood. For example, infants look longer at fearful than at happy faces and modify their own behavior more strongly in response to others' negative than others' positive expressions (see Vaish et al. 2008 for a review), and preschool-aged children selectively remember the faces of threatening individuals (Kinzler & Shutts 2008). Yet, very little is known about the nature of early individual differences in the negativity bias. Understanding how and whether early individual differences in attention to negative stimuli guide later attitudes – and the process by which early individual differences unfold and are shaped by both genes and environment – is critical for gaining traction on the nature of psychological and political attitudes across the lifespan.

One area of investigation that promises to be extremely fruitful in this regard is that of genetic variation. Indeed, one recent study shows that genetic variation accounts for differences in infants' negativity bias in processing fearful faces (Grossmann et al. 2011). Equally, one can ask about the role of early experience in establishing the negativity bias. The authors note that parents' political beliefs have only meager effects on their children's eventual political orientations. Yet parenting may have very important effects on the emergence of the negativity bias in early development. As illustration, infants who have had more frequent exposure to happy expressions (because they have happy, positive mothers) show a greater negativity bias than infants whose mothers are not as happy and positive (de Haan et al. 2004). Thus, the influence of parenting on the factors that contribute to political attitudes may be more robust than is currently known.

Further research is needed to understand how such biological and environmental factors, as well as their interaction, impact individuals' attention to negative events throughout development.

The target article provides evidence that individual differences in the negativity bias are stable over time, yet when do such stable differences emerge? Although diverse studies suggest that the negativity bias emerges as early as infancy, no research to date has explored whether infants' reactions are predictive of later attitudes. The authors briefly make reference to Jerome Kagan's work on early temperament, but this relation needs to be empirically explored. Moreover, it is unknown whether individual differences in early attention to negative social stimuli relate to individual differences in other aspects of temperament (though see Grossmann et al. 2011). It is plausible that early attention to negative information could be meaningfully related to infants' novelty seeking behaviors. If so, this might suggest an early coherence across psychological profiles that relate to later political attitudes. If not, this would suggest a potential complexity in the developmental trajectory of early social behaviors and attitudes, and raise new questions regarding how such individual variation serves as a precursor to later attitudes.

In their discussion, the authors put forth the possibility that different subcategories of negative emotion may differentially impact attitudes toward diverse issue sets. Is attention to *some kinds* of negative information early in development most predictive of later political attitudes? For example, there is evidence that threatening information (as opposed to information that is negative but non-threatening, such as sadness) may be most attention grabbing early in development (Kinzler & Shutts 2008; Lobue 2009). It is conceivable that individual differences in early attention to threat, but not all subcategories of negative information, may predict the emergence of diverse political profiles. It also remains to be seen whether the category *threat* may be even further meaningfully subdivided – for instance, is early attention to social threats different from attention to non-social threats? A more nuanced understanding of the parameters of early negativity bias that predict later political profiles may help uncover new insight regarding the nature of political attitudes among adults, and could help resolve apparent incongruities in the kinds of negative information (e.g., threats from people versus threats from the environment) that elicit different reactions among conservatives and liberals.

To conclude, the authors argue that their approach can be useful in identifying which political attitudes are “peripheral” and which are “core.” We agree. Furthermore, if core attitudes are identified, might the hallmarks of those attitudes be present early in development? And if so, which candidate aspects of children's early lives, choices, and social experiences might reflect those attitudes? We submit that inquiries at the intersection of developmental and political psychology will generate new productive research programs that inform our understanding of the factors contributing to political attitudes across the lifespan and will reveal many fascinating insights into the human mind in social and political context.

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Threat bias, not negativity bias, underpins differences in political ideology

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Abstract: Although disparities in political ideology are rooted partly in dispositional differences, Hibbing et al.'s analysis paints with an overly broad brush. Research on the personality correlates of liberal-conservative differences points not to global differences in negativity bias, but to differences in threat bias, probably emanating from differences in fearfulness. This distinction bears implications for etiological research and persuasion efforts.

Hibbing et al. provide a helpful review of the psychological underpinnings of individual differences in political ideology, especially between social liberals and social conservatives (whom for brevity we refer to as "liberals" and "conservatives," respectively). They conclude that the principal variable underlying the difference between liberal and conservative attitudes is negativity bias.

Although we share Hibbing et al.'s view that disparities in political ideology are rooted partly in dispositional differences, we contend that they paint with too broad a brush. The data point not to global differences in negativity bias, but to differences in threat bias, most likely emanating from differences in fearfulness. In fairness, Hibbing et al. at times describe the difference between liberals and conservatives as stemming from differential sensitivity to threat, quoting Schaller and Neuberg (2008): "Some people [conservatives] seem to go through life more cognizant of threats" (p. 405). Yet elsewhere, they portray this difference as originating from an overarching temperamental difference in negativity: "Compared with liberals, conservatives tend to be more psychologically and physiologically sensitive to environmental stimuli generally but in particular to stimuli that are negatively valenced, whether threatening or merely unexpected and unstructured" (sect. 6, para. 6).

The difference between negativity bias and threat bias is hardly semantic. The personality literature points consistently to the existence of largely orthogonal higher-order dimensions of negative emotionality (NE) and Constraint, the latter of which falls on the opposite pole of Disinhibition (Tellegen & Waller 2008). NE is a pervasive dimension, similar to but broader than neuroticism, which reflects the propensity to experience unpleasant affects of many kinds, including anxiety, irritability, and mistrust. As Watson and Clark (1984) noted, individuals with elevated NE tend to dwell on the negative aspects of life and attend selectively to unpleasant stimuli. In contrast, Constraint is a disposition toward fearfulness and response inhibition that, according to some theorists (e.g., Fowles 2002; Lykken 1995), reflects the activity of the Behavioral Inhibition System, a brain-based circuit that mediates sensitivity to signals of punishment and uncertainty (Gray & McNaughton 1996).

Most evidence suggests that Constraint, more than NE, is the principal nexus of individual differences in threat sensitivity, especially when perceived dangers are relatively clear-cut (Depue & Spoont 1986). For example, individuals with elevated Constraint and its constituent traits, particularly harm-avoidance/fear, exhibit pronounced fear-potentiated startle (Kramer et al. 2012; Vaidyanathan et al. 2009) and habituate slowly to startle-provoking stimuli (LaRowe et al. 2006). In contrast, NE is not consistently related to avoidance reactions to threatening stimuli, including gruesome imagery (Watson & Clark 1984). The independence of NE and Constraint parallels the distinction between trait anxiety and trait fear, respectively (Sylvers et al. 2011). Trait anxiety appears to reflect a disposition to react to uncertain threats, whereas trait fear appears to reflect a disposition to react to certain threats. In factor analytic studies, trait anxiety loads primarily on NE, whereas trait fear loads primarily on Constraint (Church & Burke 1994; Tellegen & Waller 2008).

These two higher-order dimensions are conflated in much of Hibbing et al.'s analysis. This confusion is problematic, because the literature suggests that liberals and conservatives differ in threat sensitivity, presumably reflecting individual differences in Constraint (see also Jost et al. 2003), but *not* in their attunement to the negative. For example, studies in both the U.S. and Europe reveal that conservatives are either essentially identical to liberals in NE (Butler 2000; Caprara et al. 1999; 2006; Carney et al. 2008; Chirumbolo & Leone 2010; Kossowska & van Hiel 1999) or

significantly *lower* than liberals in NE (Gerber et al. 2010). Vigil (2010) similarly found that compared with liberals, conservatives reported modestly but significantly lower levels of emotional distress and frequencies of crying.

In contrast to the absence of clear-cut differences in NE, Carney et al. (2008) found that the principal correlates of political ideology within the Five Factor Model of personality (FFM) are in the dimensions of Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience, with liberals tending to be somewhat lower in most facets of the former and somewhat higher in most facets of the latter (see also Caprara et al. 2006; Gerber et al. 2010). Notably, Constraint is best accounted for by Conscientiousness and Openness within the FFM (Church 1994; cf. Digman 1997). In sum, the principal difference between liberals and conservatives appears to lie not within with the domain of NE, but rather within Constraint and probably fearfulness in particular, manifesting itself in differential sensitivity to reasonably clear-cut threats.

This alternative conceptualization is important for at least three reasons. First, it clarifies the primary dispositional differences between liberals and conservatives, and directs efforts to understand the etiology of political ideologies away from basic affective dimensions and toward threat sensitivity. It also raises a plethora of questions, such as why the links between threat sensitivity and political affiliation are only modest, suggesting the presence of unidentified modifying variables. Second, this conceptualization may help to avert the pejorative connotations often associated with research on personality differences in political ideology (e.g., York 2003). The assertion that conservatives are globally negatively biased bears few implications for adaptive functioning. In contrast, the proposition that conservatives are especially attuned to threat is not inherently disparaging, as certain hazards are genuine and necessitate attention (Barlow 2004). Hence, a threat bias interpretation reminds us that neither political view is inherently healthier than the other. Third, this perspective may be helpful in crafting messages designed to bridge the partisan divide (Abramowitz 2010). For example, a threat bias interpretation may imply that conservatives will be most readily persuaded by communications reassuring them that dangers arising from policy changes (e.g., immigration reform) are less dire than initially envisioned. Conversely, liberals may respond best to communications that leverage psychological attributes other than threat, such as perceived fairness (Haidt 2012). In this way, a more precise characterization of the wellspring of liberal-conservative differences may promote a more constructive dialogue between individuals of competing political ideologies.

Differences in negativity bias probably underlie variation in attitudes toward change generally, not political ideology specifically

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Abstract: Many of the characteristics cited in Hibbing et al.'s account are ineffective predictors of economic conservatism. However, these same characteristics are often associated with differences not only in social conservatism but also in religiousness and authoritarianism. Hibbing et al. may have offered a useful explanation of traditionalism and attitudes toward change across domains rather than of general political attitudes.

Hibbing et al. argue that the association between political attitudes and a wide range of psychological and physiological characteristics reflects elevated levels of negativity bias among political