

Positive-Negative Asymmetry in the Evaluations of Political Candidates: The Mediating Role of Affect in the Relationship between Cognitive Evaluation and Voting Intention

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Abstract : The negativity effect is one of the most intriguing and well-studied psychological phenomena that can be observed in many areas of human life. The aim of the following study is to investigate how valence framing and positive and negative information about political candidates affect judgments about similarity to an ideal and bad politician. Based on the theoretical framework of features of similarity, it is hypothesized that negative features have a stronger effect on similarity judgments than positive features of comparable value. Furthermore, the mediating role of affect is tested. Method: One hundred sixty-one people took part in an experimental study. Participants were divided into 6 research conditions that differed in the reference point (positive vs negative framing) and the number of favourable and unfavourable information items about political candidates (a positive, neutral and negative candidate profile). In positive framing condition, the concept of an ideal politician was primed; in the negative condition, participants were to think about a bad politician. The effect of independent variables on similarity judgments, affective evaluation, and voting intention was tested. Results: In the positive condition, the analysis showed that the negative effect of additional unfavourable features was greater than the positive effect of additional favourable features in judgements about similarity to the ideal candidate. In negative framing condition, ANOVA was insignificant, showing that neither the addition of positive features nor additional negative information had a significant impact on the similarity to a bad political candidate. To explain this asymmetry, two mediational analyses were conducted that tested the mediating role of affect in the relationship between similarity judgments and voting intention. In both situations the mediating effect was significant, but the comparison of two models showed that the mediation was stronger for a negative framing. Discussion: The research supports the negativity effect and attempts to explain the psychological mechanism behind the positive-negative asymmetry. The results of mediation analyses point to a stronger mediating role of affect in the relationship between cognitive evaluation and voting intention. Such a result suggests that negative comparisons, leading to the activation of negative features, give rise to stronger emotions than positive features of comparable strength. The findings are in line with positive-negative asymmetry, however, by adopting Tversky's framework of features of similarity, the study integrates the cognitive mechanism of the negativity effect delineated in the contrast model of similarity with its emotional component resulting from the asymmetrical effect of positive and negative emotions on decision-making.

Keywords : affect, framing, negativity effect, positive-negative asymmetry, similarity judgements

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