

Negativity and Public Opinion

Limits and Consequences of the Negativity Bias in Politics

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“No man is an island, entire of itself”, as John Donne once wrote. This probably rings true in life more generally – having spent the better part of the last two months in a sleep-deprived state in my office, I can’t really be sure anymore. But one thing I do know is that it’s definitely true for life as a PhD student. For better or worse, my dissertation wouldn’t have been anywhere near where it is today without helpful discussions and guidance from a large number of people. I am happy to get this opportunity to express my gratitude to those who have been along for the ride.

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Mathias Osmundsen
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Preface

This report summarizes my PhD dissertation “Negativity and Public Opinion: Limits and Consequences of the Negativity Bias in Politics”, written at the Department of Political Science, Aarhus University. The dissertation consists of this summary report and six articles and papers that are published in or prepared for international peer-reviewed journals. The goal of the summary report is to motivate the questions that guide the papers, to provide a theoretical framework that ties together their different focus points, and to provide a broader discussion that goes beyond the individual papers. Therefore, specific details with regard to theoretical arguments, methods, and measurements can be found in the papers. The following papers are included in the dissertation:

- **Paper A** (In this report, abbreviated to “New Information, Not Negative Information”)
Osmundsen, M. n.d. New Information, Not Negative Information: Investigating the Limits of the Negativity Bias in Political Communication. *In Review*.
- **Paper B** (“Framing Political Risks”)
Osmundsen, M, & Petersen, MB. n.d. Framing Political Risks: Individual Differences and the Negativity Bias in Personal and Political Situations. *Working Paper*.
- **Paper C** (“Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning”)
Osmundsen, M & Petersen, MB. 2017. Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning: Promotion of Political Conservatism Correlates with Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms and Can Help Reduce Them. *Social Cognition* 35(4): 450-74.
- **Paper D** (“A Dual-Process Theory of Threat”)
Hendry, D, Osmundsen, M, Laustsen, L, Aarøe, L, & Petersen, MB. n.d. Public Opinion and the Psychology of Threat: A Dual-Process Theory. *Revise & Resubmit Journal of Politics*.
- **Paper E** (“Different Cultures, Same Deep Foundations?”)
Osmundsen, M, Hendry, DJ, Laustsen, L, Hibbing, JR, Smith, KB & Petersen, MB. n.d. Different cultures, same deep foundations? Investigating the association between individual differences in negativity bias and political ideology. *In Review*.
- **Paper F** (“Disgust and Trust”)
Aarøe, L, Osmundsen, M, & Petersen, MB. 2016. Distrust As a Disease Avoidance Strategy: Individual Differences in Disgust Sensitivity Regulate Generalized Social Trust. *Frontiers in Psychology* 7:1038.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A well-known claim is that negative information is a more powerful driver of political behavior than positive information. From stories about economic busts, to news about the rise of violent crimes, to articles about the outbreak of new diseases, citizens and journalists alike tend to pay more attention to negative events at the expense of positive, more reassuring ones (e.g., Patterson 1994; Young 2003). It is accepted wisdom that “losses loom larger than gains” (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky 1979) and that mass communication highlighting negative consequences of a policy plays a greater role in shaping public opinion (e.g., Arceneaux 2012; Druckman & McDermott 2008; Jerit 2009); the implication being that politicians seem to be “motivated primarily by the desire to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than by seeking to claim credit for popular ones” (Weaver 1984, 371; see also Pierson 1994). Indeed, some have suggested “that most political institutions, like most people, prioritize negative information over positive information” (Soroka 2014, 108), and a case has been made that the very formation of states served primarily to protect against a state of nature that was “nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes 1651/1982). Thus, to reiterate, a good deal of what goes on in politics seems to boil down to a single organizing principle: A *negativity bias*, or the idea that people - journalists, citizens and politicians alike - tend to give preference to negative over positive information.

This dissertation is an argument about how information transmitted from the political world influences public opinion. In the dissertation, I question the view that negativity always prevails in policy discourse. I argue that the strength of negative over positive information is not fixed, because citizens are not all alike. And I propose that to fully understand the conditions under which exposure to *both* negative and positive mass communication is capable of changing public opinion requires a framework that accounts for citizens’ *preexisting beliefs and experiences*.

The framework I present extends prior work on why a negativity bias exists among ordinary citizens (e.g., Fiske 1980; Lau 1985; Soroka 2014). It maintains a high level of parsimony and consists of three basic ideas. The first is that due to what is most likely a combination of lifetime experiences, genetics, parental socialization and prior exposure to political information, people

differ markedly in their views of the social and political world. Some tend to be quite *optimistic* about their life prospects. Others have *pessimists* expectations and “seem to go through life more cognizant of threats” (Schaller & Neuberg 2012). The second idea builds on the first. It holds that the *same person* might be an optimist in some domains of life and a pessimist in others. She might be concerned with crime, violence and assault, or unemployment and lack of money, while remaining optimistic about her physical health. The third idea is that people evaluate incoming political information in light of their prior expectations. Optimists evaluate new information - both negative and positive - against a positive backdrop. Pessimists judge the mass communication they encounter against a negative context.

I seek to demonstrate that a framework accounting for these three basic ideas has important implications for how we should think about the negativity bias. In particular, it has implications for the extent to which political elites - politicians, interest organizations, the news media, and so on - can, and, perhaps more importantly, *cannot*, capitalize on negative information as a communication strategy to set the agenda, captivate citizens’ attention, and change their political beliefs. The framework suggests that optimists and pessimists will differ markedly in how strongly they weigh the importance of negative relative to positive information. Because a person’s expectations are domain-specific, it suggests that the same person may be susceptible to negative information in some policy domains, such as those related to the economy, while paying more attention to *positive* information in others, such as those related to public safety or public health. It helps explain the paradoxical finding that “optimism...is at the heart of the negativity bias” (Soroka 2014, 17), and thus why *pessimism* may lead to a positivity bias. And it sheds light on the overall research question guiding this dissertation: *To what extent do the effects of a negativity bias vary across individuals and policy domains?*

The notion that the strength of the effects of negative information should vary as a function of citizens’ prior expectations does not feature well in prior work on negativity biases in political communication. Many models assume from the outset that “[m]ost people place different weights on the same degree of positive or negative outcome, such that negative ones carry much more psychological weight” (McDermott 2004, 139) or that “all individuals are equally vulnerable” to a negativity bias (Kam & Simas 2010, 381; Druckman & McDermott 2008, 317; Jerit 2009, 413). They remain adamant that the effects of negative information “prevail in most real-world circumstances” and generally “win the day” (Cobb & Kuklinski 1997, 115).

To be sure, countervailing claims exist. Hibbing, Smith & Alford (2014, 304) assert that

“the most notable feature of negativity bias is not that it exists but that it varies so much from individual to individual”. And Federico, Johnston & Lavine (2014, 311) mount the argument “that the political impact of negativity bias should vary as a function of *issue domain*” (emphasis in original). However, it is nevertheless noteworthy that “we are still far from a precise theory of how or why negativity biases vary, across individuals or otherwise” (Soroka et al. 2017, 4-5). Accordingly, this dissertation represents one attempt to develop a model for explaining both why the negativity bias might not work the same for everyone, and why the effects of negative information may change from one policy domain to another.

The argument advanced here that citizens’ prior expectations might either enhance or reduce the negativity bias in political communication is quite simple. It is also *too* simple. I deliberately leave out of the model other types of individual level characteristics that are known to influence the way citizens process information from their political surroundings, like partisanship (e.g., Bisgaard 2015; Taber & Lodge 2006), and political awareness (e.g., Slothuus 2008; Zaller 1992). Moreover, the idea that a distillation of predispositions and experiences results in either positive and optimistic expectations or negative and pessimistic ones, is a significant simplification.

Yet, I intend to show that even such a simple model has a reasonable amount of explanatory horsepower and yields a number of novel insights with broad applicability. The aim is to contribute to a better understanding of how citizens react to different types of mass communication, including news stories from media outlets as well as negatively and positively framed rhetorical appeals from political elites. I intend to show that the insights generalize across a number of distinct and salient policy domains and that they are capable of explaining why the effects of negative information are not fixed across domains. I also seek to demonstrate that the model has implications for how much ordinary citizens rely on new negative information to form a diverse set of political beliefs, including support for risky policies as well as public sentiment and prospective evaluations of performance more generally.

Most importantly, I evaluate the framework as it relates to the effects of negative information on support for *conservative* policies. This speaks to a second core claim in the literature on negativity bias and concerns the *direction* of the effects of negative information on citizens’ support for public policies. A prominent view has been that people react to negative information by increasing their support for conservative policies that arguably protect against threats (e.g., Jost et al. 2003; Hibbing et al. 2014). Recently, this view has been challenged on empirical as

well as theoretical grounds. Some scholars fail to replicate key tenets of the theory (e.g., Knoll et al. 2015). Others contend that the relationship between negative information and conservative policy opinions only holds in *social* policy domains such as those related to crime, diseases, or immigration, but not *economic* ones (e.g., Malka & Soto 2014). Others go still further and argue that even on social issues, negative information may lead to both liberal and conservative policy opinions (e.g., Charney 2014).

Accordingly, a key contribution besides [i] exploring how citizens' prior expectations condition the *strength* of the negativity bias has been [ii] to understand the circumstances under which negative information *directs* people towards conservative policy positions. To this end, I evaluate a number of recent critiques leveled against the classic perspective. I also spent a fair amount of time developing an argument that accommodates both initial and revisionist accounts. The thrust of the argument, which I present in the next chapter, is that there is truth to both old and new perspectives. At the most general level, information about negative and threatening events may lead people to embrace *any* policies that they think of as protective - irrespective of ideological content. Yet, negative information will oftentimes have quite specific and distinct effects on public preferences when we zoom in on specific policy domains; and, in some instances, lead to conservative policy opinions. As such, this argument lends some credence to the classic perspective. More importantly, it sheds light on the second part of the research question on how the effects of the negativity bias may differ from one policy domain to another.

Overview of Papers, Data and Summary Report

The summary report is accompanied by six individual papers and articles. It is important to emphasize that each is guided by its own unique research questions. However, each of them provides a key piece towards answering the overarching research question of the dissertation. Collectively, they deepen our understanding on the ways in which the effects of the negativity bias may vary across ordinary citizens and policy domains. And they take an initial step towards unifying literatures on the exact relationship between negative communication and public policy opinions.

Paper A “New Information, Not Negative Information” is the main paper of the dissertation. Together with **Paper B** “Framing Political Risks” it lays out the core claim that the strength of

negative over positive information hinges critically on citizens' prior expectations. Generally, they are studies in political psychology, but with an emphasis on *political*. They are concerned with how ordinary citizens' expectations regulate the acquisition as well as the internalization of mass communication, and, thus, under what conditions exposure to new information may lead to attitude change. Empirically, they tell the story of how differently domain-specific optimists and pessimists respond to negative versus positive political information across three distinct political domains: the economy, public safety and public health. They suggest that there is a limit to the strength of the negativity bias in political communication, and that limit depends on citizens' prior beliefs about the world. Consistent with previous studies, they demonstrate that new negative information *can* change citizens political beliefs, including their support for conservative policies. But they add one crucial, yet paradoxical, qualifier: *Negative information only matters among prior optimists*. Pessimists, on the other hand, are much more susceptible to the influence of positive communication. In fact, the two studies point towards a controversial conclusion: In contrast to what some evolution-inspired accounts suggest (e.g., McDermott, Fowler, & Smirnov 2008) there may not be a "hardwired" negativity bias. What seems to drive changes in political beliefs is more about the provision of *new* information that deviates from what citizens have come to expect about their political worlds than it is about negative information *per se*.

Given that the framework advanced here contends that citizens' expectations calibrate the strength of the negativity bias, a reasonable question is this: Where does a person's expectations come from? This question is taken up in **Paper C** "Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning". The paper suggests, and demonstrates, that what makes some optimists, and others pessimists, depends in part on longstanding dispositions and is in part a function of information from the political world. I will argue that this latter finding is important. Since expectations may themselves change in response to new information, the strength of the effects of negative information may itself evolve over time. In addition, **Paper C** discusses the key idea that expectations are domain-specific and serves as an important theoretical foundation for both **Paper A** and **B**.

Paper D "A Dual-Process Theory of Threat" develops and, together with **Paper F** "Disgust and Trust", tests a model for understanding under what conditions negative information leads to support for conservative policies. They demonstrate that different types of negative information may often have quite distinct effects on citizens' political beliefs, depending on the specific policy domain under examination. As such, they importantly compliment the focus in **Paper A** and

Paper B on domain-specific effects of the negativity bias. Finally, **Paper E** “Different Cultures, Same Deep Foundations?” tests, and generally fails to replicate, a key finding in the literature, namely that individuals who react with strong physiological responses to negative stimuli tend to become more supportive of conservative policies. Taken as a whole, **Paper D, E and F** suggest that claims about the direction of the effects of negative information on support for protective policies are more complex than previously assumed. But they end on a positive note by opening what is hopefully a fruitful avenue for future studies to grapple with this complexity.

The dissertation draws on a rich set of data to test its expectations. It relies on a large number of experiments embedded in online surveys administered to large, and for the most part, nationally representative samples of citizens. In some instances, it also relies on data from two diverse countries, Denmark and the US. Finally, **Paper E** draws on physiological as well as self-report data from two cross-national laboratory studies.

The remainder of the summary report is organized as follows. Chapter 2 gets the ball rolling by reviewing existing work on a negativity bias in political science and by outlining the theoretical framework that seeks to answer the research question. Chapter 3 describes and discusses the research designs and data applied in the dissertation. Chapter 4 provides a summary of the empirical findings that are most important for answering the research question. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes by discussing the implications and by laying out possible extensions of the findings.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Model and Previous Work

I_N this chapter I present the theoretical framework of the dissertation and explain how it contributes to answering the overall research question: *To what extent do the effects of a negativity bias vary across individuals and policy domains?*

In order to lay the foundations for my argument, I begin with a brief review of the literature on negativity bias in political science. Next, I draw on prior explanations of why a negativity bias exists to develop the core argument that the *strength* of negative over positive information hinges critically on citizens' prior expectations. I discuss how this claim leads to a set of novel implications about how the negativity bias in political communication may be more constrained than previously suggested. I then turn to the claim that negative information generally *directs* citizens towards conservative policy opinions, and I develop an argument about how this relationship depends on the specific policy domain under examination. Lastly, I present the overall model of the dissertation and discuss how each article and paper in this dissertation addresses the guiding research question and the different parts of the model.

What we talk about when we talk about negativity bias

In modern day politics, citizens are inundated by massive amounts of information. Political actors - politicians, the news media, interest organizations, policy experts, and so on - continually compete for citizens' attention with all manner of stimuli: policy debates, campaign advertisements, news reports on societal developments, advocacy statements, and other political content. The explosion of information available on various political topics gives rise to increasingly critical questions: "what kinds of information attract citizens' attention?"; and "how does the information to which citizens attend influence their political beliefs?" (Druckman & Lupia 2016, 14).

One type of information that has been argued to matter importantly is *negative* information. As I intend it here, the *negativity bias* refers to the principle whereby people respond more strongly to a new piece of information about negative events than to a new piece of information about positive events.¹ Here, a negative event is defined as "one that has the potential or actual ability to create adverse outcomes for the individual" (Taylor 1991, 67). In contrast, positive events are perceived as beneficial or advantageous.

The concept of a negativity bias has been subject to a number of valuable meta-reviews (e.g., Baumeister et al. 2001; Rozin & Royzman 2001). "[A]lthough political science has been rather slow to come around to the idea that negative information may matter more than positive information does" (Soroka 2014, 15), there is increasing evidence of a negativity bias in the realm of politics as well. **Table 1**, shown below, summarizes the most prominent examples of how the negativity bias has been shown to influence citizens' attention and policy beliefs.

As the examples under the header **Attention** in **Table 1** show, there is an accumulation of findings suggesting that citizens react to the massive explosion of political information by giving preference to negative over positive information. People tend to rate negative news involving homicides, car crashes and natural disasters as more **important** and captivating than positive news. News consumers tend to **demand** negative and sensational news stories, even when they have the opportunity to tune in on positive news. And information conveyed in negative news stories and political campaign ads is more likely to be **remembered** than information conveyed in positive stories. There is even evidence to indicate that the preference for negative political news

¹Other definitions of the negativity bias include "a tendency to respond more strongly, to be more attentive, and to give more weight to negative elements of the environment" (Hibbing et al. 2014, 334), and "that in most situations, negative events are more salient, potent, dominant in combinations, and generally efficacious than positive events" (Rozin & Royzman 2001, 297),

may be subconscious. A small handful of studies show that news stories about crime and assault, or stories about vaccine shortages, elicit more intense **physiological** reactions than stories that are positive.

However, the proliferation of studies has resulted in a view that negative information may *also* powerfully shape how citizens form political beliefs and preferences (cf. the **Preferences & Beliefs** header in **Table 1**). Although the literature “has been somewhat dispersed and spread across several subfields” (Soroka 2014, 15), the overarching theme is that a piece of negative information causes a larger shift in citizens’ attitudes towards policies and politicians than a piece of positive information. This is evident in communication studies on how political elites can strategically capitalize on negative information to generate support for their preferred policy outcomes. For example, a large number of studies have shown that political actors can oftentimes convince citizens to support risk-seeking policy alternatives if they **frame** (e.g., Chong & Druckman 2007) the policy proposal negatively as a way to avoid a loss. And work on **persuasion** (e.g. Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992) suggests that when politicians and policy experts make predictions about the negative consequences of a policy - e.g., “you will lose your job if the trade agreement deal passes” (Cobb & Kuklinski 1997) or “allowing genetically modified foods poses a risk to your health” (Druckman & Bolsen 2011) - public support for that policy decreases much more than it increases when elites emphasize potentially positive consequences.

Negativity effects are also evident in work on how citizens adjust their political views in light of information about *changing conditions in the real world*. A considerable body of work on **voting behavior** shows that the public becomes much more pessimistic when the economy falters than it becomes optimistic when the economy changes for the better; the implication being that economic downturns tend to reduce the vote for incumbent politicians, whereas upturns seem to have virtually no effect on electoral support.

Table 1. Overview of ways negativity bias influences political beliefs and behavior

	Description	Examples in Political Science
Attention		
Importance	Negative information is rated as more important than positive information	Political stories about negative events are perceived as being higher in personal importance (Young 2003; see also Iyengar & Reeves, 1997); journalists and media outlets similarly focus on negative news stories (e.g., Chong & Druckman 2007; Patterson, 1994)
Demand	People seek out negative information	Citizens tend to demand negative political news, even when their stated preferences are for more positive news, and when they have the opportunity to select otherwise (Trusler & Soroka 2014)
Memory	Negative events are more memorable than positive events	Negative campaign ads are more likely to be remembered relative to positive campaign ads (Kenney & Kahn 2002; Lau et al. 2007)
Physiology	More physiological arousal to negative relative to positive events	Physiological responses to negative news stories are stronger than reactions to positive news stories (Soroka & McAdams 2015; see also Hibbing et al. 2014; Smith et al. 2011; Oxley et al. 2008)
Preferences & Beliefs		
Framing & Risk Preferences	People take risks to avoid losses	Citizens support risky policies to avoid certain losses (e.g., death of others, economic losses) (Arceneaux 2012; Druckman & McDermott 2008; Kahneman & Tversky 1979; Kam & Simas 2010); Politicians only willing to enact risky reforms when facing economic downturns (Vis & van Kersbergen 2007)
Persuasion and Policy Support	Losses loom larger than gains	Arguments about negative consequences of a policy have larger effects on policy beliefs (e.g., Bolsen & Druckman 2011; Cobb & Kuklinski 1997; Jerit 2009)
Real World Changes and Vote Choice	People attribute responsibility to others for negative outcomes	Citizens across a number of countries vote out incumbents when the economy falters (e.g., Bloom & Price 1975; Nannestad & Paldam 1997); Politicians, in turn, attempt to avoid blame for negative outcomes (e.g., Pierson 1994)
Real World Changes and Protective Policies	In the face of negative events, people seek protection	Citizens support policies that they believe will protect against threats; some threats, like crime (Page & Shaprio 1992; Rucker et al. 2004; Sales 1983), terrorism (Bonnano & Jost 2006; Malhotra & Popp 2012; Merolla & Zechmeister 2009), immigration (Brader et al. 2008), and diseases (Albertson & Gadarian 2015; Kam & Estes 2016), increase support for conservative policy solutions; other threats, like economic downturns, may increase support for liberal policies (Gerber et al., 2010; Federico et al. 2014; Malka & Soto 2014; Sniderman et al. 2014)

Note. The listed descriptions are primarily based on Rozin & Royzman 2001; Soroka 2014; Taylor 1991.

This is not to say that politicians of all ideological stripes suffer equally from negative events. An important development in the literature has been to show that citizens react to information about negative developments by increasing their support for **protective policies** that serve to “minimize tangible threats” (Hibbing et al. 2014, 304). A surge in studies have documented how news about terrorist attacks in the US and elsewhere generates support for warrantless government searches, surveillance, and prejudice against out-groups, how negative news about immigrants increases demands for restrictive immigration policies, how soaring crime rates lead to support for punitive actions towards criminals and wrongdoers, and how citizens who hear about the outbreak of diseases tend to become more supportive of civil liberty restrictions on fellow citizens. Although these examples all suggest that negative events lead to support for *conservative* policies, this may not always be the case. Whether negative events increase support for protective policies offered from the right or from the left likely depends on *policy discourse*, which structures the “menu” of conservative and liberal policy solutions that are available to citizens at any given moment (Sniderman & Bullock 2004) but also the specific *policy domain*. For instance, a number of scholars have suggested that economic downturns may make people gravitate towards *liberal* policy positions, because left-wing economic policies are specifically designed to guard against threats and to “create “safety nets” and reduce exposure to market risks” (Gerber et al., 2010: 116).²

Negativity Bias and Unresolved Issues

Setting aside empirical differences, the contributions highlighted above are important since they underscore the multiple ways in which negativity biases in reactions to political information have been argued to influence citizens’ attention and, by extension, their political beliefs and preferences. Accordingly, they are relevant for large bodies of work, including studies on agenda setting, issue framing, persuasion and rhetorical strategy, and the link between real world developments, mass-scale political preferences and government popularity.

²Discussions of negativity biases are also widespread in literatures on the mass media and the behavior of political elites. Journalists also tend to emphasize news that is sensational and negative (Patterson 1994), just as politicians themselves may contribute to this state of affairs by “going negative” in their persuasion attempts (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995). Research on welfare reforms similarly suggests asymmetries in reactions to positive versus negative information, and it indicates that politicians are much more preoccupied with avoiding blame for negative outcomes than they are preoccupied with taking credit for positive outcomes. Although this dissertation mainly focuses on the effects of the negativity bias on *citizens’* political behavior, I return to how the theoretical framework presented below matters for politicians and journalists also.

Yet, it is also fair to say that extant research on negativity biases first of all have demonstrated that negative information *can* be a powerful driver of changes in citizens' political beliefs. In my view, the literature consists of two key claims that need much more attention. The first and most important claim in the literature is that negative information generally has *larger* effects than positive information; negative information is more attention-grabbing, and it leads to greater shifts in public opinion. The second claim is more specific and concerns the *direction* of the effect of negative information on citizens' preferences for protective policies.

Regarding the first claim, *the conditions under which the strength of the effects of negative information may be limited* have received surprisingly little attention. Whether some segments of the populace may be less susceptible to rhetorical appeals that emphasize negative events; the extent to which people's worries about negative changes always exceed their enthusiasm about positive events; the extent to which citizens might react stronger to negative information in some policy domains but not in others; and whether positive information from media outlets and politicians never succeeds in setting the agenda or swaying public opinion, are questions that remain only partly answered (e.g., Cobb & Kuklinski 1997; Druckman & McDermott 2008; Kam & Simas 2010; Luttig & Lavine 2016; Kinzler & Vaish 2014). As Soroka and colleagues (2017, 5) recently noted in their summary of the literature, "we are still far from a precise theory of how or why negativity biases vary, across individuals or otherwise."

Regarding the second claim, it is unclear *under what conditions negative information leads to support for conservative protective policies*. The most prominent view has been that people react to negative events across a variety of policy domains, such as a plummeting economy, soaring crime rates, or the spread of infectious disease, by endorsing conservative policies that arguably protect against threat (e.g., Hibbing et al. 2014; Jost et al. 2003). However, scholars have recently questioned this assumption. For example, Charney (2014, 310) is adamant that "someone who experienced acute aversion to a particular threat could believe that *liberal* policies were a better guarantor of public safety" (emphasis in original). And Malka & Soto (2014, 320) ask "[h]ow encompassing is the effect of negativity bias on political conservatism?", their argument being that only on *social issues* may negative information lead to conservative policy preferences; in *economic* policy domains, it should instead lead to liberal policy beliefs.

In this dissertation, I address both issues. I begin the next section with discussing the first claim concerning the relative strength of negative over positive information. Building on insights on why a negativity bias exists, I argue that to better appreciate how exposure to both negative

and positive information affects public beliefs at a given point in time requires a conceptual framework that accounts for citizens' *preexisting expectations*. The argument is simple and is about individuals. Due to a combination of differential exposure to prior political information and longstanding dispositions, people's views of the social and political world vary widely. For reasons explained below, I argue that these individual level differences in expectations powerfully condition how strongly citizens respond to negative relative to positive information. They lead to a much more nuanced portrait of the pliability of the mass public. They lead to novel predictions about who is more susceptible to negative information, and who may be immune to negative communication effects. They suggest that reactions to positive rhetorical appeals might sometimes be stronger, at least for some segments of the population, or at least in some policy domains. And because an individual's expectations are likely themselves a function of political information, it leads to the prediction that the strength of the negativity bias may dynamically change over time.

Next, I discuss under what conditions negative information leads to a preference for conservative policies, and I explain why the relationship between negativity and public preferences is likely due to a combination of *general* and *domain-specific* processes. I then present the full model, discuss how the papers and articles in the dissertation help address the relationships in the model, and how they help shed light on the overall research question: *To what extent do the effects of a negativity bias vary across individuals and policy domains?*

Origin of Negativity Bias or Why the Strength of Negative Information Depends on Optimism

The notion that citizens' values, interests, personality characteristics, and other types of predispositions powerfully color their ways of thinking about politics has a long history in political science (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Converse 1964; Feldman 2003; Jost et al. 2003; Hibbing et al. 2014; Stubager 2010). That citizens rely on their predispositions in evaluating incoming political information is also well known. As Zaller (1992, 22) argues, "citizens are more than passive receivers of whatever media communications they encounter. They possess a variety of interests, values, and experiences that may greatly affect their willingness to accept – or alternatively, their resolve to resist – persuasive influences". Adding to this, a recent insight in the political

communication literature is that the effect of information carried in elite discourse is not fixed, but critically depends on the types of information that citizens' have previously encountered (e.g., Chong & Druckman 2010; Druckman & Leeper 2012; Slothuus 2016). However, these two insights have had only limited impact on the study of how people weigh and respond to negative relative to positive information. The most central point of the dissertation is that these dynamics need much more attention.

To develop my argument, I begin with two common assertions to explain why the negativity bias exists. The first one is that the human mind has evolved to *process information about one's safety* (e.g., Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby 1992). At its simplest, this involves a two-step process in which the mind [i] continually samples the internal and external environment to extract information [ii] in order to construct a mental representation of the world: "Am I in a *safe and rewarding* or a *dangerous* situation?". This assumption - stating that the combination of a person's lifetime experiences, personality factors and values (the internal environment), and the information which has been recently encountered (the external environment) collectively results in mental representations, or *expectations* about the world, which either suggest that the world is benign and positive, or that it is threatening and negative - is a simplification. But it is not new to political psychologists (e.g., Jost et al. 2003). It is akin to the "online tally" that figures so prominently in theories of online processing (e.g., Lodge & Taber 2013). It is similar to the construct "perceptions of a dangerous world" (e.g. Duckitt & Fisher 2003), and Szechtman & Woody's (2004) notion of "security-motivation". It plays an important role also in Marcus and colleagues' (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen 2000) political theory of *affective intelligence*, and the idea of a "surveillance system" that monitors the political environment for clues about how exposed to threats we personally are.

The second assertion is that individuals' expectations have important effects on how they react to and evaluate subsequent experiences and information. In particular, I stipulate that individuals pay careful attention, and react strongly, to new information that *violates their expectations about the world*. This assertion is also not new. Psychological studies indicate that information and experiences that are inconsistent with our expectations are more salient, more memorable, and more attention-grabbing than information and experiences that confirm our expectations (e.g., Bargh & Thein 1985; Festinger 1957; Proulx et al. 2017). There is increasingly evidence that expectancy-violating information has a stronger influence on political judgments as well. For example, studies have used these insights to show when "ambivalent" partisans defect

from their party line (Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen 2012; see also Hillygus & Shields 2008; Johnston, Lavine, & Woodson, 2015).

These two assertions are at the core of the ‘*expectancy-violation*’ *theory of negativity bias* (e.g., Fiske 1980; Goren 2002; Meffert et al. 2006; Niven 2000; Skowronski & Carlston 1989; Rozin & Royzman 2001; Soroka 2014; Taylor 1991). As Richard Lau (1985, 121) explains, this theory contends that since “most of us, most of the time, live in a positive world ... negative information, even though it is no more extreme than comparable positive information, may stand out due to its relative infrequency”. In other words, people give greater weight to information that is further away from their expectations about the world. Since people are generally optimistic and believe the world is benign, they give more importance to information about negative events. Negative events are unexpected, demand attention, and thus alert people that all is not well, and that protective measures are necessary.³ In contrast, because optimists expect positive outcomes, they do not pay attention to information about positive events. It does not violate their experiences and thus does not give rise to revisions of one’s beliefs.

Thus, paradoxically, “*optimism (a positive reference point) is at the heart of the negativity bias*” (Soroka 2014, 17, my emphasis), and “because strong optimists have such high expectations, they react to political disappointments much more negatively” (Niven 2000, 71). Because optimists expect positive outcomes, they are more easily persuaded by politicians who emphasize the potentially negative consequences of a given policy than by proponents of the policy who emphasize how it will enrich their lives (Cobb & Kuklinski 1997, 92). And because threatening developments contrast their expectations, it explains why they become worried when they hear negative news about soaring crime rates, economic downturns, or the spread of infectious diseases and only pay scant attention to stories about societal improvements.

Expanding the Model: Pessimists and Optimists

The expectancy-violation theory of negativity bias is remarkably simple. It may also be *too* simple. The model rests on an absolutely crucial assumption: that people have optimistic and positive expectations. But what if, as much research shows (e.g., Peterson 2000; Zuckerman

³As explained by Taylor (1991, 77), “because negative information is unexpected and contrasts sharply with the customary state of the environment, it may alert an organism to the need to take preparatory action and thus function as a cue, at least under some circumstances, for initiating physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioral mobilization.”

2003), people differ markedly in their expectations about life, with some being reasonably optimistic and others more pessimistic about their life prospects? And what if, as Paul Slovic (1987; 2000) has argued for a long time, optimism is multidimensional, i.e., the same person might worry greatly about some threats (e.g., terrorism, nuclear accidents, homicides, or Ebola) but less or not at all about other threats (e.g., motor vehicle accidents, environmental disasters, or unemployment)? In this dissertation, I argue that expanding the expectancy-violation framework to systematically account for these issues has potentially far-reaching implications for the way we think about the strength of negative information from the political world. I will now seek to demonstrate why this is so.

Table 2, which is shown below, shows a conceptual scheme that incorporates both exposure to political information at a given point in time and citizens' preexisting expectations about the world. (The following argument draws on Paper A "New Information, Not Negative Information".) Using t_1 as the reference point to indicate exposure to a given piece of political information at time t_1 , the columns show that a citizen can be exposed to either a positive or a negative message. A message is defined broadly. It may include news stories about societal developments, election campaign ads, or information from policy debates in which political actors strategically emphasize or frame a given policy positively or negatively. What matters is that the information is either negative or positive. As an example, a person might encounter negative information from a news report stating that crime is rising or, alternatively, a positive and reassuring story that crime rates are declining.

The rows indicate an individual's expectations at t_0 , that is, prior to exposure to a new piece of information. For simplicity, I begin by distinguishing between two stylized groups of citizens: The *pessimists* who expect negative outcomes and who worry a great deal about, say, crime and assault; and the *optimists* who expect positive outcomes and hence find it unlikely that they will be assaulted. The sources of variation in a person's expectations - what makes her an optimists or a pessimist - are probably manifold. As stated above, it is likely a combination of longstanding predispositions, lifelong experiences, and recently encountered information. I return to the veracity of this claim below. For now I simply assume that these two types of citizens exist. I also note that the papers and articles show that sufficiently large individual variation in expectations exists to make the distinction between pessimists and optimists empirically meaningful.

Table 2. Communication Effects and Citizens' Expectations.

		Exposure to Information at t_1	
		<i>Negative Information</i>	<i>Positive Information</i>
Expectations at t_0	<i>Optimistic</i>	(1) Large Effects	(2) Small Effect
	<i>Pessimistic</i>	(3) Small Effect	(4) Large Effect

From Paper A “New Information, Not Negative Information”

The thrust of studies on a negativity bias in citizens' reactions to political information fall in **cell 1** and **cell 2** by assumption. These cells indicate how prior optimists react to new information transmitted from the political world. **Cell 1** shows that prior optimists should respond strongly to negative stories about soaring crime rates because they “violate” their positive expectations of the world. They should pay careful attention to the story and they might start to worry that they themselves could be victims of crime (e.g., Marcus et al. 2000). It should also influence their political beliefs. They may begin to think that incumbent politicians ought to do more to contain crime and that anti-crime policies, e.g., more police officers on the streets, increased surveillance, or harsher punishment of criminals, should be implemented (e.g., Hetherington & Suhay 2011). On the other hand, positive information (**cell 2**) should not exert a large effect on prior optimists because it merely “confirms” their optimistic expectations. It is thus not sensational or captivating, and it should not cause them to revise their preexisting beliefs. Consequently, negative information has larger effects than positive information on prior optimists. *The negativity bias is strong*. This is the standard implication of the expectancy-violation explanation for the negativity bias.

Only a few studies have examined the information processing in **cell 3** and **cell 4**. This neglect is unfortunate since “expectancy-violation” theory predicts that prior pessimists react dramatically differently to new information. In marked contrast to optimists, prior pessimists should not react strongly to new negative information about crime since it does not “violate” their gloomy expectations (**cell 3**). They already worry about crime and assault and they might even favor crime-protective policies before receiving any new negative information (e.g., Hibbing et al. 2014; Jost et al. 2003). On the other hand, they should *react strongly to new positive news* about declining crime rates (**cell 4**). Since it deviates from their expectations, it should capture

their attention. It may cause them to revise their views on politicians' (lack of) ability to handle crime and the need for policies that combat crime, and it may lead them to adjust their views towards a more optimistic and enthusiastic outlook. These predictions are crucial. If correct, they suggest that positive information has larger effects than negative information among prior pessimists. In the extreme, the negativity bias might disappear entirely among pessimists. They may instead show evidence of a *positivity bias*.

In some sense, the framework presented in Table 2 is quite simple. Building on the same “expectancy-violation” logic as prior studies on the origins of the negativity bias, it merely expands the framework by introducing a new group of citizens: *the pessimists*. Yet, I believe that the implications flowing from this extended model are important. First, as I discuss in Paper A, it is not preordained that the effects of negative information are larger among optimists while the effects of positive information should be stronger among pessimists. Indeed, work by others, such as Hibbing and colleagues (2014), leads to the opposite prediction. They argue that people who perceive the world as dangerous - i.e., the people I refer to as pessimists - should react much stronger to negative information while people who believe the world is benign - i.e., optimists - should pay more attention to positive information that reinforces their preconceptions of the world. Similarly, as I discuss below, some evolutionary psychologists argue that people are essentially “hardwired” to react stronger to all manner of negative and threatening stimuli. Their argument implies that the negativity bias is universally present among all citizens - both optimists and pessimists.

This is not what I argue here, however. In fact, the second and most controversial point is the argument that *there is no inherent negativity bias*. The framework suggests that what captivates citizens' attention, and what may cause them to change their political beliefs, is not negative information *per se*. Rather, it is the provision of *new* information - understood as information that deviates from what citizens expect about their political and social worlds. In this sense, the framework is akin to a “Bayesian model” (e.g., Gerber & Green 1998) in which citizens adjust their political beliefs upwards or downwards depending on the discrepancy between their prior expectations and new information. If the discrepancy is large, then new information causes a large shift in beliefs. If it is small, then people do not react much.

This insight matters politically because it suggests that the relative strength of negative over positive political information is not fixed across the entire population. Contrary to some prior claims, negative information may not always win the day (e.g. Cobb & Kuklinski 1997),

and the specter of losses may not always loom larger than the prospect of gains (e.g., Arceneaux 2012; Jerit 2009). Most importantly, some individuals, the pessimists, may pay closer attention to positive stories in the news, and they may be more persuaded by elite rhetoric that emphasizes the potential gains to be achieved by implementing new policies. In other words, individual differences in expectations may serve as an important constraint on the susceptibility of the mass public to be swayed by negativity. A good deal of this dissertation is dedicated to showing that this is empirically true.

To be sure, we might still observe a negativity bias in the aggregate. According to this framework that depends entirely on the empirical distribution of optimists and pessimists in the population.⁴ I know of only one other study that has tested these implications. Recently, Soroka (2014, 65-70; 119) found that negative shifts in unemployment rates have larger effects on public sentiment when the overall economy is doing comparatively well, but “[w]hen the economy is doing poorly, however, the gap in the impact of negative versus positive change narrows”, which suggests that “[w]hen the political environment is desperately negative, then, we should see a shift in attentiveness to positive information.” These findings fit into the framework presented here since they suggest that people react stronger to negative information when they are optimistic (i.e., when the economy is doing well), whereas positive information becomes more important when people are pessimistic (i.e., when the economy is doing poorly). Thus, one goal of the dissertation has been to build on this study in order to develop a coherent framework for illuminating how political beliefs flow from an interaction between the political environment and individual differences in citizens’ preexisting expectations.

We can go one step further. I expand on the insights emphasized above to explain why the same individual might be receptive to negative information in some policy domains and pay more attention to positive information in other policy domains. In other words, I seek to answer the second part of the research question and explain why the strength of the effects of negative versus positive information may vary from one policy domain to another.

⁴According to the framework presented here, as long as $N_{\text{Optimists}} > N_{\text{Pessimists}}$ in the population, we should observe a negativity bias in the aggregate.

Domain-Specific Optimists and Pessimists

The argument so far is that a person’s expectations play a critical role in conditioning the strength of the effects of negative and positive information. Yet, it may not make sense to speak of either *a* pessimistic or *an* optimistic outlook, singular. The problem arises because the same person might be pessimistic in some domains of life while maintaining an optimistic outlook in others (e.g., Slovic 1987). In other words, expectations may be domain-specific. In a study on the effects of optimism on political trust, Niven found that the majority of his subjects were optimistic that they would not be “fired from [their] job”. However, fewer of the same subjects were optimistic that they would not “suffer an illness in the near future”, and fewer still expressed confidence that they would not “be the victim of a crime” (2000, 77). I argue that such *intra-person* differences in domain-specific expectations influence the importance given to different types of political information.

To illustrate the argument, **Table 3** shows an individual who is an optimist in Domain A (e.g., she has optimistic expectations regarding her economic situation) but a pessimist in Domain B (e.g., she has negative expectations regarding the likelihood of falling victim to a crime). It also indicates how she is assumed to respond to new information from the political environment, given her domain-specific variation in optimism. The dynamics draw on the same “expectancy-violation” logic as in **Table 2**. Because she is an optimist in Domain A, **cell 1** shows that she should react strongly to negative information that pertains to that specific domain (e.g., news about an economic downturn). She should become much more worried. She might reconsider her electoral support and begin to think that protective policies, such as economic “safety nets”, should be implemented to mitigate the danger. In contrast, and as shown in **cell 2**, new positive information has a small effect because it merely confirms her expectations (e.g., news about an economic upturn). The negativity bias in reactions to new political information is thus strong in Domain A. However, in Domain B, the effects of information should reverse. Since she is initially inclined to expect the worst, **cell 4** shows that positive news (e.g., crime rates are dropping) should command her attention. She might become more enthusiastic, and she might adjust her beliefs significantly. On the other hand, news about a rise in crime should matter little since she already worries about crime (**cell 3**). Taken together, this person should *simultaneously exhibit a negativity bias in Domain A and a positivity bias in Domain B*.

Table 3. Domain-Specific Communication Effects.

	Exposure to Domain-Specific Information at t_1	
	<i>Negative Info</i>	<i>Positive Info</i>
Expectations at t_0		
<i>Domain A: Optimist</i>	(1) Large Effect	(2) Small Effect
<i>Domain B: Pessimist</i>	(3) Small Effect	(4) Large Effect

From Paper A “New Information, Not Negative Information”

The argument that citizens’ expectations may be domain-specific have a number of important implications. Insofar as a person has optimistic expectations in one domain and a pessimistic ones in another, the importance that person attaches to a piece of new negative information should vary predictably as a function of the policy domain to which it belongs. If a person is optimistic about her *economic well-being*, she might react strongly to negative stories in the economic domain (e.g., stories about unemployment, inflation, rising oil prices, or federal debt). And if she feels *physically safe*, she might become significantly more worried by new negative information related to the policy domain of public safety (e.g., news about rape, assault, home invasions, terrorism, or gang violence). On the flip side, if she already worries about her *health* she should pay only scant attention to negative information pertaining to the domain of *public health* (e.g., information about Ebola, AIDS, genetically modified foods, or pollution in the water). In this particular policy domain, the effects of positive information should be stronger. Consequently, domain-specific expectations may provide yet another boundary condition on how successfully political actors can capitalize on negativity to set the agenda and persuade voters.

True, domain-specific effects of political information may also provide a rhetorical *possibility* because some issues cut across policy domains depending on how political elites frame them. Consider immigration. Immigrants have occasionally been negatively framed as being responsible for either bringing “tremendous infections disease...”, for being “criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc.”, or for “killing us on trade...” (Donald Trump in *The Guardian 2016*). Depending on intra-person differences in domain-specific expectations, a person might be susceptible to information contained in some frames (“they kill us on trade”) but less persuaded by other types of framed messages (“they are criminals and rapists”).

The idea that policy domains have different dynamics does not fit well with the existing

literature. Studies on negativity biases often glance over different types of negative information, more or less assuming that they have similar effects across distinct domains (e.g., Hibbing et al. 2014, 334-35). I believe the lack of attention to domain- or issue-specific effects is true for political communications studies more generally as well (for a discussion, see Lecheler, de Vreese, & Slothuus 2009). On the one hand, this is understandable. Parsimony is a laudable goal. But parsimony often involves a trade-off in terms of real-world predictive accuracy. In this dissertation I intend to show that the additional leverage obtained by taking into account domain-specific dynamics is worth the (relatively minor) increase in complexity.

A final and related caveat: It is probably not likely that someone who is a full-fledged optimist in one domain is simultaneously a complete pessimist in another. Just as a global left-right measure of political ideology may constrain the extent to which a person's attitudes fluctuate across different political topics (but see Converse 1964), a global measure of "expectations towards the world" may constrain differences in domain-specific expectations. Paper C "Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning" touches upon the theoretical basis for this claim. Here, I simply make two points. First, while the empirical studies accompanying this summary report indicate a fair amount of covariation between domain-specific expectations (e.g., Paper A), there is enough independence to make domain-specific claims. Second, although less than ideal, it may as a practical matter make sense to rely on an omnibus measure of citizens' expectations. In the analyses that follow, I will occasionally do so.

Negative Information and Conservative Policy Preferences?

The argument advanced here that citizens' domain-specific expectations condition their reactions to political information challenges the first claim in the literature that negative information is always stronger than positive information. I intend to show that the argument has broad implications for how citizens weigh different types of negative information, including information from news media reports as well as politically framed messages, across a number of distinct policy domains. I will show that it has novel implications for how strongly citizens rely on new negative relative to positive information to form a diverse set of political beliefs, including their support for risky policies as well as public sentiment and prospective evaluations of performance more generally. Most importantly, I evaluate the argument as it relates to the effects of negative

information on citizens' support for conservative policies. This concerns the second claim in the literature on the *direction* of the effects of negativity information on citizens' policy preferences. But it also begs the questions: When and why are reactions to negative information associated with conservative policy beliefs?

Classic views focus on the *instrumental* value of conservative policies (see Hibbing et al. 2014; Jost et al. 2003 for overviews). Citizens support conservative policies (e.g., harsh treatment of criminals), the argument goes, because they are generally more useful than liberal policies (e.g., rehabilitation of criminals) in safeguarding against negative events (e.g., soaring crime rates). Evidence in favor of this view comes from studies showing that citizens react to certain negative events - e.g., crime, disease, immigration - by increasing their support for conservative policies (cf. Table 1). And it comes from studies showing that people with strong *physiological reactions* to negative stimuli tend to be more supportive of conservative protective policies. For example, Oxley et al. (2008) found that people with stronger skin conductance reactions to threatening images and stronger oculi startle blink electromyography responses to loud noises “were more likely to favor defense spending, capital punishment, patriotism, and the Iraq War” (ibid., 1667). Dodd et al. (2012) extended this research, showing that those who paid more attention to threatening images in an eye-tracking study tended “to roll with the right”. These studies also showed that those who responded less to negative information and instead had stronger physiological reactions to *positive* information were less willing to support conservative policies and more willing to support liberal policies such as “reductions in defense and police spending, assistance to out-groups, rehabilitation of criminals, and challenges to traditional authority” (Hibbing et al. 2014, 304). In sum, these findings indicate that strong responses to different types of negative events tend to increase support for conservative policies, while reactions to positive events are more commonly associated with less conservative preferences.

This view has recently been challenged empirically. First, the findings of a relationship between physiological reactions to negative stimuli and conservative policy preferences have been complicated by a recent failed replication (Knoll et al. 2015). Second, scholars have recently argued that only negative events pertaining to *social* issues, such as immigration and crime lead to conservative policy opinions, whereas negative events pertaining to *economic* issues, like economic crisis, lead to liberal policy preferences (e.g., Feldman & Huddy 2014). Third, even within the social dimension, negativity may sometimes increase demand for liberal policies. For example, Kam & Estes (2016) argue that neither liberal nor conservative social policies are in-

herently protective. Their argument implies that as long as a given policy is framed or socially constructed as protecting against a negative event, it is likely to resonate well with citizens who worry about threats.

Although most of this dissertation grapples with the conditioning effects of citizens' expectations on the relative strength of negative over positive information, I also devote considerable effort to empirically evaluate all three challenges to the classic perspective on the link between negative information and conservative policy beliefs. In addition, **Paper D** "A Dual-Process Theory of Threat" seeks to build a model that accounts for both the initial and revisionist perspectives on the political effects of negativity. The thrust of the argument is that public support for protective policies in the face of negative events derives from two distinct psychological processes that operate simultaneously. The first *domain-general* process draws on *Affective Intelligence Theory* (Marcus et al. 2001) and holds that citizens who react strongly to negative events will generally reach out for those protective policies that are offered in policy discourse - independently of whether the content is conservative or liberal. This prediction is in line with revisionist accounts (e.g., Kam & Estes 2016).

The second *domain-specific* process, which may "override" the domain-general process, draws on evolutionary theories. It holds that citizens are particularly likely to favor policies whose specific content resonates with their deep-seated and evolved intuitions about the "best solution" to a particular negative event. This has important implications. The existence of deep-seated intuitions suggests that when multiple policy alternatives are available simultaneously, some will be predictably more powerful than others at garnering support. Moreover, the policy solutions that fit our intuitions need not be ideologically coherent across policy domains; they may be liberal in some instances and conservative in others. This suggests that the exact relationship between reactions to negative information and support for protective policies is specific to the policy domain or issue at hand. But **Paper D** also argues that in the face of some specific types of negative events - like crime and disease threats - the policies that most closely match our evolved intuitions can be construed as *conservative* policies. In particular, the model predicts that in the context of negative news about crime, people should *increase* support for government policies intended to bring people into closer contact. This prediction draws on the argument that seeking contact with others as a way of garnering coalitional support from allies to defend against threats from violent adversaries was an advantageous solution over evolutionary time. In contrast, the model also predicts that in the context of threats from diseases people should *decrease* support

for contact-promoting policies to protect the individual against the risk of infection from others (see also Paper F “Disgust and Trust”). Importantly the paper predicts and demonstrates that these diametrical opposite responses can, in the context of the specific type of negative event, be construed as a conservative solution. As such, this prediction lends some credence to the classic view.

How the Arguments are Tested

The aim of the dissertation has been to build on previous theoretical arguments to build a framework for understanding the limits of the negativity bias in reactions to political communication. In doing so, it sheds light on the guiding research question: *To what extent do the effects of a negativity bias vary across individuals and policy domains?* The model underlying this research question can be illustrated as in Figure 1, shown below. It provides a general frame for illuminating how citizens’ expectations condition their evaluations of negative and positive information, and, consequently, how these evaluations are converted into political beliefs. It is also too general. I have purposely left out the important qualifier that the model should be evaluated on the basis of the specific policy domain at hand. This point is important to keep mind. I now go through the model in more detail and explain how each of the papers and articles in the dissertation relates to the model. Each is guided by its own unique research question. However, when taken together they contribute greatly to explaining the model.

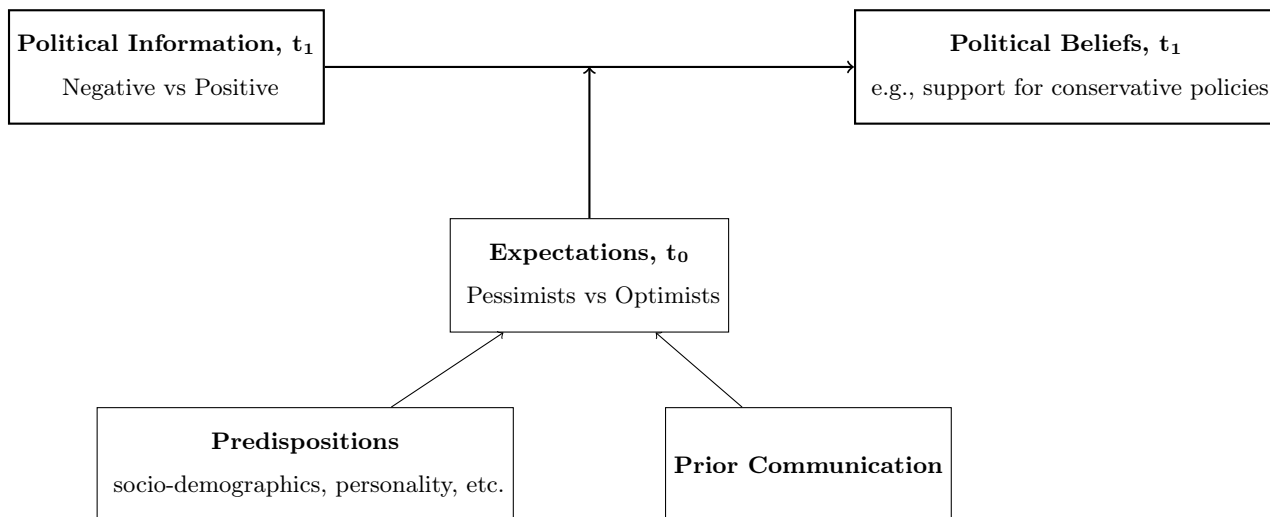


Figure 1. Theoretical model for a given policy domain.

The most fundamental argument advanced here concerns the first important claim in the literature and can be stated as follows. The strength of the negativity bias - i.e., the extent to which negative information commands more attention than positive information, and the extent to which negative information has larger effects on citizens' political beliefs, including their support for conservative policies - hinges critically on citizens' pre-existing expectations. [i] Because some people are optimists and others are pessimists, the strength of the effect of negative information relative to positive information will differ markedly across the populace. [ii] And because some people are pessimists in some policy domains and optimists in others, the strength will vary also depending on the specific domain to which the negative information belongs. Although these insights have virtually been ignored in prior studies (but see Soroka 2014), they have profound implications. Contrary to popular beliefs, news media outlets, politicians and other political actors cannot always capitalize on negative communications to set the agenda and mold citizens' preferences into compliance with their own preferred policy positions. They are constrained because citizens are not all alike.

Together, Paper A and Paper B fully test the main argument that citizens' domain-specific expectations condition the relative power of negative over positive information. (The conditioning impact of Expectations on Political Information \rightarrow Political Beliefs in Figure 1.) Empirically, they examine the argument across three distinct and salient policy domains - those related to the economy (Paper B), public health (Paper A, B), and public safety (Paper A).

They examine whether the argument applies to how citizens respond to both objective news reporting (**Paper A**) and framed communications from political elites (**Paper B**). And they test the argument on three measures of political beliefs that figure prominently in the existing literature: citizens' support for risky policy reforms (**Paper B**), public sentiment more generally (**Paper A**), and, most importantly, citizens' support for conservative protective policies (**Paper A**). The predictions regarding the effects of information on conservative policies are relatively straightforward. Insofar as negative information in the policy domains under examination increases support for conservative policies, and given that optimists react stronger to negative information, the framework predicts that the link between negative information and conservative beliefs should be stronger among optimists than among pessimists. On the flip side, insofar as positive information decreases conservative preferences, the effects should be large among pessimists and significantly smaller among optimists. **Paper A** addresses these predictions.

In much of the preceding discussion, I have assumed that citizens' expectations are the product of longstanding predispositions and previously encountered information. **Paper C** examines the veracity of this claim. It examines whether a person's expectations correlate with a host of longstanding dispositions (e.g., sociodemographic variables, personality factors). (**Predispositions** → **Expectations**.) And in an experimental study, it examines whether the provision of political information in the form of positive *conservative* policy reassurances makes people more optimistic. (**Prior Communication** → **Expectations**.) In addition, the paper offers a theoretical discussion of the covariation between domain-specific expectations, and the extent to which domain-specific expectations are related to an global measure of expectations towards the world.

Although the thrust of the dissertation concerns the conditioning role of expectations on the *strength* of the effects of negative information, I also directly address the second claim in the literature about the *direction* of the effects of negative information on policy preferences. As explained in the previous section, **Paper D** and **F** provide, and test, a theoretical model for explaining the relationship between domain-specific types of negative information and conservative policy preferences. (The main effect of **Political Information** → **Political Beliefs/Conservatism**.) Furthermore, **Paper E** explores some of the empirical critiques that have recently gained traction. In particular, it seeks to replicate the finding that strong physiological responses to negative stimuli are associated with both social and economic conservatism across two countries, the US and Denmark.

Before proceeding to the next chapter about design decisions, I want to raise one last point.

The perhaps strongest claim in the dissertation is that there is no inherent negativity bias, and that citizens' reactions to negative information fully depend on whether they are optimists or pessimists. This claim may be too strong. The biggest challenge to the framework presented here comes from a series of evolutionary studies arguing that negative information is inherently and universally more potent than positive information. The basic argument here is that “[b]ecause it is more difficult to reverse the consequences of an injurious or fatal assault than those of an opportunity unpursued, the process of natural selection may also have resulted in the propensity to react more strongly to negative than to positive stimuli” (Cacioppo & Gardner 1999; see also Hibbing et al. 2014). In other words, negative information is intrinsically more important than positive information because negative consequences are detrimental to survival. And not because it stands out against people's expectations.

I return to this question in the concluding chapter. Here, I briefly make three points. First, some threats, such as physical assault or a terrorist attack in your neighborhood, are clearly bad. They should captivate everyone's attention and cause everyone to seek protection. But most negative events in politics are not *manifest* and *imminent* like that. They are, in the words of Boyer & Liénard (2006, 9), *inferred* or *potential*. For instance, reading in the newspaper that crime is on the rise might cause you to infer that the probability of being assaulted yourself has risen. Not that you will with absolute certainty be assaulted. Manifest and potential threats are not the same and although the evolutionary model might do a good job of explaining responses to manifest threats, it is not clear whether these insights travel to potential threats. Second, both theories can be true simultaneously. Proulx and colleagues (2017, 69) recently alluded to this: “there is a mode of stimuli that may trump the heightened salience of negativity: expectancy-violating stimuli”. Empirically, this is a question of confounding and can be evaluated as such: If you take away a negative event's “unexpectedness”, is there still a residual effect of negativity? Third, the relative veracity of both models is ultimately an empirical question. I hope to demonstrate that the framework presented here does a good job of explaining how citizens actually respond to political information.

Chapter 3

Research Designs

THIS chapter summarizes the different research designs and methods applied throughout the dissertation. The chapter begins with an overview of the six papers and articles included in the dissertation, their theoretical foci and their key methodological features. Next, the chapter clarifies why the dissertation has employed a research design strategy that relies primarily on an experimental approach. Finally, it turns to the dissertation's core relationships between the negativity bias and citizens' expectations, on the one hand, and their political beliefs, on the other, and it presents the applied operationalizations of these variables.

Overview of Studies

Table 4, shown below, summarizes the methodological choices for each of the dissertation’s six papers. It outlines how each paper contributes to the overall questions raised in the dissertation, and the research design as well as the data and variables used to answer the questions. The dissertation draws on a rich data material to test its expectations. It offers extensive variation in the type of experimental treatments used and in the range of dependent and independent measures. It relies on both self-reported and physiological data to test its claims. Moreover, the data consists of large - and for the most part - nationally representative samples of citizens. In some instances it also includes data from two diverse countries, Denmark and the US.

Paper A and **Paper B** were designed to test the core claim that citizens’ expectations condition the strength of negative information on a variety of political beliefs. The studies make use of two commonly employed experimental treatments to gauge the strength of negative relative to positive information: positive or negative information about specific policy changes presented as real newspaper articles (**Paper A**); and negatively or positively *framed* policy proposals from political elites (**Paper B**). **Paper D** also relies on an experimental approach - in the form of positive and negative radio news stories - to build a theoretical model for understanding why the association between negative information and conservative policies depends on both domain-general and domain-specific processes. **Paper F** builds on this model to examine whether citizens’ domain-specific pessimism about health is associated with less contact-seeking (measured by social trust) and, hence, conservative policy beliefs. As such, they complement both **Paper A** and **B**.

Paper C explores whether a person’s expectations are a function of longstanding dispositions and prior exposure to communication. This is an important question. If expectations are mostly due to longstanding dispositions, and hence temporally stable, it suggests that the relative strength of negative over positive information may also be fixed over time. On the other hand, if a person’s expectations are themselves a product of political information, and hence dynamically changing, it suggests that the strength of negative information may also be changing (e.g., Soroka 2014). Finally, **Paper E** relates specifically to the second claim in literature regarding the direction of negativity on support for public policies. It tests the claim that strong physiological reactions to negative stimuli are associated with political ideology, including both economic and social conservative policy preferences.

Table 4. Overview of data, research design and contribution to dissertation

Paper	Contribution to Dissertation	Data and participants	Variables
A	Do prior expectations condition the negativity bias in reactions to news media stories?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two randomized survey experiments conducted in the US where subjects were randomly exposed to negative or positive news stories about public health and public safety. Online survey with subjects recruited through the Survey Sampling Agency (N = 1,800). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent Variables (IVs): experimental treatment stories; self-report measures of domain-specific expectations related to the policy domains of public health and public safety. Dependent Variables (DVs): Public sentiment (i.e., forward-looking expectations); support for conservative policies on the two focal issues, public health and public safety.
B	Do prior expectations condition the negativity bias in reactions to politically framed messages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two randomized survey experiments conducted in the US where subjects were randomly exposed to negatively or positively framed stories about public health or economic developments. Online survey with subjects recruited through the Amazon Mechanical Turk Platform (N = 1,800). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IVs: experimental treatment stories; self-report measures of domain-specific expectations related to the policy domains of public health and the economy. DVs: support for risky policy programs.
C	Do prior expectations depend on prior exposure to communication and/or longstanding dispositions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three cross-sectional online surveys conducted in the US with subjects recruited either through YouGov's online panel or Amazons Mechanical Turk platform (N₁ = 2,066; N₂ = 2,116; N₃ = 2,503) Randomized online survey experiment conducted in the US where subjects were randomly assigned to a "conservative policy appeal" treatment condition or a "No-information" control condition (N₄ = 2,510) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IVs: experimental treatments; socio-demographic variables and personality factors. DVs: global measure of domain-general expectations (i.e., obsessive compulsive symptoms).
D	Are domain-specific reactions to negative information associated with a preference for conservative policies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two randomized experiments conducted in the US and Denmark where subjects were randomly exposed to a negative or positive radio news stories about public health or public safety. Online survey with subjects recruited through YouGov's online panel (N_{US} = 1,509; N_{DK} = 1,509). A randomized experiment conducted in the US where subjects were randomly exposed to a negative news story about public safety or public health. Online survey with subjects recruited through the Survey Sampling Agency (N = 1,500) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IVs: experimental treatment stories. DVs: emotional reactions to radio news stories; support for conservative policies on the two focal issues.

Table 4. Overview of data, research design and contribution to dissertation (cont.)

Paper	Contribution to Dissertation	Data	Variables
E	Are strong physiological reactions to negative stimuli associated with conservative policy preferences?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two laboratory studies conducted in the US and Denmark where nationally representative samples of participants were exposed to different types of negative stimuli, including images related to physical safety and health. Two different measures of physiological responses, skin conductance responses and electromyographic reactions ($N_{DK} = 178$ and $N_{US} = 170$). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IVs: physiological reactions to negative stimuli. DVs: a set of 6 measures of political ideology, including both social and economic conservatism.
F	Are domain-specific expectations associated with conservative policy preferences?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three cross-sectional online surveys conducted in the US with subjects recruited either through YouGov’s online panel or Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform ($N_1 = 2,510$; $N_2 = 508$; $N_3 = 1,422$). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IVs: self-report measure of domain-specific expectations related to public health. DVs: measures of contact-seeking (i.e., generalized social trust); measures of conservative preferences.

Paper A “New Information, Not Negative Information”; **Paper B** “Framing Political Risks”; **Paper C** “Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning”; **Paper D** “A Dual-Process Theory of Threat”; **Paper E** “Different Cultures, Same Deep Foundations?”; and **Paper F** “Disgust and Trust”.

Randomization and Experiments

The key claim in the dissertation is that the relative power of negative over positive information at some point in time, t_1 , hinges on citizens’ expectations measured at some prior point in time, t_0 . As an example, consider one implication derived from the theoretical model presented in the previous chapter, which I test in **Paper A**: Optimistic citizens should respond strongly to new negative information that crime rates are rising (it violates their expectations); but they should not pay much attention to new positive information that crime rates are dropping (it confirms their expectations). In other words, the argument is that an optimist reacts differently to negative information *than she would have reacted* had she been exposed to positive information (and vice versa). But since an optimist does not observe both states of the world simultaneously - i.e., crime rates are not rising and falling at the same time - this necessarily implies a counterfactual line of reasoning. How to solve this?

The majority of papers in this dissertation adopt an experimental approach to these issues.

The central feature of experiments is that the allocation of different treatments is fully controlled and randomized. Since assignment to treatment is random, it follows that individuals in different treatment groups are similar on observable as well as unobservable characteristics, aside from any chance occurrences. Returning to the example from above, this means that prior optimists - and pessimists - can be randomly assigned to different conditions, where some receive information that crime has been on the rise, some receive information that crime rates are declining, and others might not receive any information at all (i.e., the “control” or placebo condition). This is an advantageous design. In part because it rules out problems of *self-selection* - e.g., prior optimists might be differentially attracted to news media outlets that tend to bring positive stories that confirm their expectations. In part because it allows the researcher to control and vary the flow of information that reaches citizens. And in part because it offers a relatively simple way to estimate whether the causal effects of negative relative to positive information on citizens’ political beliefs differ as a function of their prior expectations (i.e., an interaction between treatments and expectations).

This is not to say that experiments come with no cost. As Kinder (2011, 527) rightly notes, “All methods are fallible. None can provide a royal road to the truth”. In particular, while experiments ensure a strong degree of *internal* validity they are often vulnerable to *external* validity issues. One concern is that “experiments are often conducted with samples of convenience, leading to scepticism over whether experimental results can be generalized safely to the populations of real interest” (Kinder & Palfrey 1993, 27). In this dissertation, I strive to meet this challenge by relying on diverse and, in many instances nationally representative samples of individuals (Paper A, C, D, F). Moreover, two of the papers draw on samples from two countries - Denmark and the US - in order to test cross-cultural generalizability (Paper D, F). This latter point is particularly important in light of increasing awareness of how national and cultural differences may influence the way people respond to the information they receive (e.g., Henrich et al. 2010).

A second concern with experiments is that “experimental results are always subject to the charge that they depend precariously on exactly how the independent variables were created” (Kinder & Palfrey 1993, 27). I seek to meet this charge in two ways: By creating experimental stimuli that closely reflect the types of political information that citizens may encounter in the real world; and, as discussed in the next sections, by operationalizing my measures of domain-specific expectations and political beliefs in different ways.

In order to raise the ecological validity, **Paper A**, **C**, **D** provide subjects with realistic experimental treatments in terms of political news stories presented as real newspaper articles or radio news stories, while **Paper B** relies on a well-established measure of the negativity bias (see Asian Disease Study below). The newspaper stories in **Paper A** were constructed to generate high levels of consistency in story structure and included actual words and phrases from policy discourse. The radio news stories in **Paper D** were scripted and produced in consultation with professional journalists, and the experimental stimuli in **Paper C** consisted of a slide show in which participants were exposed to real-world Republican policy promotions as reflected in the Republican Party’s “Principles for American Renewal” from 2014. Moreover, the stories in both **Paper A** and **Paper D** were pre-rated in terms of comparability on a number of characteristics (e.g., realism, credibility). **Figure 2**, shown below, gives an example from **Paper D** where an opt-in sample of MTurkers were asked to pre-rate the four radio news stories used in the main study in terms of real-world realism. As can be seen, all stories obtained a high degree of realism. (See the appendices in **Paper A** and **Paper D** for further pre-ratings and analyses.)

In the next sections I discuss the different measures used in the studies. First, three different ways of operationalizing the negativity bias that I have relied on; second, how citizens’ domain-specific expectations - the extent to which a person is an optimist or a pessimist - have been measured; and third, the different measures of political beliefs that have been used in the papers and articles.

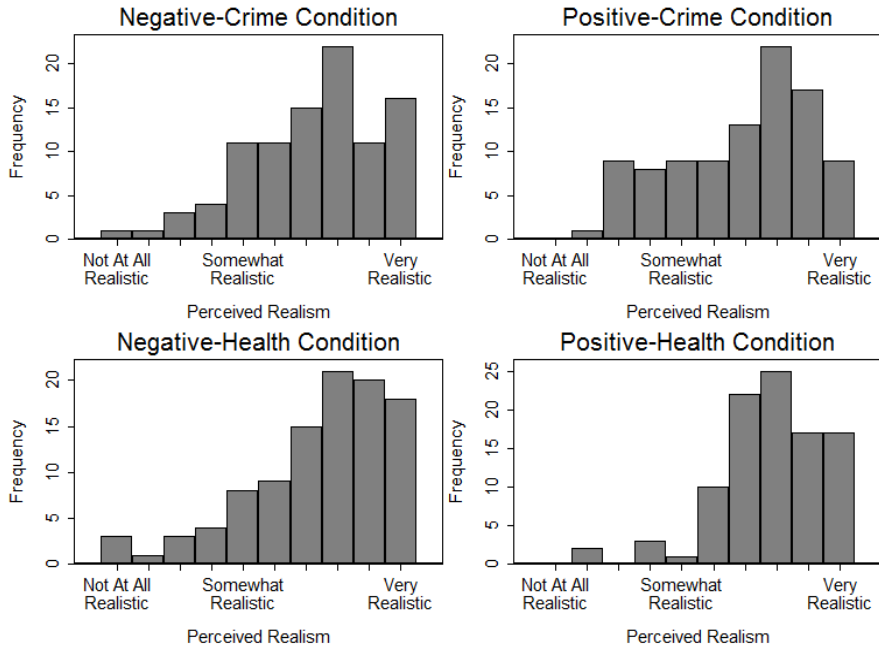


Figure 2. Paper D “A Dual-Process Theory of Threat” pre-ratings of different radio stories in terms of realism.

Three Measures of Negativity Bias

The main purpose of the dissertation is to understand how citizens’ prior expectations condition the strength of the negativity bias in political communication. But how does one go about measuring the negativity bias in the first place? The literature offers (at least) three well-established ways, and this dissertation relies on all three of them. I now take each up in turn.

1. *Negative vs Positive Developments*

As Taylor (1991, 68) notes, “[T]here is an issue of calibration involved in comparing negative and positive events: How does one know that the negative stimuli are as negative as the positive stimuli are positive”? In models of (economic) retrospective voting, this is usually solved by comparing current policy conditions, e.g., the unemployment rate today, with conditions at some previous point in time, e.g., the unemployment rate 12 months ago. For example, a 3% drop in unemployment would be characterized as a positive event; a 3% increase would be a negative event of equal magnitude. A negativity bias is present if a negative change in unemployment

rates has larger effects on citizens’ political beliefs than a positive change. If responses to positive and negative changes are symmetric, then no bias is present. And if people respond stronger to positive changes, then a positivity bias is present.

Paper A and Paper D rely on the same convention but generalize it to two distinct policy domains: crime (public safety) and disease (public health). Table 5, shown below, gives an example from Paper A. Here, respondents were randomly exposed to either a positive or a negative news article about public safety, or a positive or negative story about public health. (The study also included a “No-Information” control condition.) All stories were attributed to *The New York Times* and consisted of a factual report followed by two expert statements. In the negative stories, respondents read that violent crime or the prevalence of infectious diseases had risen since last year; and in the positive stories, they read that they had fallen. The expert statements simply reinforced the interpretation of the factual numbers.

Table 5. Treatments from Paper A “New Information, Not Negative Information”.

	Negative Crime	Positive Crime	Negative Health	Positive Health
Factual Info	Compared to last year: (1) violent crime rose 7%; (2) homicides up from 14,164 to 15,696; (3) violent crime rose in 68 of 100 largest cities	Compared to last year: (1) violent crime fell 7%; (2) homicides down from 15,696 to 14,164; (3) violent crime fell in 68 of 100 largest cities	Compared to last year: (1) prevalence of infectious diseases rose 7%; (2) deaths from pneumonia up from 14,164 to 15,696; (3) flu-related hospitalizations rose in 68 of 100 largest cities	Compared to last year: (1) prevalence of infectious diseases fell 7%; (2) deaths from pneumonia down from 15,696 to 14,164; (3) flu-related hospitalizations fell in 68 of 100 largest cities
Expert Statement I	The picture is dire. Violent crime thrives in many cities.	The picture is bright. Violent crime declines in many cities.	The picture is dire. Flu activity spreads across the country.	The picture is bright. Flu activity declines across the country.
Expert Statement II	There is reason to be worried. America is a dangerous place to live.	There is reason to be optimistic. America is a safe place to live.	There is reason to be worried. The numbers are discouraging.	There is reason to be optimistic. The numbers are encouraging.

There are at least three reasons why this setup is ideal for my purposes. First, it allows a clean test of the negativity bias hypothesis. A negativity bias is present if respondents react stronger to the negative relative to the positive stories (compared to the control condition). Second, it allows a simple test of the conditioning impact of respondents’ pre-existing expectations: Do optimists respond stronger to the negative stories, and do pessimists pay more attention to the positive stories? Third, it makes it possible to test the claim that the conditioning impact is domain-specific: Do respondents’ optimism regarding crime and assault condition the impact of

the crime stories, and do respondents' optimism regarding health condition their responses to the public health stories?

2. *Negative vs Positive Framing of Policy Choice*

As Soroka (2014, 6) notes, “[t]he relative power of negative over positive is perhaps best (and most famously, at least for those political scientists interested in policy framing) captured in Kahneman and Tversky’s (1984) experiment on policy choice”: *The Asian Disease Problem*. In this experiment, all subjects first receive the following information:

Imagine that the US is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows:

One half of the subjects are then given two *positively* framed options:

If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. [72%.] If Program B is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and 2/3 probability that no people will be saved. [28%.]

The other half of the subjects are given the same two options, except here they are *negatively* framed:

If Program C is adopted, 400 people will die. [22%.] If Program D is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that nobody will die, and 2/3 probability that 600 people will die. [78%.]

In their classic study, Tversky and Kahneman (1981) found that when given the choice between programs A and B, 72% of their subjects selected Program A over B, and when given the choice between C and D, 78% of their subjects selected D over C. This reversal is noteworthy since Programs A and C are exactly equivalent in their expected outcome, but the “sure-thing” outcome is deemed much less attractive when framed as people dying. Programs B and D are also identical in expectation, but the negatively framed Program D puts respondents in a region of perceived losses, and this makes it look much more attractive. Consequently, negatively framed information is a stronger motivator towards risky behavior than is positive information.

This basic finding has been replicated in numerous studies on political communication (e.g., Arceneaux 2012; Kam & Simas 2010), and it has been generalized to other domains such as

economic decision making (e.g., Druckman & McDermott 2008). **Paper B** extends this logic and examines the conditioning impact of citizens' expectations in relation to positively and negatively framed policy programs in the domains of public health and the economy. The public health story was very similar to the canonical Asian Disease Problem and asked respondents to “[i]magine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian Disease”, and that some people would die. It also included the same policy alternatives, framed either positively or negatively. The economic story asked respondents to “[i]magine that the U.S. is experiencing an economic relapse into recession”, and that some people would lose their jobs. They were then asked to choose between a “safe-outcome” program, in which some people would keep [/lose] their jobs with certainty, or a “risky-outcome” program in which all people would either keep or lose their jobs.

This experimental setup provides yet another way to examine the key predictions presented in this dissertation. In particular, if optimists pay more attention to negative information, they should be more willing than pessimists to endorse the risk-seeking policy alternatives. And because the setup includes information from two policy domains, it also enables a test of the claim that domain-specific expectations condition the strength of negative information.

3. Physiological Markers of Negativity Bias

A new field of research has explored the physiological markers of the negativity bias. A number of studies have found that people have more pronounced physiological reactions to negative stimuli - threatening or disgusting images, or negative news stories - than to positive stimuli (e.g., Oxley et al. 2008; Soroka & McAdams 2015). As mentioned in the preceding chapter, a few studies have gone further and suggested that stronger reactions to negative stimuli are associated with conservative political beliefs (e.g., Dodd et al. 2012; Oxley et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2011).

Yet, as recently emphasized by Hibbing, Smith and Alford (2014, 303), “[a]dditional studies are needed [...] because much of the extant physiological work is based on small, geographically constrained samples and much of the psychological work relies on college undergraduates who may have yet to form stable political attitudes.” Moreover, the general findings in this area have been further complicated by a recent study that failed to replicate a number of the central tenets of the negativity bias hypothesis (Knoll et al. 2015; though see Peterson et al. 2016 for a reply).

Paper E seeks to remedy these shortcomings by conducting the first cross-national examination of the correlation between deep individual differences in negativity bias and political

orientations in locally representative samples drawn from two different countries, the US and Denmark. It relies on two well-established physiological measures of a negativity bias: skin conductance responses, and electromyographic reactions, to negative and threatening images. (See the paper for a detailed discussion of these measures.) The study in Paper E thus deals directly with the second claim in the literature on negativity bias: That strong reactions to negative information lead to conservative policy preferences.

Citizens' Expectations: Domain-Specific Optimists and Pessimists

Since the central claim is that citizens' domain-specific expectations condition the importance they attach to negative as opposed to positive information, another critical question is: How should a person's domain-specific expectations be operationalized? Although the specific operationalizations are kept to the actual papers, I want to emphasize here a number of general points.

The thrust of the dissertation focuses on the relative power of negative versus positive information in three distinct policy domains: [i] *crime or public safety*, [ii] *disease or public health*, and [iii] *the economic domain*. To reiterate, the prediction is that the extent to which a person is an optimist or a pessimist in one domain, such as crime, conditions her response to negative and positive information in that domain, but not her reactions to positive or negative information in another domain, such as the economy. Consequently, it was necessary to operationalize citizens' expectations as they map onto each of three domains.

In the studies, I rely on a number of different and well-established measures. (For references, see the individual papers and articles.) The measures share a common theme in that they typically include items focusing on an individual's *personal* optimism or pessimism - e.g., "I worry about getting fired from my job" (economic pessimism), "I do not worry very much about getting germs from others" (health pessimism), "I do not worry about keeping myself safe from others" (physical safety pessimism) - as well as *societal* optimism or pessimism - e.g., "I think violent crime poses a great threat to our country". The personal and societal subdimensions were generally highly correlated, and are thus treated as tapping the same underlying construct.

The *expectancy-violation theory of negativity bias* rests on the assumption that people are generally optimistic, whereas the expanded framework developed here contends that the population consists of both optimists and pessimists. Empirically, this contention holds up well. Figure 3, shown below, is based on data from Paper A and shows the distribution of pessimism across the three focal policy domains. Each of the three domain-specific measures of pessimism

is constructed on the basis of a number of personal and societal items, and are scaled to range from 0 (= Optimist) over .5 (=Neither/nor) to 1 (= Pessimist).

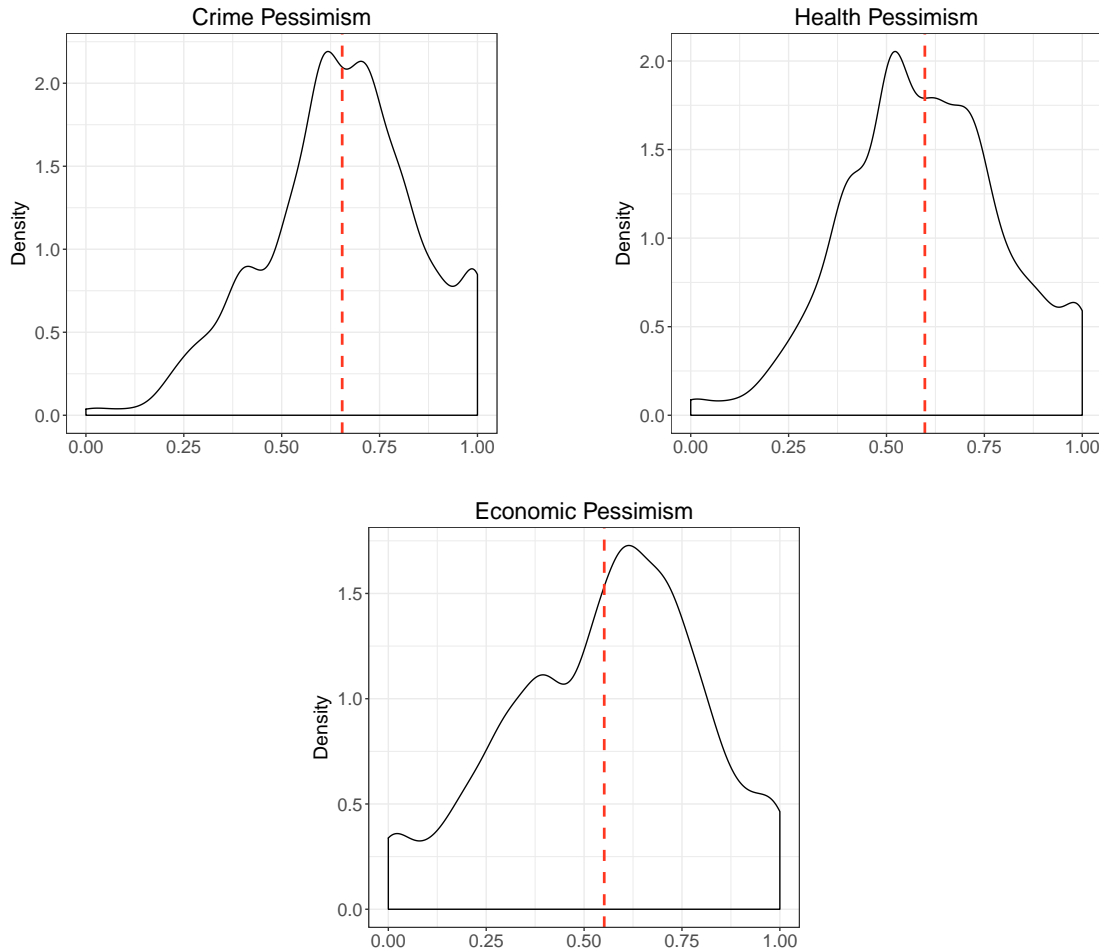


Figure 3. Based on data from Paper A “New Information, Not Negative Information”. The figure gives the distribution of pessimism in three policy domains: crime/public safety (upper left), health (upper right), and the economy (lower center). The measures consist of a number of items, and the overall indices are scaled to range from 0 (= Optimist) to 1 (= Pessimist). The vertical lines give the median value on each index. As can be seen, individuals vary greatly in their levels of pessimism.

It is immediately clear from **Figure 3** that people vary greatly in their expectations. Some are clearly pessimistic, and others are optimists. In fact, the median value is in all three instances slightly above the .5 midpoint of the scale, suggesting that respondents were slightly pessimistic

to begin with. However, I do not want to put too much emphasis on this particular finding since it is partly a function of the items used and the exact question wordings. That said, the observation that people do indeed vary in their domain-specific expectations is important since it enables me to test the conditioning impact of expectations on their reactions to political information.

A final point concerns the correlations between the domain-specific expectations. As argued in the preceding chapter, it is probably reasonable to expect that a person who is an optimist in one domain is also an optimist in another, at least to some extent. Based on the data from **Paper A**, this is mostly true. People who worry about crime also tend to worry a good deal about their health, $r_{\text{Health, Crime}} = .29$. A person who is a pessimist in the domain of crime also tends to be pessimistic in the economic domain, but the correlation is less strong, $r_{\text{Crime, Economy}} = .16$. The same pattern of results holds for the relationship between health optimism and economic optimism, $r_{\text{Health, Economy}} = .24$.

Policy Opinions

The main argument in the dissertation is that citizens' expectations are the critical intervening variables between the communications people encounter in the mass media, on one side, and their statements of policy opinions, on the other. But as **Table 1** made clear, the negativity bias has been shown to influence a number of different types of beliefs and opinions. I examine only a subset of those in this dissertation. However, I believe the scope of measures included covers sufficient space to illustrate the broad applicability of the framework presented here. Again, the exact operationalizations are best kept in the individual papers and articles, but I present here some general comments.

Paper B, which builds on Tversky & Kahneman's seminal work, focuses solely on the extent to which negatively and positively framed policy messages affect citizens' support for *risky policy programs*. Political elites routinely seek to garner support for their policies by capitalizing on negatively framed messages. Consequently, it is important to understand whether citizens' expectations condition the extent to which they are persuaded by such rhetorical strategies. It is normatively important as well. From a democratic perspective, the claim that citizens can be arbitrarily swayed by the way elites present their arguments is dour. But if, as my framework contends, at least some segments of the populace are able to resist such persuasive efforts, it suggests that public opinion may be less malleable than previously suggested.

Among other things (see below), **Paper A** examines the extent to which negative and positive news stories about societal developments affect citizens' *forward-looking expectations*. A good deal of work demonstrates that information about economic developments influences citizens' sociotropic perceptions of the future economy, which, in turn, may influence government popularity (e.g., Lewis-Beck 1990; MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson 1992). Studies also demonstrate asymmetric effects, such that negative changes in the economy have larger effects than positive changes (e.g., Ju 2008; Soroka 2006). **Paper A** extends this line of research in two ways. First, it examines whether the effects travel to other policy domains besides the economy. In particular, it examines whether information about negative and positive changes related to crime and public health influences citizens' prospective evaluations about whether or not crime will pose a societal problem in the future, and whether or not the threat from disease will be larger or smaller.⁵ Second, it examines the extent to which the link between changes and future perceptions is moderated by citizens' preexisting expectations: Do optimists become more worried about the future when they receive negative information that violates their expectations? Do pessimists weigh information about positive changes as more important, and do they become more enthusiastic when things take a turn for the better? In sum, does the relative effect of negative over positive information on forward-looking expectations vary as a function of citizens' domain-specific expectations?

The majority of papers (**Paper A, D, E, F**) examine the extent to which negative and positive information influences citizens' support for *conservative policies*. As argued, this is important in itself since a major claim in the literature concerns the effects of negative information on citizens' support for conservative protective policies. Consequently, a number of the papers address this issue. But it is also important because citizens' expectations may affect the relationship. Hence, a major goal of **Paper A**, in particular, has been to show that the asymmetric effects of negative versus positive information on support for conservative policies is not fixed, but hinges importantly on citizens' expectations. In particular, the prediction is that the effect of new negative information on conservative beliefs is accentuated among prior optimists. They should pay much attention to negative information since it violates their expectations and should thus significantly adjust their policy preferences towards conservatism. However, among pessimists the asymmetry should be muted. They should rate positive information as more im-

⁵It is interesting to note that recent analyses from the Pew Research Center (2016) show that over half of all Americans worry that crime and the number of infectious disease threats to health will grow "compared to today".

portant and consequently decrease their conservative policy inclinations when things improve.

The papers and articles rely on different measures of conservative beliefs. Some of them rely on unidimensional measures such as respondents’ ideological self-placement on Left–Right or Liberal–Conservative scales. Others add nuance and rely on multidimensional measures that distinguish between *economic* and *social* dimensions of conservatism. Others zoom in further still and focus on domain-specific measures of conservative policy preferences. For instance, **Paper A** explores the conditioning impact of citizens’ expectations on the effects of negative and positive stories about crime on support for conservative crime-protective policies. But what is a conservative crime-protective policy? In this particular paper, I relied on a “bottom-up” approach. In a pilot study, I asked an opt-in sample of MTurkers to pre-rate a number of policy options and judge whether they thought of them as ‘Broadly Liberal’ (=1), ‘Somewhere in Between’ (=4), or ‘Broadly Conservative’ (=7). The results are presented in **Figure 4**, shown below. As can be seen, four of the policy options were judged to be on the Conservative side of the continuum (i.e., > 4), and these were used in the final survey. The items included statements such as “[t]he best way to reduce crime is to increase the deterrent effect of sentencing – by sending more criminals to prison, and making sentences longer” (i.e., **Harsh Prison Sentence**) and “[m]ore effort should go to deterring crime by improving law enforcement with more police officers on the streets” (**More Police on Street**). (See the appendix in **Paper A** for full question wordings.)

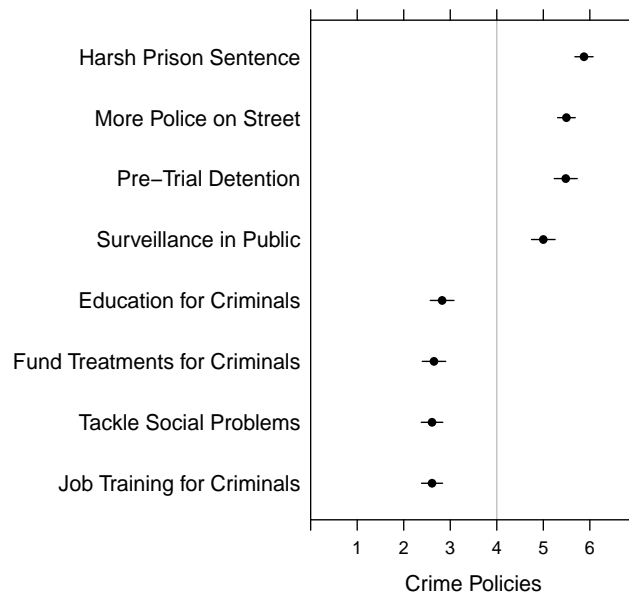


Figure 4. Based on **Paper A** “New Information, Not Negative Information”. Panels plot ratings of policy issues. Those to the right of the vertical line are judged to be conservative and were included in the final survey.

Chapter 4

Summary of Findings

In this chapter, I summarize eight core findings in the dissertation, and I relate them to the overall research question: *To what extent do the effects of the negativity bias vary across individuals and policy domains?* The summary of results revolves around the distinct relationships in the overall model presented in **Figure 1**. I begin by discussing four findings related to the key claim that citizens' domain-specific expectations condition the relative strength of negative over positive information on political beliefs. These findings relate to the first claim in the literature on negativity bias. Next, I discuss two key results on how citizens' longstanding dispositions and exposure to prior information influence their expectations, and how this may lead to a dynamic interpretation of the negativity bias. I then explore the second claim in the literature in more detail and empirically evaluate two core findings related to claims about the relationship between reactions to negative information and support for conservative policies. Finally, I seek to tie the findings together before discussing the more general implications in the next chapter.

Two notes of clarification. First, as I have emphasized previously, each paper in the dissertation was guided by its own unique research question. Here, I simply emphasize those that relate to the overall arguments in the dissertation. Second, details on data, measurement, and robustness analyses can be found in the individual articles and papers to which I will be referring.

The Strength of the Negativity Bias Depends on Domain-Specific Expectations

1. Do citizens' expectations condition the negativity bias? The most important claim of the dissertation is that citizens' responses to negative and positive political information depend on their preexisting expectations. In particular, the claim is that *prior optimists* should react stronger to negative than to positive information since it deviates from their expectations (i.e., a negativity bias) while *prior pessimists* should react stronger to information about events that have positive, as opposed to negative, implications (i.e., a positivity bias). These predictions are novel and extend some prior work (e.g., Niven 2001; Soroka 2014). Moreover, they challenge evolutionary arguments that all citizens are inherently susceptible to negative information as well as other bodies of work suggesting that positive information has larger effects among optimists while negative information has larger effects among pessimists (e.g., Hibbing et al. 2014). Do the findings support my predictions?

In general, they do. I begin by discussing results from Paper A “New Information, Not Negative Information”, two survey experiments conducted on a representative sample of US participants. The survey first assessed participants preexisting expectations as they related to two policy domains: their *physical safety pessimism* (e.g., “I worry about violent crime”), and their *health pessimism* (e.g., “I worry about contagious diseases”). The participants were then randomly exposed to either a positive or a negative news article about crime (i.e., the **Public Safety Study**), a positive or a negative story about the spread of diseases (i.e., the **Public Health Study**), or a “No-Information” control condition. The two issues were chosen because they were expected to map onto participants' distinct and domain-specific expectations, i.e., I expected *physical safety pessimism* to condition responses to the crime stories, and *health pessimism* to condition susceptibility to the public health stories. Finally, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they worried about crime and spread of disease as societal problems in the future, and they were asked to indicate their support for conservative protective policies on the two focal issues of the analysis, public safety and public health. These were the dependent measures.

Figure 5, shown below, gives the main result from the **Public Safety Study**. It shows the relative effects of negative and positive crime information on forward-looking worries about

crime (left panels) and support for conservative policies (right panels) among respondents who were optimistic about their physical safety (i.e., **crime optimists** in the figure), and among those who were pessimistic (i.e., **crime pessimists**). The most striking finding is how differently prior pessimists and optimists respond to new information. As can be seen from the two upper panels, negative information that crime is rising has large effects among prior optimists. They become significantly more worried about the future (left). They also significantly adjust their preferences for conservative policies upwards (right). These findings are in line with previous studies (e.g., Hetherington & Suhay 2011). Importantly, the panels also show that the provision of new negative information has virtually no effect among prior pessimists. They do not become more worried, nor do they increase their preferences for conservative crime-protective policies. As predicted by the framework advanced here, new negative information matters only for optimists.

Crucially, the effects reverse when we zoom in on responses to positive information that crime is declining, and that the situation is improving (the two lower panels). Whereas negative information had little effect, positive information has a large impact on prior pessimists. They become significantly more enthusiastic about the future and, perhaps as a consequence, they even become significantly less supportive of conservative policies. In contrast, new positive information has no effect among those who were quite optimistic at the outset; they do not change their forward-looking expectations, nor do they adjust their views on the necessity of conservative crime-protective policies. These findings support the framework. New positive information has a large effect on pessimists, but has no discernible effect among those who expect positive outcomes.

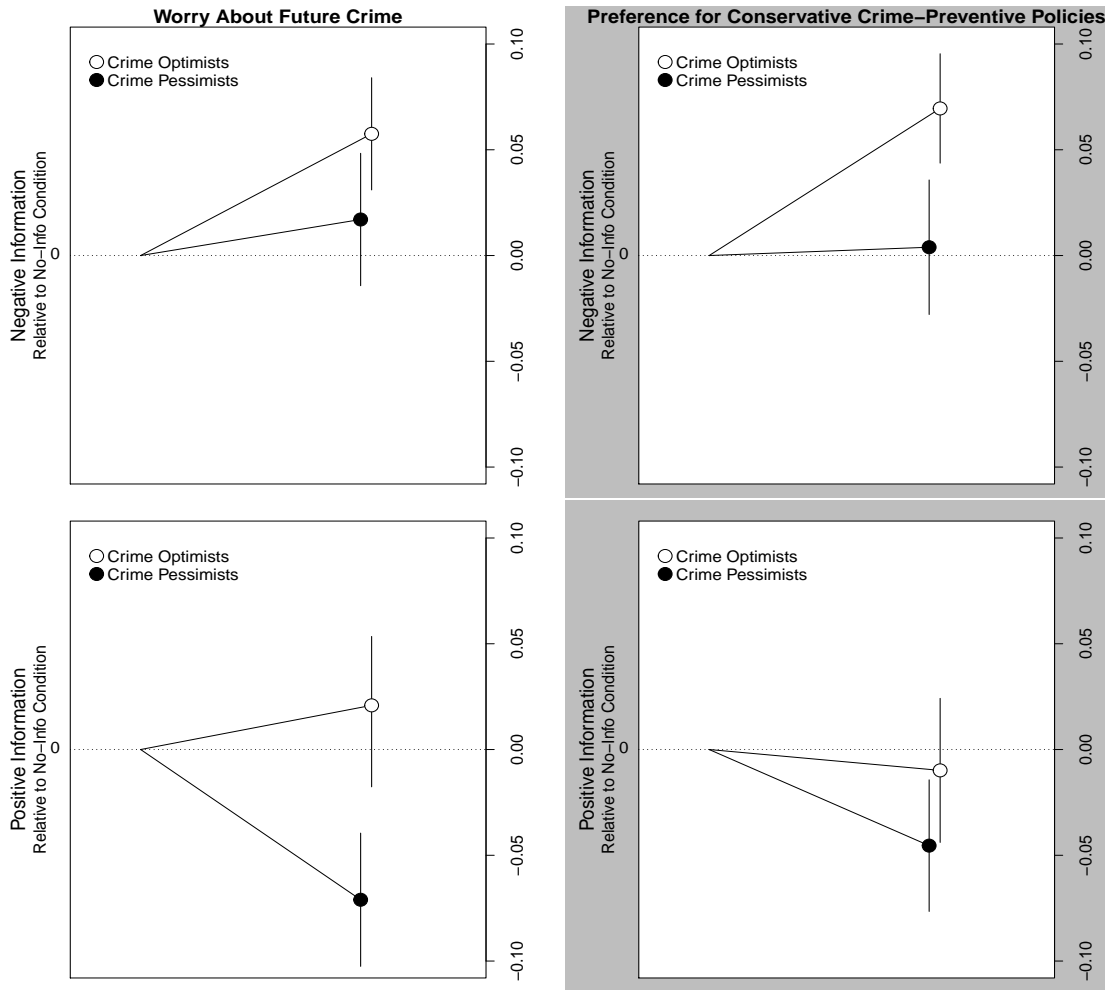


Figure 5. Estimated effects of negative and positive crime information on future worries about crime (left-hand panel) and preferences for conservative crime-protective policies (right-hand panel) among “Prior Crime Pessimists” and “Prior Crime Optimists”. Both DVs range from 0 and 1, where higher values indicate more worry about future crime and stronger support for protectionist policies. Vertical black lines are 95% confidence intervals. Reprint from **Paper A** “New Information, Not Negative Information”.

Taken together, these findings are important. In line with the framework advanced here, they suggest that citizens’ political beliefs can be influenced by the information they receive, both negative and positive, *but only to the extent that it differs from their prior expectations about the world*. From the perspective of the negativity bias hypothesis, this is critical. The findings indicate that negative information is not inherently stronger than positive information, as some evolutionary accounts propose. Rather, the strength is critically contingent on citizens’ preexisting expectations. Consequently, the relative power of negative information is more constrained

than previously suggested. Pessimists and optimists are not equally susceptible to the effects of a negativity bias in political communication.

2. Are citizens' expectations domain-specific? The Public Health Study in Paper A, which focuses on citizens' reactions to news stories about disease, generally reinforces the interpretation that the strength of negative over positive information hinges on citizens' pre-existing expectations. As such, it serves as an important robustness test of the findings. But taken together, the findings underscore another key claim proposed in this project: that citizens' *domain-specific* expectations condition the effects of political information. Thus, the paper also demonstrates that the extent to which citizens are optimistic or pessimistic about their physical safety plays no role in conditioning the impact of either positive or negative information about diseases; and the extent to which they worry about their health has no moderating impact on their responses to information about crime. This is strong support for the argument that it is necessary to distinguish between different types of negative information. It suggests that the exact effects negative and positive information has on a person's political beliefs depends on the specific policy domain under investigation.

3. Do citizens' expectations condition framed elite messages? Paper A showed that citizens' expectations powerfully condition their reactions to information from news stories. But does the framework advanced here also apply to other types of mass communication? What about reactions to negatively and positively *framed* communications from political elites? Many studies argue that people are generally more sensitive to negatively framed messages (e.g., Arce-neaux 2012; Jerit 2009; McDermott & Druckman 2008; Kahneman & Tversky 1979). But the framework presented here suggests that prior pessimists and optimists should differ markedly in their susceptibility to negatively and positively framed messages as well. Paper B "Framing Political Risks", a survey experiment in which a sample of participants from the United States were randomly exposed to either positive or negative policy frames, speaks to this.

The findings very much corroborate those presented above. Framing effects do not act uniformly across individuals because their expectations differ. For example, among citizens who were at the outset optimistic about their economic well-being, the negativity bias was strong, and negatively framed messages about the economy had considerable effects on their support for risk-seeking policies. In contrast, prior pessimists who worried a good deal about their economic situation were immune to negatively framed elite messages. They reacted much stronger to positively framed messages. As such, these findings speak generally to the literature on political

communication, and they offer one potential explanation for why some citizens can resist framed communications from political elites. When taken together, the findings from the two papers also underscore the broad applicability of the framework. The theory would seem to apply both to how citizens respond to ostensibly objective news reports, as well as politically framed messages.

Paper B served an additional purpose in that it delved into the deeper motivations that make people react strongly to expectancy-violating information. For example, optimists may react stronger to negative political information not only because it is “surprising” or “unexpected” but also out of “selfish” motivations. Thus, the findings indicate that optimists have positive expectations that they generally benefit from a society that is well-functioning and because some negative events - like economic recessions or soaring crime rates - threaten societal cohesion and stability, they react strongly to them. Conversely, because pessimists are less likely to believe that they benefit from a society that is well-functioning they are much less bothered by negative societal developments. These findings are important and contribute with a more fine-grained analysis of the conditioning effects of citizens’ expectations on negative and positive political information.

4. Did a negativity bias prevail in the aggregate? That is, averaging across all optimists and pessimists, did negative information exert a larger effect on political beliefs than positive information? More often than not, the answer is yes. Some of the findings from **Paper A** suggested that positive and negative information were, on balance, equally powerful. For example, findings from the **Public Safety Study** showed that even though negative information, on average, made people worry more about the future, whereas positive information made people less worried, the absolute values of the magnitude of the two effects were similar and significantly indistinguishable from each other. But results from **Paper B** - and also **Paper D**, to which I return - demonstrated that negative information might oftentimes hold a slight advantage. Corroborating Kahneman & Tversky’s seminal work, **Paper B**, for example, demonstrated that negatively framed messages were in the aggregate a stronger motivator of support for risky policies than were positively framed communications. And in no instances did positive information actually “outpower” the effects of negative information.

These findings are important and are consistent with a good deal of previous work. They suggest that an aggregate negativity bias might more often than not be the rule. Nevertheless, it remains true that the argument presented here goes beyond previous work in suggesting that to fully understand the strength of the negativity bias it is imperative to take citizens expectations

into account as well. Average effects of information miss important variations among different subgroups of the population (e.g., Druckman & Leeper 2012). The findings presented so far demonstrate that average effects reflect an effect present only among certain groups of ordinary citizens: Effects of negative information are largely driven by optimists, whereas movements in public beliefs in the face of positive information are due to the responsiveness of pessimists only. As such, individual level differences in domain-specific optimism and pessimism serve as a powerful constraint on the power of negativity in political communication. I return to these considerations in the concluding chapter.

Expectations, Longstanding Dispositions and Prior Exposure to Communication

Given that citizens' expectations importantly condition the strength of negative versus positive information transmitted from the political environment, a critical question becomes: Where does a person's expectations come from? Are they the product of longstanding dispositions, and hence temporally stable? Or are expectations themselves the product of information from the political environment, and hence dynamically changing? The dissertation tests both predictions and finds partial support for both.

5. Do long-standing dispositions influence expectations? Based on data from three cross-sectional surveys in **Paper C** "Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning", **Figure 6**, shown below, gives the bivariate associations between citizens' expectations and a host of longstanding dispositions. The list of dispositions includes basic sociodemographic variables as well as personality traits as indexed by the well-known Big-Five personality inventory (e.g., Gosling et al. 2003). For ease of exposition, the figure shows how these predispositions are related to a global measure of expectations, which collapses across domain-specific expectations: a measure of *obsessive-compulsive symptoms* (e.g., Boyer & Liénard 2006; Szechtman & Woody 2004; Tooby & Cosmides 2006; see **Paper C** for a discussion of this measure). All variables in the figure are scaled to range from 0 to 1, where higher values of the **expectations** scale corresponds to a more pessimistic outlook.

As the figure shows, individuals' expectations are associated with a number of longstanding dispositions. Perhaps not too surprisingly, people in higher income brackets as well as people with

higher levels of education, seem to be *more* optimistic. In contrast, females as well as people with higher ages tend to be (slightly) more pessimistic. Moreover, pessimistic expectations are positively associated with two personality traits - neuroticism and agreeableness - while individuals high in openness to new experiences and conscientiousness seem to be more optimistic. Overall, these findings suggest that a good portion of what makes a person an optimist who expects positive outcomes or a pessimist who tends to worry a good deal is related to basic differences in longstanding dispositions that are (relatively) stable over time. (Of course, since the data is correlational the usual caveats about causality apply.)⁶

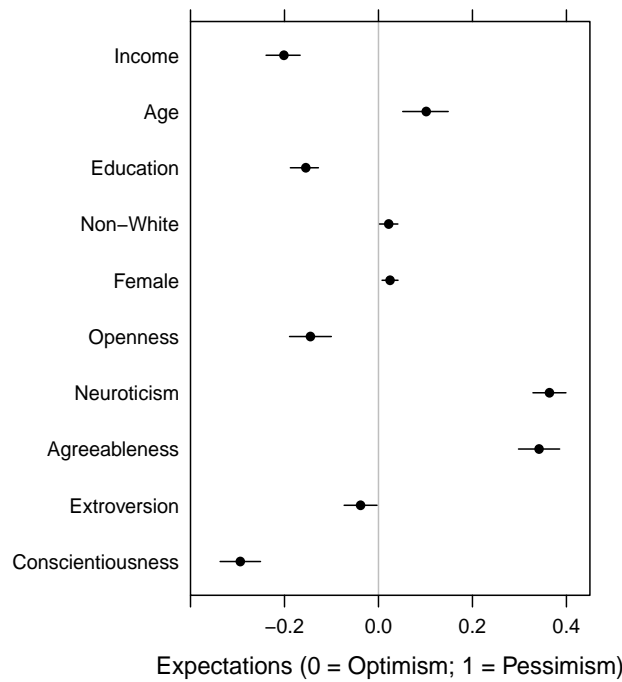


Figure 6. Based on data from Paper C “Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning”. Bivariate regression coefficients from models where an omnibus measure of expectations - obsessive-compulsive symptoms - is regressed on a set of longstanding dispositions. All variables are scaled to range between 0 and 1, where higher values of the expectations measure corresponds to more pessimism. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

⁶Results from Paper A indicate that the correlations between dispositions and domain-specific expectations pertaining to the domains of the economy, public safety and public health yield quite similar results with two noteworthy exceptions: [i] Income level is most strongly associated with economic optimism, and [ii] higher levels of education are more strongly associated with optimism in both the public safety and health domains.

6. Does exposure to political communication influence expectations? However, the findings highlighted above do not preclude the possibility that expectations are, at least partly, themselves a function of exposure to political information. Paper C also tested this prediction. Based on the hypothesis that negative information leads to a preference for conservative policies, which I discuss below, the paper developed and tested the idea that the promotion of conservative policies aimed at protecting against negative events should serve a *palliative* function (e.g., Jost et al. 2003) of decreasing citizens’ worries and hence lead to more optimistic expectations.

To test this, the paper included an experiment in which a sample of Americans was randomly allocated to one of four conditions: [i] a “No-Information” control condition, [ii] a condition in which participants were exposed to information about real-world Republican policy promotions as reflected in the Republican Party’s “Principles for American Renewal” from 2014⁷, [iii] a condition in which participants were exposed to factual information about a decisive Republican election victory in the 2014 Congressional elections, and [iv] a condition in which participants were exposed to information about *both* the promotion of conservative protective policies and information about the Congressional win. Finally, after exposure to the treatments, all participants were asked to rate their optimism or pessimism on the same global measure of expectations as before, scaled to range from 0 to 1 with higher values corresponding to more pessimistic expectations. The findings are presented in Figure 7, which is shown below. The figure plots the estimated treatment effects on citizens’ expectations, where the “No-Information” condition serves as the comparison condition.

The findings shown in Figure 7 are consistent with the prediction that information from the political environment may influence citizens’ expectations. It seems that exposure to the Republican Party’s Principles for American Renewal (i.e., **Republican Policies** in the figure) is enough to generate a (slight) drop in pessimism. Moreover, it seems that the effect is descriptively reinforced by information about the Republican election victory (i.e., **Republican Victory + Policies**).⁸ None of the effects are extraordinarily large, e.g., the effect of **Republican Victory + Policies** is a reduction in pessimism by just around 3.5 percentage points. But all three in-

⁷The policy promotions and principles can be found on <https://www.gop.com/principles-for-american-renewal>. Examples of policies include: “Keeping America safe and strong requires a strong military, growing the economy, energy independence, and secure borders” and “We need an immigration system that secures our borders, upholds the law, and boosts our economy.”

⁸Although the effect of exposure to information about the Republican Congressional win is not itself statistically significant at the conventional .05-level, it is important to emphasize that the differences in statistical significance between the **Republican Victory** condition and the two other conditions were not themselves statistically significant.

formation effects are nevertheless consistent in terms of both direction and magnitude, hence making it less likely that they emerged exclusively by chance.

Taken together, the findings indicate that citizens' expectations are partly - and perhaps, mostly - the result of longstanding dispositions, and partly the result of exposure to political communication. This latter finding is important since it suggests that expectations may dynamically change, depending on the information environment (e.g., Soroka 2014). As I discuss in the concluding section, this latter finding is important since it suggests that the relative strength of negative information may *also* change over time as the public moves from pessimism towards optimism (or vice versa).

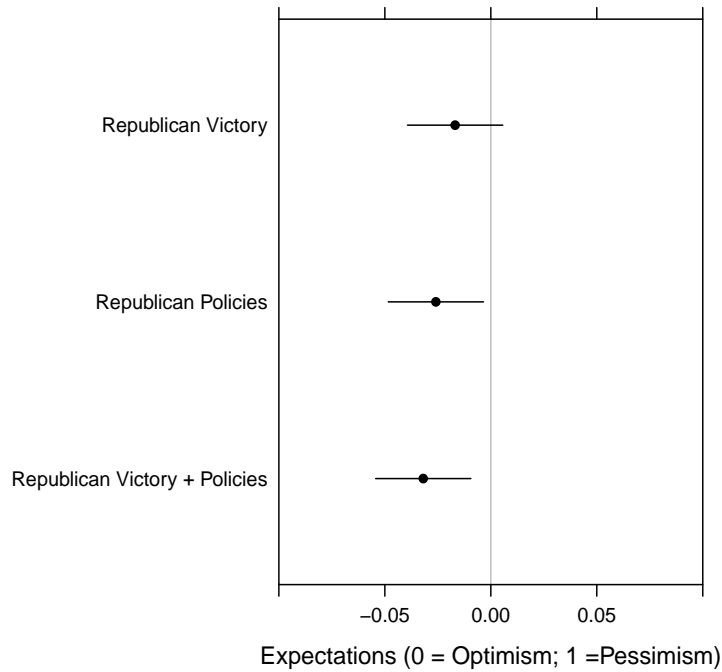


Figure 7. Based on data from Table 4 in Paper C “Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning”. Estimated treatment effects of being exposed to [i] info about Republican Congressional win (**Republican Victory**), [ii] info about Republican protective policies (**Republican Policies**), or [iii] both types of info (**Republican Victory + Policies**), on an omnibus measure of **expectations**, scaled from 0 to 1 where higher values indicate pessimistic expectations. Effects are relative to a “No-Information” control condition. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Negativity and Conservative Policy Preferences

Paper A and Paper B demonstrated that individual differences in domain-specific expectations conditioned the impact of information on citizens' political beliefs, including their support for conservative policies. And in exploring the origins of citizens' expectations, Paper C suggested that policy assurances from conservative elites served to reduce citizen's pessimism. But what is the exact relationship between negativity and conservative policy beliefs? This relates to the second claim in the literature, and is about the *direction* of the effects of negative information on citizens' public policy preferences. A number of the studies in the dissertation speak to this question, and I now discuss the core findings.

7. Are physiological responses to negativity associated with social and/or economic conservative policy preferences? Much existing work on a negativity bias in politics argues that negative information leads people to worry and hence gravitate towards a preference for conservative policies that protect against threats (e.g., Hibbing et al. 2014). A key finding emanating from this perspective is that individuals with high physiological sensitivity to negative and threatening images (e.g., an image of a man holding a gun; an image of an attacking snake) are more likely to hold conservative beliefs (e.g., Oxley 2008; Dodd et al. 2012). Yet, these physiological findings have been complicated recently by a failed replication (Knoll et al. 2015). They have also been challenged on theoretical grounds. Some authors have argued that responses to negative events more generally are associated only with *social*, as opposed to *economic*, conservatism (e.g., Malka et al. 2014). To remedy these shortcomings, Paper E "Different Cultures, Same Deep Foundations?" sought to replicate the finding that stronger physiological reactions to negative stimuli are associated with conservative policy preferences. In contrast to prior studies, the paper relied on data from cross-national laboratory studies, conducted both in Denmark and the US. In addition, it extended prior studies by examining both social and economic dimensions of conservatism.

Results were equivocal. Utilizing two well-established measures of physiological reactivity to negative images, the study demonstrated that only one of them was a significant predictor of conservative policy preferences, and only among the American participants. However, in the study, participants were also asked to indicate their self-reported emotional reactions to the images, e.g., the extent to which they had positive or negative feelings when viewing an image of

a man with a gun. Here results were somewhat less ambiguous. In both countries, respondents who rated the images as more negative were also more likely to hold *social conservative* beliefs; the effects on *economic* conservatism were insignificant in both cases. These findings suggest that the theoretical model may hold water - at least with respect to the association between negative information and social conservative preferences (see also **Paper C** for a similar pattern of results). However, they also suggest that physiological measurement techniques may not be robust operationalizations of individual differences in the negativity bias. As such, **Paper E** is also a cautionary tale about the utilization of physiological measures to predict citizens' political preferences.⁹

8. Are responses to negativity even associated with social conservative preferences? **Paper E** offered preliminary evidence that reactions to negative information are associated with social conservative preferences. This was also evident in **Paper A** where exposure to negative news stories increased support for conservative policies in the domains of public safety and public health, on average. (To be sure, **Paper A** also found that the effects were mostly, if not completely, driven by prior optimists.) However, **Paper A** suffered from a shortcoming in that it only included public policy measures that had been pre-rated as being conservative (e.g., “[t]o combat crime, we need more police on the streets”). It omitted measures that had been pre-rated as liberal protective policies (e.g., “[t]o combat crime, we need more funding for rehabilitating criminals”). For the purposes of **Paper A** this omission was acceptable. The primary goal was to test the key claim that prior optimists and pessimists differed in their reactions to negative and positive information. However, from the broader perspective of the effects of negative information on preferences for protective policies it was unfortunate. Perhaps optimists, who reacted strongly to negative information, would *also* have increased their support for liberal protective policies, had they only had the opportunity to do so? Indeed, this neglect speaks to another core criticism of the classic “conservative shift” hypothesis (Huddy & Feldman 2011) in response to negative information. This criticism contends that even in the face of negative events in domains related to social policy issues, people become supportive of all kinds of protective policy measures, irrespective of their ideological content (e.g., Kam & Estes 2016).

⁹One point of clarification: The study showed that people did, on average, exhibit more intense physiological reactions to negative images than to positive images. As such, this finding corroborates other work (e.g., Soroka & McAdams 2015). I regard the finding that negative images or news stories elicit more intense physiological reactions as robust; complications only arise in the next step of the process, namely when physiological reactions are used to predict political ideology.

Paper D “A Dual-Process Theory of Threat” developed and tested a model for understanding the relationship between negative information and public support for protective policies on the social dimension. The paper consisted of multiple survey experiments administered in Denmark and the US. It demonstrated that negative and threatening information about either increasing criminal gang activities (i.e., stories about public safety) or information about the spread of Ebola (i.e., stories about public health), led to support for policies that offer protection, whether the policies could reasonably be designated conservative or, importantly, liberal. For example, the effect of the negative story about disease was to increase citizens’ support for implementing policies to lower the costs of vaccination, which is arguably a liberal policy position.

Although these findings thus lend credence to recent criticisms of the classic perspective, such a conclusion may be premature. The paper similarly argued that negative information within the specific policy domains should also lead to *threat-specific* attitudinal responses. It theorized, and demonstrated, that exposure to negative information about crime threats *increased* support for contact-seeking policies (e.g., “[t]he government can increase everyone’s safety by making it easier to form communities where people can live close together”), presumably as a way to defend against potential threats from violent adversaries. In contrast, exposure to disease threats triggered *less* support for contact-seeking policies, arguably as a way to lower the likelihood of contamination by pathogens from others.

These domain-specific findings were important for two reasons. First, they illustrate that exposure to negative information in distinct policy domains can sometimes have diametrically opposite effects on citizens’ political beliefs, even within the social dimension. This underscores one of the crucial points of the dissertation: the exact effects of negative information should be evaluated on a domain-by-domain basis. Second, the findings lend some credence to the classic approach that negative events may lead to conservative policy preferences, at least in these two policy domains: a post-test indicated that participants judged *both* domain-specific responses of support for contact-seeking policies in the face of crime threats, and contact-avoidance in the face of disease threats, as *conservative* policy solutions to the specific threats. Thus, at a general level it would seem that negative events can increase support for protective policies, irrespective of ideological content. At a more specific level, different types of negative information may lead to highly distinct attitudinal responses, and in the domains under examination here, these responses can most correctly be construed as conservative in nature. This latter interpretation was reinforced by findings from **Paper F** “Disgust and Trust”. This paper relied on a number of

correlational studies to demonstrate that individuals' who were pessimistic about their physical health and worried a good deal about diseases, were less willing to trust and cooperate with other people, presumably as a way to avoid diseases. Importantly, the study also showed that people who worried about diseases tended to be more conservative, but that the effect was mediated by their lower propensity to trust others.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the findings from the papers and articles yielded eight important findings that shed light on the overarching research question guiding this dissertation: *To what extent do the effects of a negativity bias vary across individuals and policy domains?*

The four first findings relate specifically to claims about the *strength* of the effects of negative versus positive political information. Combined, they support the key predictions [1] that citizens' preexisting expectations condition the effects of negative and positive political information, [2] that citizens' expectations are domain-specific, and [3] that the framework applies both to how citizens respond to news media stories as well as politically framed elite messages. Taken together, they imply that the power of negative information is more limited than prior work suggests because citizens' susceptibility to mass communication hinges critically on the extent to which they are optimists or pessimists. The findings also demonstrate that the framework applies across three distinct and salient policy domains - the economy, public safety and public health - but also that it has implications for how new political information influences how citizens make up their minds about a number of political evaluations, including their forward-looking expectations about societal developments, their support for risk-seeking policy programs, as well as their preferences for conservative policies. Finally, the findings lend some credence to prior studies showing that [4] a negativity bias may exist in the aggregate. But they highlight the crucial point that aggregate effects mask large variation. Optimists and pessimists differ markedly in the extent to which they can be swayed by positive and negative information.

The next two findings concern the origins of citizens' expectations. [5] The findings demonstrate that people's expectations about the world are associated with a host of longstanding dispositions. [6] However, results from a communication experiment suggest that people may also become less pessimistic when they receive policy assurances. As I discuss in the next chap-

ter, this dynamic interpretation of citizens' expectations has potentially important implications.

Finally, the last two findings relate specifically to claims about the *direction* of the effects of negative information on policy preferences. The most general conclusion is that the relationship is complex. [7] The papers did not replicate the association between physiological reactions to negative images and conservative policy preferences, but they did suggest that self-reported reactions to negative images were associated with *social* conservative policy opinions, but not *economic* conservative policy opinions. [8] However, even in policy domains within the social dimension results are less than straightforward. At a general level, negative information may increase support for both conservative and liberal protective policies. However, the findings also demonstrate that exposure to negative information in distinct policy domains can lead to highly specific attitudinal responses. In the two domains explored here, both response sets were associated with conservatism. Although these findings are only preliminary, they emphasize the need for more careful attention to domain-specific dynamics. Taken together, these findings, along with the other contributions, highlight the fact that the effects of the negativity bias are not the same for all citizens or across political domains.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I believe that the arguments developed and the findings obtained in this dissertation extend our understanding of the negativity bias in political communication. They also have implications for future research. In this chapter I highlight these contributions and implications. I first discuss how the framework advanced here adds to our understanding of the nature of the negativity bias. This discussion concerns the first claim in the literature and is about how we should understand the relative *strength* of negative information more generally. I then discuss how the findings from the dissertation add new insights about the second claim in literature, which concerns the *direction* of the effects of negative information on citizens' policy preferences. I conclude by briefly discussing some general issues about the negativity bias in politics.

The Nature of the Negativity Bias

Scholars have long argued that negative information is a more powerful driver of citizens' attitudes and behaviors than positive information. This idea is evident in work on the types of news media stories that attract people's attention (Trusler & Soroka 2014; Young 2003), perhaps best exemplified by common adages such as "if it bleeds, it leads" and "no news is good news". It is evident in work on ordinary citizens' susceptibility to persuasive and rhetorical appeals from political elites (e.g., Arceneaux 2012; Cobb & Kuklinski 1997) and the notion that "losses loom larger than gains" (Kahneman & Tversky 1979). The argument also figures prominently in work on how people form political beliefs and impressions of policies and incumbent performance in light of changes in the real world (e.g., Albertson & Gadarian 2015; Bloom & Price 1975).

Nonetheless, a good deal of disagreement exists in the literature. Is the negativity bias equally strong among all segments of the populace (e.g., Hibbing et al. 2014; Kam & Simas 2010; Luttig & Lavine 2016)? Does the relative strength of negative over positive information vary from one policy domain to another (e.g., Federico et al. 2014; Malka & Soto 2014; McDermott & Druckman 2014)? And what is the precise nature of the effects of negative information on citizens' support for public policies (e.g., Charney 2014; Huddy & Feldman 2014; Kam & Estes 2016)? I hope that I have contributed to these unresolved issues.

The most fundamental claim in the dissertation is that the strength of the negativity bias is not fixed. It is not, because people are not all alike. The argument that some people - and, some would say, the majority (Niven 2001) - are optimistic and have high expectations to their social and political worlds while others tend to adopt a gloomy and negative outlook is important because it suggests that they evaluate and respond to incoming political information against very different backdrops. Building on existing work on the origins of a negativity bias (e.g., Fiske 1980; Lau 1985; Skowronski & Carlston 1989; Soroka 2014; Taylor 1991), I have developed, and tested, a framework for understanding how the relative strength of negative over positive information depends importantly on whether or not a person has *pessimistic* or *optimistic* expectations.

I hope to have offered preliminary empirical evidence that the framework has broad applicability for a variety of political phenomena. The core findings in **Paper A** "New Information, Not Negative Information" and **Paper B** "Framing Political Risks" demonstrate that prior optimists and pessimists react in markedly different ways to new political information, whether in

the form of news report stories or politically framed messages. In line with previous work, the studies showed that optimists' political beliefs, whether in the form of support for risky policies, forward-looking expectations, or preferences for conservative policies, were more influenced by negative than by positive information. Crucially, however, the findings showed that prior pessimists relied much more on positive information in adjusting their political beliefs. In contrast to optimists, they showed evidence of a *positivity bias*.

I believe that the framework advanced here makes three important contributions to the literature. First, it offers a theoretical model for understanding how changes in political beliefs flow from an interaction between political information and ordinary citizens' preexisting beliefs and expectations. Citizens' expectations regulate the acquisition as well as the internalization of political messages. Empirically, it suggests that the extent to which the news media and political elites more generally can capitalize on negative information to set the agenda and influence citizens' political attitudes is more constrained than previously argued. The relative effectiveness of negative over positive information depends on individual differences in expectations, and among some segments of the populace - the pessimists - new positive information may be internalized more easily and hence matters much more.

Second, the finding that a person's *domain-specific* expectations condition the effects of political information suggests that much more attention should be paid to the exact *policy domain* under investigation. Much too often scholars of the negativity bias glance over different types of negative communications. But negative information is not just negative information; its effect depends critically on the policy domain to which it belongs. And demonstrating that a person reacts strongly to negative information about, say, economic downturns, does not necessarily imply that she will also be susceptible to negative information about, say, soaring crime rates. The finding that the same person can be an optimist in some domains and somewhat less of an optimist in others has another interesting, although less straightforward, implication. Because of *intra-person* differences in expectations, the *aggregate* levels of optimism may differ between policy domains. And since aggregate levels of optimism can differ between policy domains, so too should the aggregate strength of negative information. In policy domains where optimists outnumber pessimists, the aggregate reaction to new negative political information should be greater than reactions to positive information. But in policy domains where optimism is not the rule, the average impact of the negativity bias should be muted, and positive information should matter much more. In my view, these predictions merit further examination.

The third implication of the findings is that they contribute to a new way to think about the phenomenon of a negativity bias more generally. The view advanced here that the power of negative information is premised on citizens' expectations, when taken to its logical conclusion, implies that there is *no inherent negativity bias*. What matters most for changes in citizens' attention and political beliefs is *new information* that deviates from their preexisting expectations. This is not to say that we will never observe a negativity bias in the aggregate. Many studies do, and a number of the findings here also suggests that negative information may, on average, have stronger effects than positive information (e.g., Paper B and Paper D; but see Paper A). But the findings from the papers also underscore the crucial point that average effects of information, whether positive or negative, mask large amounts of individual level heterogeneity. The strength of the framework presented here is that it generates a set of hypotheses about how to understand this heterogeneity. It leads to hypotheses about who should generally be more - and less - influenced by different types of mass communication.

Granted, the claim that negative information is not inherently superior to positive information is still controversial (although not completely new, e.g., Soroka 2014). In particular, it seems to challenge a core assumption underlying much evolutionary work on a "hardwired" negativity bias (e.g., Cacioppo et al. 2014). This model was discussed previously. I have argued that evolution-inspired explanations are plausible in some instances, such as in the face of manifest threat like an actual criminal assault, but also why it may not be a plausible model for explaining how people react to negative events in the political sphere where threats are typically potential. I also discussed that both accounts can be true simultaneously. Most importantly, however, it is unclear if and how the evolutionary model could explain the empirical patterns of results obtained in this dissertation. In any event, the goal of this dissertation has not been to adjudicate between these two views. It has been to develop a simple model with a reasonable amount of explanatory horsepower and evaluate the implications derived from this model against the empirical world. On that account, I believe it has done a good job.

Limitations and Future Directions

Most generally, the claim presented here is that a distinction between two groups of citizens - the optimists and the pessimists - does a reasonably good job of explaining how differently people react to different types of negative versus positive political information. In my view, it is a quite

parsimonious model with a fair amount of empirical breadth. As such it also creates the potential for further extensions and applications. These extensions are discussed in this section. But parsimony and simplification also comes at a cost, and the model and the findings presented here omit much of what goes on in real-life politics. I begin by discussing some important limitations.

The argument is fundamentally about how characteristics of citizens - their expectations - condition the strength of negative and positive political information. However, it is important to emphasize that other types of characteristics besides a person's expectations may also significantly influence their susceptibility to communication effects. However, at present it is unclear how these characteristics may fit into the model. Consider *partisanship*. A good deal of work on motivated reasoning suggests that strong partisans reject negative information, such as negative economic developments, if their preferred party is in government (e.g., Taber & Lodge 2005; but see Gerber & Green 2000). But how does partisanship interact with a person's expectations? Would an optimist still respond strongly to new negative information if it reflected badly on her party? Consider also *political awareness* or the extent to which citizens pay attention to, and understand, political issues (e.g., Slothuus 2008). In real-life politics, a modicum of attentiveness to politics is probably a prerequisite for communication effects to matter at all (cf. Zaller's *Reception Axiom* (1992, 42)). But does this suggest that the conditioning impact of a person's expectations on negative and positive information should be most readily apparent among attentive citizens? Exploring how other types of characteristics such as partisanship and political awareness interact with a person's expectations in the translation of information into political beliefs is, in my view, a promising path for future studies.

The point about political awareness raises another empirical concern. Most of the dissertation involves experimental studies where information is essentially forced on participants. But in reality, citizens are free to ignore political information altogether; and even if they do not ignore it, they are not necessarily randomly exposed to either positive or negative information. Although I have attempted to create highly realistic treatments in the experiments, it is necessary to stress that the dissertation, as a whole, suffers from a lack of "realism". This neglect underlines the potential for future work to apply the framework in more realistic settings, e.g., by capitalizing on different data sources such as natural experiments or panel data to extend the findings. Moreover, I have barely scratched the surface of the types of political beliefs that the framework may be applicable to. For example, an important argument in the literature is that negative information may also powerfully influence citizens' vote for incumbent parties and

politicians. Future studies would do well also to explore whether the implications generated here generalize to such political beliefs.

The framework also has a number of implications that I have not explored. Thus, another avenue for future studies concerns the *temporal* dynamics of the negativity bias. **Paper C** “Political Ideology and Precautionary Reasoning” demonstrated that expectations are partly a function of longstanding dispositions and partly the result of exposure to political information. This latter finding opens for the possibility that the strength of negative information may itself evolve and change over time (e.g., Soroka 2014). To give an example of how this would work, consider an optimist at time t_0 who receives some negative information at time t_1 . Since the information violates her expectations, she might significantly adjust her expectations in a more pessimistic direction. How does this adjustment affect the way subsequent information at time t_2 is processed? Given that she has now become (more of a) pessimist, any new negative information is likely to matter less - it merely confirms her new expectations. In contrast, the effects of positive information, which did not matter much before, may now exert a larger impact.

I believe that this dynamic interpretation has at least two important implications. First, this line of reasoning suggests that the weight individuals give to a piece of negative (positive) information decreases as their expectations become pessimistic (optimistic): the effects of multiple rounds of exposure to political information in the same direction is essentially “self-limiting”. Second, and even when we keep the first point in mind, citizens’ expectations may *converge* in the face of decidedly one-sided information environments. It is fair to assume that certain negative shocks - like the recent economic recession - are followed by extraordinarily negative news coverage. In such instances, most citizens may converge on a pessimistic economic outlook. A recent study by Hetherington & Suhay (2011) appear to support this contention. They found that in the aftermath of 9/11, most Americans became exceedingly worried about their physical safety. They also demonstrated that the shift was primarily driven by those who were initially optimistic about their safety catching up with their pessimistic fellow citizens who worried even before the attack.

Finally, although the dissertation primarily focuses on how the negativity bias influences citizens’ reactions to political communication, I believe it has implications for the behaviors and actions of the news media and political elites as well. For one thing, journalists and politicians are human beings, and so their behavior may also be driven by their preexisting beliefs. Consider the finding from **Paper B** that preexisting optimists became more supportive of risk-seeking poli-

cies in the face of negative economic information. A similar dynamic may apply for politicians. For example, in their study of welfare reforms, Vis & Kersbergen (2009) argue that politicians enact risky and unpopular welfare reforms only in suddenly deteriorating economic situations. Moreover, the insights may have *strategic* implications for journalists. For example, to maximize consumer engagement, media outlets should increasingly focus on disseminating positive (negative) news stories in policy domains that are generally dominated by pessimism (optimism). These are but a few examples of how the implications of the framework may generalize beyond the behaviors of ordinary citizens.

Negativity Bias, Conservative Preferences and Future Directions

In a recent article, Hibbing, Smith & Alford (2014) masterfully reviewed a lengthy literature on the nature and origins of citizens' political views. Their argument boiled down to a simple, yet powerful claim: People who pay more attention to, and react strongly to, negative features of their environments tend to become more supportive of conservative policies. However, in my view, the most interesting aspect of the article was the accompanying "Peer Review Commentary", in which numerous fellow scientists commented on the article. For one thing, it illustrated what science is really about - collaboration, in the sense of scholars openly engaging in good-spirited debates over the merits of interesting and controversial ideas. For another, the commentaries seemed to converge on the same general conclusion: There may something right about the idea; but, in the words of some of the commentators, it is "[n]ot so simple" (Huddy & Feldman 2014, 312). In many ways, this conclusion summarizes this dissertation's findings concerning claims about the *direction* of the effects of negative information on citizens' support for conservative policies. In this section, I outline the main contributions and complications, and I discuss a path for future studies.

The first point is a practical matter concerning methodology. **Paper E** "Different Cultures, Same Deep Foundations?" explored, and generally failed to replicate, a key claim from the classic literature that stronger physiological reactions to negative events are associated with conservative policy preferences. In itself, the failed replication is an important contribution since it, at the very least, serves as a practical warning to political scientists seeking to rely on physiological laboratory equipment to gauge the sources of citizens' political beliefs. As discussed in the paper,

physiological measurements are extremely sensitive and while a great deal of care had been taken to ensure that appropriate procedures were followed, it is impossible to rule out small differences in how the measurements were gathered as an explanation for differences in relation to previous research.

The second point is that the association between negativity and policy preferences is complex. In some sense, this could hardly be otherwise. For one thing, what makes some persons gravitate towards a right-wing ideology and others adopt a liberal or left-leaning outlook is complicated. Mostly likely, it is due to a full host of influences, including childhood socialization, genetics, and life-long experiences; and information transmitted from the political world constitute but one avenue for influence. For another, how best to measure a person's political ideology is subject to considerable disagreement. Do one-dimensional measures suffice? Are political ideologies two-dimensional, or is it necessary to zoom in on ordinary citizens' beliefs as they relate to specific policy domains? Against these backdrops, we should expect no easy answers.

Although this does not seem like much of an advance, I believe the argument developed and tested in Paper D "A Dual-Process of Threat" and F "Disgust and Trust" provides a useful heuristic for organizing predictions about the effects of negative information on citizens' preferences for protective policies. In particular, the notion that citizens' reactions are driven by two processes - what I have labeled domain-general and domain-specific processes - serves as an integration of a number of important literatures. The first domain-general process holds that negative information leads citizens to generally attend to any potential protective policy whether the content is conservative or liberal. As such, this process acknowledges that citizens' beliefs are, partly, structured by policy discourse and how political elites choose to frame their messages (Sniderman & Bullock 2004). It also permits that political parties and politicians of different ideological stripes may come to "own" certain issues through their actions and hence be deemed more trustworthy in offering policies to protect against threats (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Stubager 2010; Petrocik 1996). A good deal of empirical work shows that these dynamics must be true, at least to some extent.

Yet, the domain-specific processes suggest that "not everything goes". From the perspective of ordinary citizens, it would seem that some types of policies are intuitively deemed more protective than others. Based on evolutionary psychology, the argument and findings suggest that when multiple policy alternatives are available simultaneously, the existence of deep-seated intuitions will predictably make some policies more powerful than others at garnering support.

This has a number of implications. First, it puts theoretically derived constraints on the types of policy solutions that will rise to prominence in public discourse. It entails that there is most likely a limit to the types of policies that elites can advocate and get people to rally around. Second, it suggests that the solutions people gravitate towards in a given policy domain may be very different from, and even diametrically opposed to, the solutions they prefer in other domains. The study showed that in the face of crime threats, people were more willing to support contact-seeking policies, whereas cueing people with disease threats led to less support for contact-promoting public policies. Although this might seem to suggest that the political beliefs that citizens come to hold are not “logically coherent”, they may nevertheless be “psychologically constrained” (Converse 1964, 5-6). Thus, the studies showed that at least in the two domains examined here - public health and safety - the policies that resonated more with citizens could, in each case, be construed as conservative solutions. This finding also lends credence to the classic perspective that in two salient policy domains on the social dimension, there is something right about Hibbing and colleagues’ suggestion about the direction of the effects of negative information.

Of course, whether or not this is also true in other domains - such as the economy - is at present an open question. But the advantage of the approach advocated here is the suggestion that one way forward in attempting to nail down the exact psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between negative information and support for particular protective policies is to draw on insights from evolutionary psychology to derive predictions about domain-specific effects. I believe that future research might fruitfully employ similar techniques to identify additional policy domains and offer predictions about the domain-specific responses that can be expected to arise in the face of certain negative events.

As an example, consider again the economic domain. From an evolutionary perspective, economic downturns share many structural commonalities with periods of resource scarcity (e.g., food scarcity), which have been a recurrent problem over evolutionary time (e.g., Aarøe & Petersen 2013; Kaplan et al., 2000). Studies suggest that *resource sharing* may have been an evolved solution to resource depletion. If this view is correct, the prediction would be that ordinary citizens today would also intuitively increase their willingness to cooperate with others in the face of negative economic events. Thus, it might explain why worries about economic uncertainty are associated with support for redistributive policies (e.g. Malka & Soto 2014). And it might answer the question why negative events on social issues often lead to preferences

that bundle together in a “socially conservative” belief system, while negative economic events are often associated with “economic liberalism” (e.g., Gerber et al. 2010; Huddy & Feldman 2014). Finally, it underscores one of the crucial points of the dissertation: Scholars would do well to also consider domain- or issue-specific dynamics in order to understand the power of the negativity bias on citizens’ political behavior.

Final Remarks

“A key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the *preferences* of its citizens” (Dahl, 1971, p. 1, my emphasis). Consequently, understanding the sources of citizens’ political preferences is of utmost importance for any student of democracy. At the most general level, the dissertation has grappled with this question from the perspective of political psychology. I have sought to explore how political beliefs flow from an interaction between information from the political environment and citizens’ preexisting expectations about the world. When taken individually, none of the insights are particularly new. Scholars have for a long time showed that information from political elites, in particular negative information, shapes preferences in substantial ways. It is also well known that citizens’ political preferences are a function of personal characteristics. I hope that I have contributed to a better understanding of how these two factors jointly structure the beliefs that people come to adopt.

Although the dissertation has been most centrally concerned with how citizens’ expectations condition the relative power of negative information on a host of political beliefs, including conservative policies, it speaks to the field of political communication more generally. Not only because most bits of information that people receive from their political surroundings can be construed as either positive or negative. But also because the dissertation raises a number of issues that, in my view, ought to receive more attention in studies of the effects of mass communication on citizens’ political preferences more generally. Thus, the central concern about how the exact effects of negative information may wax and wane across political issues and across ordinary citizens, applies with equal force to any study on how citizens make sense of political issues in light of mass communication. Of course, much more research is needed in order to systematically account for the intricacies between mass communications and public opinion. Yet, I believe that the framework provided here presents one way to begin to develop predictions about

when and why different types of political information may shape citizens' political preferences. As such, it provides insights into a fundamental issue in modern democracies.

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English Summary

In modern-day politics, citizens are inundated by massive amounts of information. Political actors – politicians, news media outlets, interest organizations, and so on – continually compete for citizens’ limited attention with all manner of political messages. Increasingly critical questions therefore become: “what kinds of information attract citizens’ attention?” and “how does the information to which they attend influence their political beliefs?”

This dissertation takes its point of departure in a finding that has become increasingly common: People tend to give preference to negative over positive information. From stories about economic busts, to news about the rise of violent crimes, to articles about the outbreak of new diseases, citizens tend to pay more attention to negative news stories at the expense of positive, more reassuring ones, just as their evaluations of policies and politicians seem to be influenced more by negatively framed elite rhetoric and negative societal developments. Indeed, the significance of a “negativity bias” in citizens’ reactions to political communication may have consequences for the actions of political elites themselves. Politicians, it would seem, are “motivated primarily by the desire to avoid blame for unpopular actions rather than by seeking to claim credit for popular ones” (Weaver 1986, 371).

In this dissertation I critically evaluate claims about the greater power of negative information in policy discourse. I seek to contribute to existing research in two ways. First, I develop a new perspective on when political actors can – and more importantly, cannot – capitalize on negative information to set the agenda and sway public opinion. Much research remains adamant that the negativity bias is a “hardwired” feature of human cognition (e.g., McDermott, Fowler, and Smirnov 2008), that negative political communication generally “win[s] the day” (Cobb & Kuklinski 1997, 115), and that “all individuals are equally vulnerable” (Kam & Simas 2010, 381) to the effects of a negativity information. Here, however, I build on a smaller body of work to raise the argument that citizens’ *prior expectations* powerfully shape their reactions to both negative and positive information in policy discourse. I argue that because some citizens are optimists who have positive expectations while others are pessimists who expect negative outcomes, they will have markedly different reactions to information transmitted from the political world. This view has important implications and leads to a much more nuanced portrait of the pliability of the mass public in the face of negativity: People are not unconditionally susceptible to negative

communications. Thus, while the framework suggests that optimists' political opinions may be more heavily influenced by negative information, it also leads to the - somewhat paradoxical - expectation that pessimistic citizens respond much more strongly to positive communications. Indeed, the findings from a variety of the studies in this dissertation point towards a controversial conclusion: There may not be an inherent negativity bias. Rather, what seems to matter for citizens' political beliefs has less to do with *negative* information and more to do with *new* information that deviates from what they have come to expect about their political worlds.

Second, the dissertation adds to ongoing discussions on the exact effects of negative information on citizens' preferences for public policies. While a prominent view has been that certain negative events – like terrorism, crime, and immigration – lead people to increase their support for conservative policies they believe may protect them, more recent bodies of work have challenged this claim on empirical as well as theoretical grounds. In this dissertation I empirically test the veracity of both classic and revisionist accounts in a series of cross-national studies that utilize both self-report as well as physiological measurement techniques. In addition, the dissertation also seeks to integrate both perspectives by developing and testing a *Dual-Process Theory* arguing that the effects of negative information on both liberal and conservative policy opinions depend critically on the political issues under examination. The findings put existing debates in a new light with important implications at both the theoretical and methodological level.

The dissertation consists of six papers that have been published in or prepared for international peer-reviewed journals, as well as this report summarizing the project.

Dansk Resumé

I moderne demokratier bliver borgerne bombarderet med en enorm mængde politiske informationer. Politiske aktører – såsom politikere, nyhedsmedier og interesseorganisationer – konkurrerer konstant om at fange borgernes opmærksomhed med deres politiske budskaber. Af disse grunde er det helt centralt at forstå hvilke typer informationer, som borgerne rent faktisk lægger mærke til, og hvordan de informationer i sidste ende påvirker deres politiske holdninger.

I denne afhandling tager jeg udgangspunkt i et empirisk fund, der i stigende grad har vundet indpas: Folk tillægger *negativ* information større betydning end positiv information. Mange studier peger eksempelvis på, at folk i højere grad fængsles af negative nyhedshistorier – såsom historier om økonomiske nedture, stigende kriminalitet eller udbredelsen af smitsomme sygdomme som Ebola – end af positive nyhedshistorier, der forsikrer om, at alt går godt, ligesom borgernes holdninger til politikere og støtten til deres politiske beslutninger i langt højere grad påvirkes af negativt vinklede elitebudskaber. Der er endda forskning, der peger på, at borgernes *negativitetsbias* har direkte betydning for politiske elitors adfærd. En omfattende litteratur, især indenfor velfærdsstatsforskningen, peger på, at politikere i langt højere grad er opsatte på at undgå at få skylden for upopulære reformer, end de er interesserede i at tage æren for populære tiltag.

I denne afhandling sætter jeg spørgsmålstegn ved, om negativ information altid tillægges større betydning end positiv information. Jeg forsøger at bringe forskningen om en negativitetsbias i borgernes reaktioner på politisk kommunikation videre på to centrale punkter. For det første søger studierne i afhandlingen at udvikle en ny teoretisk ramme til at forstå, hvornår politiske aktører kan – og mindst lige så vigtigt *ikke* kan – drage fordel af negative budskaber til at sætte dagsordenen og påvirke borgernes politiske holdninger. De fleste tidligere studier konkluderer, at negative informationer generelt set har større effekt på folks holdninger end positive informationer, og at alle borgere er lige påvirkelige af en negativitetsbias. I denne afhandling hævder jeg, at for at forstå hvordan borgerne reagerer på politiske budskaber – både positive og negative – må man tage højde for deres eksisterende forventninger og erfaringer. På et teoretisk plan sonderer jeg mellem to typer mennesker: *optimisterne*, der har positive forventninger, og *pessimisterne*, der har negative forventninger. Jeg hævder, og demonstrerer i en række studier, at optimister og pessimister ofte reagerer meget forskelligt på de typer informationer, de modtager

fra den politiske verden. Og jeg viser, at denne simple sondring fører til en langt mere nuanceret forståelse af effekterne af negative budskaber. Hvor negative nyhedshistorier og elitebudskaber har stor betydning for optimisternes politiske holdninger, peger resultaterne på, at pessimister i højere grad lader sig påvirke af positive historier og budskaber. Ligeledes, og som det mest kontroversielle, støtter resultaterne en konklusion om, at der ikke findes en negativitetsbias. I sidste ende lader det ikke til, at det, der rykker folks holdninger, er *negativ* information men derimod *ny* information forstået som information, der afviger fra borgernes tidligere forventninger og erfaringer.

For det andet bidrager afhandlingen også til verserende diskussioner vedrørende den præcise effekt af negativ information på folks holdninger til bestemte typer politikker. Et meget udbredt argument har været, at folk reagerer på bestemte negative begivenheder – såsom terrorisme, stigende kriminalitet eller indvandring – ved at øge deres støtte til højreorienterede politikker, der tjener til at ”forsvare dem” mod truslerne. Denne fortolkning er dog igennem de senere år blevet udfordret af en række metodologiske såvel som teoretiske kritikker. Igennem en række tværnationale studier – og ved brug af både selv-rapporterede og fysiologiske målinger – tester jeg i denne afhandling de klassiske såvel som de nyere perspektivers forklaringskraft. Ligeledes forsøger afhandlingen at bringe de to litteraturer ”sammen” gennem udviklingen af en *Dual-Process-model*, som viser, at begge tilgange er relevante, men at deres betydning afhænger af det konkrete politiske emne, der undersøges. Det er min påstand, at disse indsigter kaster nyt lys på eksisterende debatter og har både teoretiske og metodiske implikationer.

Afhandlingen består af denne sammenfattende rapport samt seks artikler og arbejdsrapporter, der enten er publiceret i eller skrevet til international videnskabelige tidsskrifter.