

How the negative trumps the positive in politics

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Negatively framed political attitudes ("I don't like Obama") are stronger than positively framed attitudes ("I like Romney"), and this effect is strengthened when people think more deeply about the issues involved.

That is the finding of a paper published in the latest issue of the [British Journal of Social Psychology](#) by George Bizer, a [psychology professor](#) at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y.

Bizer and his co-authors Iris Žeželj (University of Belgrade) and Jamie Luguri (Yale University) presented participants with information about two fictional (though ostensibly real) candidates – one conservative, one liberal – for a position on a government board.

After reading about the two candidates, some participants were asked if they 'supported' or 'opposed' the liberal candidate and some were asked if they 'supported' or 'opposed' the conservative. When the candidates were vying for a local government board, participants who were led to frame their opinions negatively – regardless of their underlying [preference](#) – expressed more certainty about their attitudes than did participants who were led frame their opinions positively. When the candidates were vying for a distant government board, the effect did not emerge.

Follow-up experiments replicated these findings: Experiment 2 showed that opposers were more certain than supporters, but only when the participants were able to think carefully about the candidates, while

Experiment 3 showed that the effect generalized to perceived importance.

Dr Bizer says: "Our prior research showed that framing an opinion in terms of [opposition](#) yields stronger attitudes than does framing it in terms of support.

The most interesting point from our latest research is that this effect is actually stronger when people process the messages more deeply – when they are motivated and have been able to think about the issue. But when people are not motivated and able, the effect goes away. So, perhaps counter-intuitively, the people who care the most about the issues or [candidates](#) seem more likely to be affected by the bias."

Provided by Union College

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