

Character Weakness, Partisan Bias, and Presidential Evaluation: Modifications and Extensions

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Abstract In a recent article Goren (*American Journal of Political Science* 46, 627–641, 2002) draws upon theories of negativity bias, partisan bias, and motivated reasoning to posit that the more strongly people identify with the opposition party of a presidential candidate, the more heavily they will rely on character weakness impressions to construct global candidate evaluations. This paper modifies the theoretical framework by positing that (1) partisans will judge opposition nominees most critically on the traits owned by the former's party and (2) partisan bias promotes negativity bias in the evaluation of incumbent presidents seeking reelection and incumbent vice presidents seeking the presidency. Analysis of data from the 2000 and 2004 NES surveys, along with a reconsideration of the results from the 1984 to 1996 period covered in the original piece, yields strong empirical support for these expectations.

Keywords Party identification / Presidential character / Candidate evaluation / Negativity bias / Trait ownership / Motivated reasoning

Introduction

How do people evaluate presidential candidates? Perceptions of presidential character in general—and character weakness in particular—directly affect bottom-line judgments about the candidates (Kinder, 1986). Party identification matters too, as it directly shapes candidate evaluations and indirectly

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shapes them by coloring the character perceptions on which they depend (Funk, 1999). Recent work by Goren (2002) concurs that party identification plays a key role in the evaluation process, but it differs in suggesting that partisan bias intrudes more subtly and powerfully into the process than scholars have recognized. Drawing on theories of negativity bias, partisanship, and motivated reasoning, he posits that the partisan opponents of a presidential candidate rely more heavily on character flaws when judging him than do his partisan supporters. To illustrate, he found that Democratic identifiers relied more heavily on perceptions of Ronald Reagan's character weakness (a lack of empathy) when evaluating him in 1984 than Republicans, while Republicans made greater use of perceptions of Bill Clinton's limitation (a lack of integrity) when evaluating him in 1996 than Democrats. Partisan bias also intensified negativity bias in evaluations of George Bush and Bill Clinton in 1992; however, the interaction failed to emerge for Walter Mondale in 1984 and for both candidates in 1988.

What does this mixed pattern of results teach us about the candidate evaluation process? On one hand, the findings are intriguing in suggesting that partisan bias and negativity bias are linked perniciously in the minds of citizens. On the other hand, the results are unsatisfying insofar as the theory is silent on which traits partisans will judge opposition candidates most critically on and fails to explain why the interaction between partisanship and negativity bias emerges for some candidates rather than for all of them. In light of this, it seems fair to say that the original theory demands revision. The present paper addresses the shortcomings in the original article by making two critical amendments to its theoretical framework and testing the implications of the revised theory with data from the 2000 and 2004 NES surveys. To begin with, I draw upon the recent work of Hayes (2005) on trait ownership theory to posit that a candidate will be judged most critically by opposition partisans on the traits owned by their party, presumably because such judgments are grounded in the issue-handling reputations of the respective parties. Operationally, this implies Democrats will find G.O.P. standard-bearers most clearly lacking in empathy, while Republicans will believe Democratic candidates are especially vulnerable on leadership or integrity.

Second, I argue that the ability of opposition partisans to emphasize a candidate's character deficiency when evaluating him, relative to his partisan supporters, is constrained by the need to maintain an "illusion of objectivity" (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987, p302). When people encounter a candidate during his initial (perhaps only) presidential campaign, character weakness is inferred from party issue handling reputations rather than from specific bits of information about the candidate (Hayes, 2005). Therefore, partisans cannot in good conscience justify extensive use of character defects when judging opposition nominees because there is little in particular they can point to indicating why the flaw deserves extra weight. But once the candidate compiles a lengthy record of public service in the White House, either as a president for four years or as a vice president for eight, opposition partisans can zero in on candidate-specific information to rationalize greater reliance on

the character defect in the evaluation process. Operationally, several empirical propositions follow from this line of reasoning. First, a presidential candidate who succeeds in his first campaign should find his partisan antagonists more critical of his character now during his second campaign. Second, the partisan opponents of reelection-seeking presidents or incumbent vice presidents seeking higher office will rely more heavily on character defects when evaluating them than their partisan supporters; in contrast, this process should not play out in the case of non-incumbent candidates who lack comparable records for voters to scrutinize. Third, a reelection-seeking president should find his partisan adversaries relying more heavily on character weakness when evaluating him the second time around.

My analysis of data from the 2000 and 2004 NES surveys yields strong support for the revised theory. First, I find that strong Democrats evaluated George W. Bush most negatively on empathy in 2000 and 2004, while strong Republicans proved most critical of Al Gore and John Kerry on leadership. Second, Democrats' perceptions of Bush's empathy declined significantly from 2000 to 2004. Third, for the incumbent candidates Democrats grounded evaluations of Bush more firmly in perceptions of his character deficiency than Republicans in 2004, while Republicans did the same with respect to Gore in 2000. Party ties did not affect negativity bias for Bush in 2000 or Kerry in 2004. Fourth, among Democrats negativity bias in Bush evaluations was more pronounced in 2004 relative to 2000. Fifth, I demonstrate that the revised theory does a better job of explaining the results across the period 1984–1996 than the original incarnation of the theory. Broadly speaking, these results demonstrate that traces of partisan bias permeate the entire candidate evaluation process and thereby affirm some of the central tenets of the classic Michigan model of party identification.

Theoretical Overview

Presidential Character and Negativity Bias

Scholars have long recognized that character matters to voters (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960; Kinder, 1986). Just as people make inferences about the personalities of individuals they encounter in their daily lives, they do the same for the presidential contenders they see on television and read about in the paper. Specifically, they make judgments about four personality traits. To begin with, competence impressions reflect beliefs about the candidate's intelligence and knowledge. Next, leadership impressions represent beliefs about the candidate's ability to serve effectively. Integrity impressions are judgments about candidate trust and morality. Finally, empathy impressions reflect feelings about a candidate's ability to understand and connect with ordinary people.

Trait impressions influence candidate evaluations in a straightforward manner. The more positively someone rates a candidate on any single

dimension of character, the more positive her global evaluation of him will be (Funk, 1999). The relationship between trait impressions and candidate evaluations may vary systematically for several reasons. Most relevant for my purposes, theories of negativity bias hold that negative traits manifest stronger effects on bottom-line judgments about some target than equally extreme positive traits (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Accumulated research demonstrates that the combination of a positive and negative trait (i.e., competence and dishonesty or incompetence and honesty) does not produce a neutral global evaluation of the target, which would be expected if the traits were weighted equally, but rather, yields a negative evaluation, which suggests that people attach more importance to the character flaw in the judgmental process (De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000; Klein, 1991; Martijn, Spears, Van Der Pligt & Jakobs, 1992). What theoretical mechanism accounts for this asymmetry? Negative traits prove more consequential for information processing and judgment than positive traits because they contrast vividly with a positive perceptual background (Klein, 1991; Lau, 1985). Put simply, since most people hold positive views of most others, character defects more easily command attention, and thus, more readily impinge on global evaluations.

Negativity bias has been documented in studies of presidential character and evaluation. To begin with, Goren (2002) and Hayes (2005) use data from multiple NES surveys to show that the public typically rates presidential candidates above the scale mid-points on multiple measures of character, thereby establishing that the personality background against which candidates are seen is positive. Next, studies indicate that character defects are better predictors of global evaluations than character strengths (Klein, 1991, 1996). For instance, in 1992 the public gave Bill Clinton poor marks on morality and honesty and excellent marks on knowledge and intelligence and the former pair of traits were stronger predictors of Clinton feeling thermometer scores than the latter pair. In sum, while character counts a good deal, negative character counts even more.

Party Identification and Motivated Reasoning

In contrast to the standard accounts of the candidate evaluation process, Goren (2002) argues that the impact character weaknesses have on candidate evaluations is moderated by party identification.¹ This work maintains that partisans are motivated to dislike opposition candidates, but that they must arrive at such a conclusion in a manner that appears untainted by partisan considerations. Why is this so? Theories of motivated reasoning hold that when people need to make a judgment, they typically favor a particular conclusion at the onset of the decision-making process; however, they cannot conclude whatever they want to, but instead must convince themselves that they have assessed the evidence in a fair and judicious manner (Baumeister &

¹ Party identification represents an enduring sense of psychological attachment to a political party that influences political perception and judgment (Campbell et al., 1960).

Newman, 1994; Kunda, 1990; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). That is, decision-makers need to maintain “an illusion of objectivity” by constructing “seemingly rational justifications” for reaching these decisions (Klein & Kunda, 1992, p146; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987, p302). They can do so by selectively marshalling evidence in the information environment and from long-term memory, assessing the evidence in a manner that conforms to their underlying desires, and integrating it in a way that yields the correct decision (Lodge & Taber, 2000).

This process can be illustrated using the following hypothetical example. A Democrat is asked to evaluate George W. Bush during the 2004 presidential campaign. She is motivated by party to render as negative a global evaluation of the president as possible, subject to the constraint that her evaluation is grounded in rationales more compelling than crass partisanship. Since character defects are highly accessible, it seems plausible that she will try to use them as much as possible to maximize her dislike of the president. Partisan motivation can guide the reasoning process as follows. First, she selectively attends to information in the broader environment that fits her preconceptions and encodes it in long-term memory (e.g., “those tax cuts for the rich show that Bush doesn’t care about regular people”). Second, this and other evidence (e.g., “he hasn’t done anything about the minimum wage”) that is consistent with her latent partisan goals are recalled from memory. Of course, evidence that runs counter to the character law may come to mind as well (e.g., “he did push for a prescription drug benefit for seniors”). Third, she assesses the evidence in a biased fashion, taking care to arrange and rearrange the evidence-assessment rules as necessary to ensure that information inconsistent with her goal is accorded less weight than evidence supporting it (e.g., “the prescription drug benefit is Republican spin that won’t really help seniors anyway, those millionaire tax cuts are what really counts”). Fourth, having marshaled the evidence necessary to justify heavy reliance on the character law, our good Democrat makes greater use of it in the final evaluation than someone from the other side of the partisan spectrum.

In my earlier work I test this hypothesis using data from the 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996 NES surveys. He demonstrates first that Democrats consistently rate G.O.P. nominees lowest on empathy while Republicans rate Clinton lowest on integrity and the other Democratic candidates lowest on leadership. Next, I show that out-partisans were more prone to negativity bias in the cases of Ronald Reagan in 1984, George Bush in 1992, and Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996, but not for Walter Mondale in 1984 or for George Bush or Michael Dukakis in 1988. When the analysis is extended to Bob Dole in 1996, the expected interaction effect fails to emerge.² Tallying up the results, we can

² Dole was omitted from the original article for reasons given in Goren (2002, p629, 635). Using the same procedures and measures described in the original article, I found that among Democrats Dole’s character weakness was a lack of empathy (mean = 0.29 on 0.00–1.00 scale; second weakest trait is leadership, mean = 0.40) and that the empathy · party identification term is statistically insignificant in the Dole feeling thermometer equation (see M1 in the appendix below).

see that the key hypothesis is supported for four of eight candidates, most notably, among the three presidential incumbents.

Overall, these findings suggest that while partisanship interacts with negativity bias to shape candidate evaluations under some circumstances, the theory suffers from at least two self-evident limitations. First, there is no explanation as to why Democrats rate Republican nominees lowest on empathy and Republicans rate Democrats lowest on leadership or integrity. Second, the theory provides no indication as to why partisanship enhances negativity bias mainly for incumbent evaluations. Clearly, some additional theoretical elaboration and clarification are in order. I now take up this task by drawing on Hayes' (2005) theory of trait ownership to address the outstanding issues.

The Importance of Trait Ownership

How do citizens form first impressions of presidential character? And how do these impressions evolve over time? When a politician secures his party's nomination the first time, people begin to form tentative impressions of his competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy (Just et al., 1996). Since most people have not observed him in office before, their perceptions of his traits must be based on information drawn from sources other than his prior record of governance. Citizens may use his demographic profile to infer what he is like as a person; they may use details about his personal life to surmise political character; or they may rely on his ability to run an effective campaign to judge how competent and strong he will be as a leader (Just et al., 1996; Popkin, 1994). While these sources may prove useful to some extent for informing character impressions, it seems likely that party reputations will prove to be especially important in this regard.

To elaborate, Hayes (2005) argues that trait perceptions are rooted in the issue-handling reputations the parties have developed over time. Since many people are familiar with the issues owned by the respective parties (Petrocik, 1996), they can infer what a candidate's personality is like from these images. In essence, voters hold stereotypical perceptions about the parties and use these to inform judgments about the character strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. To illustrate, the Republican Party is seen as better able to handle moral issues, national security, and law and order, which leads most people to view Republican candidates as strong on integrity and leadership. In contrast, the Democratic Party is seen as better able to provide for the well-being of the elderly, the poor, and the needy via social welfare programs; therefore, people conclude that Democratic nominees are especially caring and empathetic. In short, first impressions of presidential character are probably based more on party issue-handling reputations than on candidate-specific information that yields direct insight into their personalities.

Now that we have a plausible account of how trait perceptions are formed at the outset, we can take up the influence of party identification. First, partisans should rate the out-party's candidate more negatively on each dimen-

sion of character than their own party's candidate, which presumably reflects a combination of selective perception of political reality (Bartels, 2002; Campbell et al., 1960) and differences in political taste (Green, Palmquist & Schickler, 2002). Accumulated research strongly supports this proposition (Funk, 1999; Goren, 2002; Hayes, 2005). Second, and much more importantly for my purposes, voters should prove most critical of opposition nominees on traits owned by the voters' party. Given that trait impressions are based on the issue-handling reputations of the parties, it seems natural that partisans will judge an opposition nominee most harshly on the traits most directly implicated by the issues his party is seen as least concerned about. To elaborate, since the Democratic Party is seen as weak on family values and defense, it follows that Republican identifiers will infer that Democratic nominees lack integrity and leadership more so than they lack competence and empathy. And since the Republican Party is seen as weakest on social welfare and caring for the needy, Democrats will likely infer that G.O.P. candidates are especially weak on empathy. To sum up, the first prediction of my revised theory is that Republicans will regard a lack of leadership or integrity as the Democratic candidate's character flaw, while Democrats will see the Republican nominee's character defect as a lack of empathy (H₁).

In addition, there are grounds for positing that partisan motivation systematically affects how perceptions of an incumbent's character weakness evolve over time. Recall that character weakness impressions are based initially on party issue-handling reputations rather than on detailed information about the candidate (Hayes, 2005). After the candidate is elected president, he compiles a record of policy priorities and achievements (and failures) for all to see. During this period opposition partisans can seek out specific bits of information that reinforce first impressions of his character defect while simultaneously ignoring other information that would seem to undermine these negative feelings (Sweeney & Gruber 1984; Taber & Lodge 2006). By the time the president seeks reelection, out-partisans are no longer beholden to party reputations for forming character impression, for they can now recall specific pieces of information from long-term memory to support the judgment that the candidate is remarkably deficient on the trait owned by their party. And since negative information will outnumber positive information, character weakness impressions should deteriorate over time. In short, I predict that the partisan foes of reelection-seeking incumbent will hold more negative perceptions of his character weakness compared to how they saw it during his first run for office (H₂).

Lastly, the passage of time should facilitate the ability of opposition partisans to deliberately employ character weakness impressions when evaluating two types of candidates: presidents seeking reelection after four years and vice presidents who aspire to succeed them after eight. Why is the passage of some time necessary for partisan motivation to exacerbate negativity bias in candidate evaluation? When a candidate runs for president the first time his partisan adversaries are motivated to dislike him of course, but they are prevented from advancing this partisan goal by attaching extra weight to his

character defect because the reasons for doing so are rather imsy. Insofar as character weakness impressions are initially inferred from the party images rather than candidate-specific data (Hayes, 2005), the ability to maintain a façade of objectivity is fatally compromised (Klein & Kunda, 1992; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987).³ But once the candidate assumes office and develops a record, either as a president serving for one term or a vice president serving for two, opposition partisans can now accumulate a bill of particulars about the candidate's character defect and thereby stress its relevance to the evaluation process by pointing to something specific when he runs again.⁴

To illustrate the process, consider how Democrats may have thought about George W. Bush during his first and second presidential campaigns. In 2000, many Democrats presumably inferred that Bush lacked compassion because they saw his party as lacking in compassion, but they did not have specific details to confirm this stereotypical categorization. In addition, Bush's assertions that he was a "compassionate conservative" probably added to the uncertainty surrounding these inferences. Thus, convincing reasons to elevate the importance of empathy perceptions in the evaluative calculus were missing; something more, something concrete, was needed. By 2004 Democrats could assert that "his tax cuts for the rich" revealed who he really cared about, and therefore, they could lend more weight to their character weakness impressions when rendering global judgments about him. Operationally, this line of reasoning suggests that out-party loyalists will rely more heavily on character flaw perceptions when evaluating reelection-seeking presidents and incumbent vice presidents seeking higher office than in-party partisans, but not so in the case of non-incumbent candidates (H₃); and finally, that out-party identifiers will rely more heavily on character weakness impressions when evaluating a presidential candidate seeking reelection than when he sought the White House the first time around (H₄).

To sum up, by integrating insights from the theory of trait ownership into the theory of character weakness, partisan bias, and presidential evaluation, I have modified the original theoretical framework to address the questions it left unanswered. If the four hypotheses presented above are supported by empirical evidence, we can conclude that these revisions have been useful. The next section of the paper takes up these evidentiary matters.

³ In addition, candidates often seek to trespass on the issues and traits owned by the other side, which adds further uncertainty to the trait inference process (Hayes, 2005; Petrocik, 1996).

⁴ While potential voters have seen less of sitting vice presidents than of the presidents they serve, when it comes to public visibility and recognition vice presidents are more similar to presidents than they are to non-incumbent challengers. To elaborate, by the time a vice president announces his intention to seek the presidency he has served 8 years as the second most visible politician in the US. He is better known than present and former Senators, governors, former administration officials, and so on. Candidates who have not played a prominent role on the national political scene for an extended period of time lack a record visible. Although such officials may have caught the attention of the national media and the broader public from time to time, they cannot match the exposure attained by modern vice presidents.

Statistical Analyses and Results

The Effects of Party Identification on Perceptions of Character Weakness

I use data from the 2000 and 2004 NES surveys to measure the variables and test the hypotheses. To begin with measurement, I tap character perceptions using items that ask respondents to rate how well various words or phrases describe each candidate (the response options are “not well at all,” “not too well,” “quite well,” and “extremely well”). Competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy are gauged using the “knowledgeable,” “provides strong leadership,” “moral,” and “really cares about people like you” items, respectively. The traits are arrayed on a 0.00–1.00 scale, with higher scores reflecting more positive impressions. Next, I use the standard 7-point self-placement scale to tap party identification, recoded onto a 0.00–1.00 scale with higher scores denoting stronger Republican identification.

The first hypothesis (H_1) predicts that Democrats will rate George W. Bush most negatively on empathy, while Republicans will reserve their harshest judgments for Al Gore and John Kerry on leadership or integrity, presumably because citizens cast a more critical eye toward partisan foes on traits owned by the voters’ party. To test this proposition, an operational means of identifying character weakness is required. The character defect is the trait that satisfies the following pair of conditions among a candidate’s partisan antagonists in the public. First, the trait mean must be significantly lower than the means of the other traits. If this condition holds, we can conclude that the candidate’s foes have reached a consensus on his character flaw. Second, a trait meeting the first condition must fall in the negative half of the scale (i.e., mean < 0.50). If this condition is satisfied, we can conclude that opposition partisans see the weak link in the candidate’s personality profile as negative in absolute terms. Now that we have an operational measure of a character weakness, we can see if the revised theory correctly predicts which traits the respective candidates will score lowest on.

Table 1 presents the candidate trait means among strong Democrats and Strong Republicans in 2000 and 2004. To begin with Gore₀₀, the data reveal that strong Republicans rated Gore significantly lower ($p < 0.01$) on leadership (0.27) and empathy (0.29) than on competence (0.57), and integrity (0.47). The estimates suggest that Republicans saw Gore as deficient in leadership, but since the difference between leadership and empathy is substantively small and statistically marginal ($p < 0.11$), this finding is more suggestive than definitive. Next, the remaining candidates all had readily identifiable character deficiencies in the eyes of their opponents. In 2000, strong Democrats rated Bush significantly lower on empathy (0.26) than on competence (0.48), leadership (0.41), and integrity (0.51) ($p < 0.01$). This pattern replicates in 2004 as Democrats gave Bush his lowest marks on empathy (0.16 versus competence = 0.34; leadership = 0.32; integrity = 0.41; $p < 0.01$). Finally, in 2004, Republicans thought less of Kerry’s leadership

Table 1 Candidate trait means, 2000–2004

	Competence	Leadership	Integrity	Empathy
2000				
Al Gore				
Strong democrats	0.80	0.75	0.79	0.75
Strong republicans	0.57	0.27	0.47	0.29
George W. Bush				
Strong democrats	0.48	0.41	0.51	0.26
Strong republicans	0.72	0.79	0.80	0.71
2004				
George W. Bush				
Strong democrats	0.34	0.32	0.41	0.16
Strong republicans	0.80	0.92	0.91	0.83
John Kerry				
Strong democrats	0.82	0.74	0.78	0.78
Strong republicans	0.52	0.22	0.38	0.30

The range of the trait variables varies from 0.00 to 1.00. Higher scores reflect more positive assessments. Source: 2004 and 2000 NES surveys

mettle (0.22) than of his competence (0.52), integrity (0.38), and empathy (0.30) ($p < 0.01$).

At this point it will be useful to return to the candidates from the period 1984–1996 to determine how well the revised theory fares with additional data (see Goren, 2002, p631, Table 1 and note 2 above for the reported traits means). Note first that strong Democrats rated three of the four Republican nominees (Reagan₈₄, Bush₉₂, and Dole₉₆) lowest on empathy⁵ and strong Republicans rated the Democrats lowest on leadership (Mondale₈₄ and Dukakis₈₈) or integrity (Clinton₉₂ and Clinton₉₆). When we aggregate the results over the past six elections, we can see that the expectations of the revised theory are confirmed in 11 of 12 tests. Thus, Democrats consistently perceive Republican candidates most negatively on Democratic-owned traits and G.O.P. loyalists return the favor when it comes to assessing Democratic nominees on Republican-owned traits. Collectively, these results provide solid support for the first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis (H_2) predicts that the partisan opponents of a reelection-seeking president will take a dimmer view of his character deficiency the second time around, presumably because they have sought out specific evidence from the broader environment to confirm their initial impressions and processed it in a manner that serves their latent partisan goals. This prediction can be assessed by comparing a candidate's character flaw among his opponents at times 1 and 2. As indicated in Table 1, the Bush empathy mean did indeed fall among strong Democrats. The 2004 mean of 0.16 is significantly lower than the 2000 value of 0.26. This decline is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) and substantively powerful (a 38% drop). Furthermore, when we look back to the character weakness means reported in

⁵ In 1988, strong Democrats rated Bush slightly lower on leadership than empathy (0.35 vs. 0.37; $p < 0.09$).

Goren (2002, p631, Table 1) for George H. W. Bush in 1988–1992 and Bill Clinton in 1992–1996, similar results obtain. Among strong Democrats Bush's empathy score fell by 16% from 0.37 to 0.31 ($p < 0.01$); among strong Republicans the Clinton integrity mean dropped an astonishing 45% from 0.29 to 0.16 ($p < 0.01$). Although it is impossible to recover the precise psychological mechanisms underlying these changes, the results are consistent with the assumption that as time passes the partisan foes of a president find the evidence they need to make a stronger case that he is most seriously flawed on the trait owned by their party.

Broadly speaking, the confirmation of the first two hypotheses substantiates the proposition that party identification most deeply colors perceptions of opposition-party nominees on traits owned by the other party. Hence, Democratic identifiers reserve their harshest judgments for Republican candidates on empathy and Republicans do same for Democratic nominees on leadership and integrity. What remains to be seen is whether the theory accurately predicts when partisanship will condition negativity bias in the evaluation of presidential candidates.

The Conditional Effects of Party Identification on Negativity Bias

My theoretical framework predicts that Republicans should have relied more heavily on leadership perceptions than Democrats when evaluating Al Gore in 2000; that Democrats should have relied more heavily on empathy perceptions than Republicans when evaluating George Bush in 2004; and that partisanship should not have moderated the relationship between character weakness and candidate evaluation for Bush in 2000 and Kerry in 2004 (H₃). Furthermore, the theory predicts that party ties should aggravate negativity bias when candidates are evaluated a second time around (H₄). Before proceeding to the empirical tests, I will describe how the variables are measured and the statistical model is specified.

To begin with measurement, I tap candidate evaluations, the dependent variable, using the feeling thermometer scores in which higher values denote more positive feelings.⁶ The key independent variables, character traits and party identification, are measured as described above. I include statistical controls for respondents' sociotropic assessments of the national economy and their preferences on government spending on social services, aid to blacks, and defense spending. For the sociotropic variable higher scores indicate more positive assessments, which should be positively related to incumbent party evaluations (i.e., Gore in 2000 and Bush in 2004) and negatively related to non-incumbent party evaluations (i.e., Bush in 2000 and Kerry in 2004). The policy preference variables are coded from the most liberal to the most conservative position, and hence, should be positively related to Republican evaluations and negatively related to Democratic evaluations. Lastly, note

⁶ Note that the feeling thermometer items are drawn from the post-election surveys; all other variables are drawn from the pre-election surveys.

that all variables are rescaled on a 0.00–1.00 range, therefore, with the exceptions of the constituent and multiplicative coefficients described below, each predictor's regression coefficient represents the effect that movement across its full range has on the feeling thermometer score.

The candidate evaluation equations are estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression techniques with interaction effects.⁷ For each candidate, I create a multiplicative character weakness · party identification variable that indicates whether partisan ties condition the impact character weakness has on the feeling thermometer scores; *ceteris paribus*. First, in the Gore equation the leadership · party term should be positive and significant, which would indicate that character weakness perceptions impact Gore evaluations more powerfully among Republicans than Democrats. Second, in the Bush₀₄ model the empathy · party term should be negative and significant, which would indicate that Democrats make greater use of empathy than Republicans. Third, party identification should not affect the use of Bush's character weakness in 2000 (a lack of empathy) or Kerry's defect in 2004 (weak leadership); therefore, the respective multiplicative terms should be insignificant. Fourth, party identification should not condition the use of any other character traits. To test for this, I create a series of multiplicative terms between each remaining dimension of character and party identification. My expectation is that these terms will be statistically insignificant in the regression equations.⁸

Table 2 contains the unstandardized OLS regression estimates for each candidate evaluation equation. To begin with the Gore₀₀ equation, two of four control variables behave as predicted. More liberal positions on government services and aid to blacks led to warmer evaluations; in contrast, sociotropic assessments and defense spending have no effect. Next, the estimates reveal that party identification moderates the relationship between the leadership variable and Gore evaluations. The positive and significant coefficient for the multiplicative term ($b = 0.172, p < 0.05$) indicates that G.O.P. partisans relied more heavily than Democrats on Gore's weakness when evaluating him. Third, party identification does not systematically affect the relationship between the non-character weakness traits and Gore evaluations. Each trait · party term falls well short of statistical significance. Overall, the Gore results are consistent with the claim that negativity bias is a function of partisan bias in the case of a vice president going after the presidency.

The regression estimates for the Bush₀₀ model appear in third column of Table 2. To begin with the control variables, we can see that the only one that matters is defense spending, with hawks proving more supportive of Bush than doves. Next, Democratic partisanship does not systematically condition reliance on Bush's character weakness (a lack of empathy) or on any other

⁷ All models are weighted by the NES post-sample stratification weight.

⁸ Note that the constituent party identification variable does not represent the main or average effect of partisanship on the feeling thermometer scores, but rather, represents the impact of party identification when a trait variable equals zero. Similarly, each constituent trait coefficient represents the impact a given trait has on the thermometer scores when partisanship equals zero (see Friedrich, 1982, pp804–805).

Table 2 Candidate evaluation models 2000–2004, unstandardized OLS estimates

	Gore ₀₀	Bush ₀₀	Bush ₀₄	Kerry ₀₄
Constant	0.579** (0.049)	0.077* (0.038)	0.005 (0.041)	0.402** (0.061)
Sociotropic assessment	-0.002 (0.028)	-0.030 (0.028)	0.058* (0.033)	-0.062 (0.033)
Government services	-0.135** (0.031)	0.029 (0.032)	0.017 (0.035)	-0.078* (0.037)
Aid to blacks	-0.052* (0.024)	0.030 (0.025)	0.018 (0.028)	-0.084** (0.029)
Defense spending	-0.013 (0.026)	0.087** (0.027)	-0.063* (0.035)	0.002 (0.037)
Competence	-0.029 (0.061)	0.055 (0.053)	0.211** (0.048)	0.214** (0.073)
Leadership	0.033 (0.056)	0.274** (0.048)	0.197** (0.050)	0.045 (0.068)
Integrity	0.133** (0.054)	0.098** (0.044)	0.167** (0.046)	0.080 (0.070)
Empathy	0.246** (0.047)	0.184** (0.047)	0.300** (0.053)	0.286** (0.065)
Party identification	-0.385** (0.062)	0.252** (0.063)	0.323** (0.065)	-0.131* (0.070)
Competence · PID	0.000 (0.093)	0.063 (0.095)	-0.066 (0.088)	-0.156 (0.106)
Leadership · PID	0.172* (0.090)	-0.056 (0.092)	0.102 (0.093)	0.120 (0.107)
Integrity · PID	0.104 (0.080)	-0.017 (0.087)	-0.093 (0.095)	0.015 (0.103)
Empathy · PID	-0.062 (0.081)	-0.066 (0.086)	-0.155* (0.093)	-0.025 (0.102)
Adjusted R ²	0.61	0.57	0.74	0.64
F-statistic	90.676	74.912	139.413	79.324
n	779	759	660	604

Standard errors in parentheses

Source: 2004 and 2000 NES

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

trait for that matter. All four multiplicative terms fall short of statistical significance. Thus, the Bush₀₀ estimates indicate that the relationship between character weakness and partisan bias does not automatically extend to a relative newcomer on the national political scene. This finding is consistent with the theoretical claim that when the partisan opponents of a presidential candidate infer a lack character from his party’s issue-handling reputation rather than from candidate-specific information, they cannot easily rationalize attaching extra weight to the deficiency in the evaluative calculus.

Does partisanship strengthen the relationship between character weakness and global evaluations for the 2004 incumbent? The Bush₀₄ estimates appear in the fourth column of Table 2. First, among the control variables increasingly positive national economic assessments and hawkish defense spending postures translate into warmer evaluations of the president. Second, as predicted Democratic partisanship is associated with the use of Bush’s character flaw: Democrats made greater use of empathy perceptions than Republicans (b = -0.155, p < 0.05). Thus, when individuals formulated bottom-line judgments about President Bush in 2004, a perceived lack of compassion proved more important to his Democratic critics than to his Republican defenders in the electorate. Third, the impact of the other dimensions of presidential character is unaffected by partisanship as none of the other trait · party cross-products can be reliably distinguished from zero. In sum, the Bush₀₄ results suggest that when a Republican incumbent seeks reelection his Democratic opponents view his character defect as a matter of great importance. Among his Republican base, the issue is a non-starter.

The final candidate under consideration is John Kerry, about whom voters knew far less relative to President Bush. The estimates in column 5e support the following conclusions. To begin with, more negative sociotropic assessments and liberal positions on domestic policy led to more positive feelings toward Kerry. Turning to the trait \times party interactions, none of the multiplicative terms reach conventional levels of significance. Most importantly, Republicans proved no more likely to rely on his character defect (a lack of leadership) when evaluating Kerry than Democrats. As was the case for Bush₀₀, the estimates indicate that partisanship does not engender negativity bias in the evaluation of non-incumbent candidates.

The regression estimates presented above show that party identification promotes reliance on character weakness impressions in the evaluation of incumbents with extended records of public service in the White House. These results are consistent with my expectations; however, they are limited in at least two ways. First, they fail to reveal much about the substantive power of partisan bias. Second, they fail to illustrate the extent to which negative trait perceptions in particular, rather than trait perceptions per se, affect candidate evaluations. To convey such information, Table 3 presents predicted Gore₀₀ and Bush₀₄ feeling thermometer scores for strong Democrats and strong Republicans at the highest and lowest values on the character weakness variable, with all other variables held constant at their scale mid-points.⁹

To begin with Gore₀₀, leadership impressions mattered little to strong Democrats: the predicted thermometer scores for those rating him highest on leadership differ trivially from those assigning him the lowest score (0.67 vs. 0.65, respectively; $n = 54$ and $n = 1$).¹⁰ Strong Republicans behaved much differently: Gore thermometer scores are much higher among those who believe he is a strong leader (0.50, $n = 1$) compared to those who see him as weak (0.29, $n = 45$). Put differently, the feeling thermometer difference between strong Democrats and strong Republicans who view Gore as a strong leader (0.17) is less than half of the difference between strong Democrats and strong Republicans who see him as a weak leader (0.36). Next, for Bush₀₄, strong Democrats and strong Republicans holding the most positive empathy impression render positive evaluations, with predicted thermometer scores of 0.61 ($n = 2$) and 0.73 ($n = 63$), respectively. But among those who hold the most negative impressions, the Bush thermometer score is much lower for Democrats at 0.31 ($n = 61$) than for Republicans at 0.61 ($n = 2$). Put differently, the feeling thermometer differential for Democrats and Republicans who believe Bush lacks compassion is 0.30, far greater than the 0.12 difference for those believing he has it.

⁹ The predictions derive from the trimmed models reported in the appendix (see M2 and M3), which better isolate the character defect \times party effect by dropping the insignificant multiplicative terms.

¹⁰ Since few partisans give their own nominee low marks on character and high marks to the opposition nominee, the predicted values are best seen as simulated values rather than as actual data points.

Table 3 Predicted candidate evaluation scores for partisans for most positive and negative character weakness scores, 2000–2004

	Strong democrats	Strong republicans
Gore ₀₀		
Most positive leadership impression	0.67	0.50
Most negative leadership impression	0.65	0.29
Bush ₀₄		
Most positive empathy impression	0.61	0.73
Most negative empathy impression	0.31	0.61

Cell entries represent the predicted feeling thermometer score for each candidate for the listed partisan group. The character weakness variable takes on the following values: most positive impression = 1.00 and most negative impression = 0.00. All other variables = 0.50

Source: Appendix models M2 and M3

Broadly speaking, these simulations demonstrate that the statistically significant effects observed in the regression models translate into substantively significant effects and that it is negative perceptions that drive these differences. Hence, we can conclude that when it comes to the evaluation of incumbent candidates, the conditioning effect of partisan sentiments on negativity bias is psychologically and politically meaningful.

The empirical results for 2000 and 2004 are largely consistent with expectations. How well does the modified theory account for candidate evaluations from 1984 to 1996? If the theory is not invalid, partisan opposition should (1) enhance negativity bias in the evaluation of the three presidential incumbents (Reagan₈₄, Bush₉₂, and Clinton₉₆) and the vice president who sought the presidency (Bush₈₈) and (2) should not increase negativity bias for the other (non-incumbent) candidates (Mondale₈₄, Dukakis₈₈, Clinton₉₂, and Dole₉₆). From the discussion presented above we know that party promoted the use of character flaws to shape evaluations of the three sitting presidents and Clinton in 1992. Therefore, the revised theory generates correct predictions for six of the candidates (Reagan₈₄, Mondale₈₄, Dukakis₈₈, Bush₉₂, Clinton₉₆, and Dole₉₆) and incorrect predictions for the remaining two (Bush₈₈ and Clinton₉₂). When we consider the results across the entire 1984–2004 period, we can see that the revised theory does fairly well in absolute terms, yielding the correct prediction for 10 of 12 candidates, and far better than the original theory, which generates only six correct predictions. In sum, although the predictive success of the revised theory falls well short of perfection, it represents a significant improvement over the original in accounting for when partisan bias promotes negativity bias in candidate evaluation.

The final hypothesis concerns whether partisanship augments negativity bias over time. The theory suggests that as partisans acquire more ammunition to justify further denigration of an opposition president’s character flaw, a combination of more negative trait perceptions and more persuasive justifications for lending them weight should lead to higher levels of negativity bias when he is evaluated during his second campaign. This can be assessed by looking at whether movement across the empathy range had a bigger effect on

Table 4 Predicted candidate evaluation scores for candidate at T_1 and T_2 among partisans opponents

George W. Bush	Strong democrats ₀₀	Strong democrats ₀₄
Most positive empathy impression	0.51	0.50
Most negative empathy impression	0.36	0.29
Difference	0.15	0.21
Bill Clinton	Strong republicans ₉₂	Strong republicans ₉₆
Most positive integrity impression	0.68	0.81
Most negative integrity impression	0.34	0.34
Difference	0.34	0.47
George H. W. Bush	Strong democrats ₈₈	Strong democrats ₉₂
Most positive empathy impression	0.61	0.65
Most negative empathy impression	0.43	0.30
Difference	0.18	0.35

Cell entries represent the predicted feeling thermometer score for each candidate. The character weakness variable takes on the following values: most positive impression = 1.00 and most negative impression = 0.00. All other variables = 0.50

Source: Appendix models and Goren (2002)

Bush thermometer scores among strong Democrats in 2004 than in 2000. Table 4 shows that this is the case. In 2000 movement from the empathy maximum to minimum leads to a 0.15 decline in Democratic evaluations of Bush. In 2004 comparable movement leads to a 0.21 decline in Bush evaluations, thereby establishing that negativity bias was more deeply ingrained among Democrats when Bush sought reelection. When we turn to results from 1984 to 1996, a similar pattern is evident. Drawing on the data reported originally in Goren (2002) and from the appendix below, Table 4 indicates that Republicans were more prone to negativity bias in evaluating Clinton a second time around (negativity effect = 0.47 in 1996 vs. 0.32 in 1992) just as Democrats were prone to it when evaluating George H. W. Bush during his reelection bid (negativity effect = 0.35 in 1992 vs. 0.18 in 1988). In sum, the passage of time allows motivated partisans to build a stronger case justifying why they should dislike opposition party incumbents.

At the broadest level, the evidence from Tables 2 through 4, as well as that reported in the original piece, which together cover a dozen presidential candidates going back 20 years, makes two things clear. First, partisan bias conditions negativity bias in the evaluation of incumbent candidates. Second, the intrusion of partisan bias into the evaluation process deepens—or perhaps, grows more insidious—with the passage of time.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper builds on the theory of character weakness, partisan bias, and presidential evaluation presented originally in Goren (2002) by incorporating insights from Hayes' (2005) trait ownership theory to provide a more

complete picture of how party identification conditions negativity bias in the evaluation of presidential candidates. The revised theory first maintains that partisans will be most critical of opposition nominees on traits owned by the voters' party. Since character traits are initially based on the issue-handling reputations of the parties, partisans will typically conclude that an opposition-party nominee is weakest on traits tied most directly to issues that the candidate's party has a poor reputation for handling. Hence, Democratic citizens should consistently find Republican candidates short of compassion, while Republicans should prove most skeptical of Democratic standard-bearers on leadership or integrity. The statistical analyses reported here and in the original article confirm these expectations handsomely, as the predicted character weakness emerges among opposition partisans for 11 of 12 major party candidates over the period 1984–2004.

Second, the revised theory holds that party identification will engender negativity bias only when reelection-seeking presidents and vice presidents seeking higher office are evaluated. Since candidate-specific reasons for granting extra weight to character weakness perceptions are scarce for newly emergent challengers, the partisan motivation to render as negative a global evaluation as possible is effectively curtailed. But after people have observed a president for four years or a vice president for eight the psychological restraints are off. By this point, they have accumulated a bounty of anecdotes in long-term memory to drive character defect perceptions further downward and from which they can pick and choose those bits of evidence that justify elevating the importance of the character deficiency in the evaluative calculus. Thus, the belief among Democrats in 2000 that "Bush is probably uncaring like most Republicans" is not persuasive enough to justify attaching extra weight to perceptions of his character flaw; but by 2004 Democrats can do so without qualm by pointing to specifics like "he never served in combat and cannot relate to what it's like for all those working-class kids fighting in Iraq." Empirically, the findings are for the most part consistent with this model, with the expected result emerging for 10 of 12 candidates over 1984–2004. In sum, partisan bias facilitates negativity bias in the evaluation of incumbent candidates.¹¹

¹¹ Following Zaller (1992), some might posit that politically aware partisans are more prone than politically unaware partisans to pick up elite messages regarding character flaws and subsequently incorporate such information into their opinion judgments about the candidates. Others might argue that this is unlikely to be the case insofar as it is easy to link trait perceptions to candidate evaluations, which suggests that unaware partisans should prove as adept as aware partisans at linking traits to evaluations. Indeed, Zaller (1992, p48) notes that "the more simple and direct the link between a predisposition and an issue, the less important awareness is likely to be in regulating responses to political communications on that issue." If we think of character flaws as the predisposition and evaluations as the issue, it seems likely that people do not need to be politically aware to make such links because these are already quite simple and direct. To determine whether the interaction between character weakness and partisan bias is itself conditional on political awareness, I created a third-order interaction variable (character weakness \times party identification \times political awareness; all necessary second-order terms are included in the model) and entered it as a predictor in the 12 candidate evaluation equations for the 1984–2004 period. This term was statistically insignificant in all 12 equations, suggesting that awareness does not condition the relationship between character weakness, partisan bias, and presidential evaluation.

This represents genuine progress; nevertheless, there are limits to how much should be claimed on behalf of the revised theory at this point in time. First, since only 12 candidates across six elections can be analyzed (due to the lack of useable trait measures prior to 1984), it must be recognized that the theory does not yet rest on a well-established empirical foundation. While it is certainly sensible to learn as much as possible using currently available data, it is apparent that these findings demand replication from future presidential election studies. Second, while the theory develops a plausible psychological model of how partisans form character weakness impressions, update these impressions over time as new information becomes available, and integrate them into bottom-line judgments about candidates, the use of survey data obviously precludes testing any of the underlying assumptions directly. The need for experimental work is obvious, with the clever designs of Lau and Redlawsk (2006) and Taber and Lodge (2006) serving as potential exemplars of how future studies might proceed. Third, while the analyses conducted here are limited to presidential candidates, it seems likely that partisans reason in a similar fashion when evaluating other well-known incumbents or challengers. For instance, one can readily imagine that questions about Ted Kennedy's integrity are especially important to Massachusetts Republicans, certainly more so than to Massachusetts Democrats. Similarly, Pennsylvania Democrats probably focus more readily on Rick Santorum's empathy when evaluating him than do Pennsylvania Republicans. In short, the model developed here can and should be tested for incumbent candidates in other electoral offices.

These findings, though preliminary, contribute to our understanding of public opinion and political psychology on at least two fronts. First, they underscore the impressive power and reach of party identification. For decades scholars have focused on the most direct and obvious manifestations of partisan influence, namely, how party identification "raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation" (Campbell et al., 1960 p133). As we have seen here, Democrats rate Democratic candidates as more competent, stronger, more trustworthy, and more compassionate than Republicans. Republicans, of course, do the same with respect to G.O.P. nominees. Such findings are now commonplace and thus not terribly surprising. But perceptual selection is only one half of the story and the less interesting half at that, for partisan reasoning also involves "subtle processes of perceptual adjustment by which the individual assembles an image of current politics consistent with his partisan allegiance" (Stokes, 1966 p127). Hence, partisan motivation does more than simply, and somewhat crudely, color character impressions in a manner that is favorable to one's partisan orientation, it also works below the surface by subtly altering the decision-making criteria citizens employ when rendering global judgments about the candidates. Partisanship thus allows citizens to assemble an image of opposition candidates in ways seemingly untainted by partisanship.

Finally, the results underscore the ability of negative information to capture attention and influence judgment. While scholars, public officials, political

candidates, and ordinary citizens frequently decry the sinister influence of negativity in the world of politics, there is no denying that such information has far reaching effects on mass political behavior and judgment. Accumulated research shows that negativity bias influences candidate evaluation, turnout, political trust, and system support (Klein, 1991, 1996; Lau, 1985; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), to name but a few types of judgments citizens routinely make. My results suggest that under some circumstances negativity effects are even more powerful than is commonly recognized. To be precise, the candidate evaluation process is subject to two manifestations of negativity: character weakness weighs more heavily on likeability judgments than character strengths among those motivated to dislike a given candidate. In short, negativity begets negativity.

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Appendix

Supplemental candidate evaluation models, unstandardized OLS estimates

	M ₁ : Dole ₉₆	M ₂ : Gore ₀₀	M ₃ : Bush ₀₄	M ₄ : Bush ₀₀	M ₅ : Bush ₈₈
Constant	0.187* (0.037)	0.563** (0.042)	0.014 (0.037)	0.090** (0.032)	0.065** (0.025)
Sociotropic assessment	0.023 (0.023)	-0.002 (0.028)	0.058* (0.033)	0.028 (0.031)	0.102** (0.029)
Government services	0.000 (0.029)	-0.135** (0.031)	0.016 (0.035)	0.030 (0.025)	0.053* (0.028)
Aid to blacks	0.007 (0.022)	-0.055* (0.024)	0.021 (0.028)	0.086** (0.026)	0.035* (0.018)
Defense spending	0.033 (0.029)	-0.010 (0.026)	-0.066* (0.035)	-0.029 (0.028)	0.110** (0.031)
Competence	0.012 (0.047)	-0.031 (0.032)	0.181** (0.029)	0.083** (0.032)	0.052 (0.036)
Leadership	0.311** (0.046)	0.023 (0.047)	0.236** (0.033)	0.250** (0.031)	0.210** (0.034)
Integrity	0.053 (0.047)	0.191** (0.028)	0.137** (0.032)	0.090** (0.030)	0.160** (0.035)
Empathy	0.142** (0.040)	0.217** (0.029)	0.310** (0.045)	0.154** (0.030)	0.184** (0.039)
Party identification	0.034 (0.056)	-0.357** (0.043)	0.301** (0.044)	0.211** (0.024)	0.148** (0.022)
Competence · PID	0.034 (0.080)				
Leadership · PID	-0.048 (0.074)	0.187** (0.069)			
Integrity · PID	0.175* (0.081)				
Empathy · PID	-0.067 (0.068)		-0.183** (0.065)		
Adjusted R ²	0.45	0.61	0.74	0.56	0.56
F-statistic	66.676	117.859	181.327	108.262	126.612
n	1044	779	660	759	901

Standard errors in parentheses

Source: 2004, 2000, 1996, and 1988 NES

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

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