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Negative Affective Language in Politics

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Abstract

How do the words we use to talk about politics influence political attitudes and evaluations? I focus specifically on negative affective language; words which individuals have pre-existing negative reactions towards. Considering the Affect Infusion Model (AIM), processing style influences how individuals use affect when making decisions. The impact of affective language depends upon the complexity of the decision. In simpler processing tasks, individuals will use affect as a heuristic. This causes a misattribution of generalized negative affect onto a political target, leading to harsher evaluations. When a decision is complex, affective language influences how new information is stored in memory, along with improving information recall and abstract thinking. For those who are exposed to negative affective language, negative evaluations of politicians persist more strongly in memory, while these evaluations fade away when affect is used as a heuristic.

"Lightweight choker Marco Rubio looks like a little boy on stage. Not presidential material!" – Donald Trump[1]

The words used to describe politics are often strong and affect-laden, though it is unclear how this language influences public opinion. This has perhaps never been so apparent than in the 2016 Presidential campaign of Donald Trump. Trump routinely calls his opponents lightweights, chokers, losers and liars – all words that individuals have strong negative reactions towards. I argue that these words, or *negative affective language*, will influence how the public makes decisions about policies and political figures, above and beyond the effects of pure negativity. When Trump characterizes Rubio as a choker, or Ted Cruz as a liar, or Jeb Bush as a loser, he uses words that individuals have pre-existing negative reactions towards. These words should be more powerful than simply criticizing an opponent's policy or record, as they should create connections between the politician and ideas that individuals already have about things they do not like. For example, seeing a political figure described as a "cancer" will activate negative thoughts one has stored about cancer, inducing a generalized negative mood. Such negative affective words are words which individuals have negative reactions towards, regardless of context (Bradley and Lang 1999). The negative mood created by these words should be misattributed to the political concepts that are described using affective language.

The context of the decision matters as well. When a decision is simple, affective language influences decision making in the short term; while the negative mood persists, the political figures will be judged more harshly, though this effect will not continue for very long. When a decision is more difficult to make, affective language will influence how information is stored in memory, which leads to longer lasting effects on political judgments.

Political language has recently been shown to frequently have an affective component. From traditional media such as the New York Times (Young and Soroka 2011) to newer media such as political blogs and Twitter (Vatrapu et al. 2009; Tumasjan et al. 2010), political information often takes on an affective tone, which is more often than not negative. Negative information has been shown to have a considerably stronger effect on attitudes than positive

[1] Quoted from a tweet on February 26, 2016.

information (Pratto and John 1991; Baumeister et al. 2001), especially negative *political* information (Miller 2010; Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson 2010). However, negative information need not always be overt. Negative rhetoric about a politician or policy should be impactful, but the words chosen to describe political events should matter as well. I argue that using negative affective language, for example, referring to a debate as "ugly" rather than "contentious," will induce a negative mood in individuals, making negative information more powerful.

If political decision making is being influenced by affective language, this brings to light important normative concerns for political scientists, and anyone interested in politics generally. Typically, the role of generalized affect in decision making is operationalized as a diffuse mood created by something clearly irrelevant to politics, and often out of the control of political elites. However, political news or rhetoric that uses affective language is not as plainly irrelevant, and can easily be manipulated by political elites. If politicians can use language to create a mood that makes the masses like them more, or their opponents less, this is problematic for democracy. The use of affective language also may have unintended consequences for politicians who make attacks. This may be seen anecdotally in the 2016 campaign. While Trump has been successful in securing the Republican nomination, he also has to deal with unprecedented unfavorability ratings. If affective language creates a generalized negative mood, it should lead to more negative evaluations of all politicians involved, whether it is a campaign attack or a single politician criticizing a bill. This goes beyond previous research on negativity, such as backlash effects on accusers (see Garramone 1984), as negative mood should effect *all* candidates equally. I examine distinct situations where affective language should matter, and processing style should differ: in evaluations of a negatively assessed policy and in evaluations of political candidates involved in campaign mudslinging.

How Affect Influences Judgments – The Affect Infusion Model

When individuals are asked to arrive at an opinion about a political object, they will draw on the various considerations about that object they have in their minds (Zaller 1992). When individuals receive political information intertwined with affective language, this language should create a particular mood, giving them another consideration that seems relevant. The affect infusion model (AIM) specifies the conditions under which individuals adopt particular cognitive strategies, and how affect operates in these contexts (Forgas 1995). The AIM has two key assumptions about judgments: that the influence of mood on judgment is dependent upon the information processing strategy used, and that individuals will adopt the least effortful processing strategy possible (Forgas 1995). Mood is likely to influence decision making in circumstances in which an open, constructive style of information processing is used (Fiedler 1991). Indeed, more complex or atypical processing tasks have been found to increase the influence of affect on judgments (Fiedler 1991, Forgas 1992). Considering these assumptions, one must consider what processing strategies are available, and which strategies would make affect infusion more or less likely to occur.

A simple form of information processing is heuristic processing, which occurs when a target is simple or typical and the judgment is not highly personally relevant to an individual (Forgas 1995). Heuristic processing is not a deep processing style, and individuals using heuristic processing typically lack the motivation, resources, or both to engage in deeper processing (Schwarz and Clore 1983, Eich et al. 2008). This processing is still open and constructive, since individuals lack prior information on which to base their judgment, but they are still trying to arrive at a judgment with minimal effort (Forgas 1995, Paulhus and Lim 1994). In this situation, affective states can influence judgment. Individuals often think "how do I feel about this?" as a heuristic, and this heuristic serves to guide their opinions (Schwarz and Clore 1988, Clore and Isbell 2001). In heuristic processing affective states guide judgments through a misattribution of feelings. If an individual is able to adopt a heuristic processing style, considering the goal of effort minimization, it should be adopted over a more complex processing strategy. When individuals engage in heuristic processing, negative affective language should make political evaluations more negative in the short term, but not in the long term, as little effort is being expended in the decision making process. Some judgment tasks, however, are not conducive to heuristic processing, and a constructive processing style must be adopted.

When a task is demanding or complex, individuals must adopt a constructive processing strategy (Forgas 1995). Constructive processing is the most effortful form of processing, and is "adopted only when simpler and less effortful processing strategies prove inadequate to the judgmental task" (Forgas 1995, p. 47). The AIM predicts that, when constructive processing is used, affect infusion and mood congruence should increase since the judgment requires more effortful and elaborate information processing (Forgas 1995, Eich et al. 2008). Since individuals retrieve information that is congruent with their current affective state (Bower 1981), this should create an even stronger influence of mood than when individuals use less effortful heuristic processing.

Still, the effect of mood may be different: those who engage in less effortful processing should use their feelings only as a heuristic. In constructive processing, decisions are not arrived at as easily. Mood is likely to bias the search for information in one's memory, but given the more effortful cognitive processing, the use of mood as a heuristic for judgments could be muted. However, information should be encoded in memory more congruently with one's mood. While affective language might influence quick judgments more strongly, affective language in a constructive processing scenario may have more long term consequences for politicians, since new information about them will be encoded more negatively when negative affective language is used[2].

Considering this, affect should influence judgments and behaviors differently depending on the processing style used. In heuristic processing, individuals make only a partial, or possibly no, search for more information in memory, while in constructive processing, individuals make an extensive and detailed search in memory (Forgas 1995). Negative affect, in particular, should have distinct consequences for how information is processed under effortful processing. Negative information is easier for individuals to recall (Baumeister et al. 2001). When in a negative mood, individuals have a stronger focus on searching memory for external information (Bless and Fiedler 2006). Negative affect also improves both the coding and retrieval of information in memory (Forgas, Laham, and Vargas 2005; Forgas, Goldenberg, and Unkelbach 2008), and increases cognitive elaboration (Bless et al. 1990). Negative affect has distinct consequences for constructive information processing: individuals should better recall information and also recall more external information they deem relevant to the judgment at hand.

This relates to work by Daniel Kahneman on System 1 and System 2 information processing. Kahneman argues that System 1 processing is fast, automatic and emotional, while System 2 processing is slow, effortful and logical (Kahneman 2011). However, if affect is truly infused with how judgements are formed, it may be difficult for individuals to separate these affective judgments even when engaged in a constructive, system 2 type of processing. When new information is stored in memory, under the Affect Infusion Model, this information is stored with the affective judgments individuals have made about it (Forgas 1995, Eich et al. 2008). In this case, even logical processing should be driven by affect indirectly. If affect influences how information is stored, this should be seen as "facts" by an individual when they retrieve this information. Considering these two models, when an individual makes quick judgments, affect is simply a heuristic. When individuals make slower, more effortful judgments, affect should influence judgments to the extent that it influences how information is stored in memory.

Affect has been shown to be influence judgment in many scenarios. Negative moods induced by various external means, including the weather, sporting events or films, cause individuals to evaluate their own lives more negatively (Forgas and Bower 1987, Forgas and Moylan 1987, Schwarz and Clore 1983, Schwarz et al. 1987), and negative external events have been shown to decrease support for incumbent politicians (Achen and Bartels n.d., Healy, Malhotra and Mo 2010). Priming individuals with a negative word, or with a photo of a prominent politician, can influence evaluations of other political candidates (Weinberger and Westen 2008). Brader (2006) finds that cues to discrete emotions like enthusiasm and fear can influence political attitudes, but his work focuses on discrete emotions rather than generalized affect. Fighting words, or violent metaphors, can increase preference for violent political action, especially among those with high levels of trait aggression (Kalmoe 2014). From this work, it is clear that both generalized affect and word choice matter in how political attitudes develop, but the two avenues of research have remained disconnected.

This research, however, often focuses on mood inductions that are artificial or out of control of political elites, or focuses on manipulation of discrete emotions. Here, I extend these applications to examine the words used in political rhetoric to determine how words that do not focus on discrete emotions can influence political attitudes.

[2] Previous research on effortful thinking suggests that this type of information processing leads to higher quality decision making. The elaboration likelihood model of information processing suggests individuals are motivated to make correct decisions, and that more effortful information processing leads to better decision making (Petty and Cacioppo 1981). Here, I make no judgment of the quality of decision making when constructive processing strategies are used. The AIM suggests that affect will bias information search, though this does not need to stand in conflict with this work. An individual's mood can simply lead them to believe that certain types of information in memory are more relevant to the current judgment task than others, or that certain types of information are more convincing than others.

How Affective Language Influences Political Judgments

Considering the AIM framework[3], the use of affective language in political communication should influence both political judgments and how political information is processed. Depending on the processing style, affect will influence judgment in different ways: it will happen either directly through affect or indirectly through how new information is encoded in memory and how old information is retrieved (Forgas 1995). This research will provide a new, more subtle examination of how affect can be infused with information received by an individual, and one that is especially relevant to politics. Rather than focusing on external or artificial mood manipulations, this study will examine real ways that political elites can use language to manipulate the mood of those consuming political information.

I present results from two different experiments on affective language. I examine situations where I would expect either heuristic or constructive processing styles to be used. When heuristic processing is used, I expect that affect will influence judgments directly; when individuals are exposed to negative affective language, this will lead to more negative evaluations of political objects. However, I do not expect negative affective language to have any influence on how information is retrieved from, or stored in, memory. Since little to no information needs to be retrieved from memory to make the judgments, those who receive negative affective language will perform similarly on a memory task compared to those who receive neutral language. In a more difficult scenario, where I would expect constructive processing to be used, I also expect that judgments of a political object will be harsher when subjects are exposed to negative affective language compared to neutral language. However, I expect this effect to be more indirect. Given the difficulty of the decision task, individuals will think more about the decision and search their memories for relevant information. When constructive processing is used, I expect individuals not only to think more about their decisions, but also to pull in more external information and remember more factual information, since affect should improve memory and lead to a more detailed information search (Forgas 1995, Isen 1984, Pham 2009).

Study 1 – Affect and Heuristic Processing

Subjects were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk on November 9th and 10th, 2011. Subjects were offered $1 to complete an omnibus study on public opinion; 316 subjects participated in the negative affective language portion of the study[4]. Subjects on Mechanical Turk have been shown to be more representative of the United States than most in-person convenience samples, even though they are typically younger, more liberal, and less wealthy (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). This is true of that current sample, with a mean age of about 34 and 50% of subjects identifying as at least somewhat liberal, with only 28% identifying as at least somewhat conservative[5]. Samples drawn from Mechanical Turk have been shown to replicate important findings in political science and psychology (see Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012).

In Study 1, subjects were assigned to one of two experimental groups. All subjects read a fictional news article[6] about a voter identification law that they were told was being considered in another state. The tone of this article was always *negative* towards the law, even in the neutral language control group. The tone of the article is kept negative, even in the control group, to better test the mechanism of negative affective language. I predict that negative affective words should be *more* negative than neutral affective words, even when the overall tone of an article remains negative. To isolate this mechanism, the tone of the control text is kept negative, to avoid confounding the effects of negative affective words with a generalized negative tone. In the treatment article 18 words[7] with a negative affective valence were included to replace 18 words with a neutral affective valence. These are words that individuals have been shown to have strong negative reactions towards, as coded in the Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW) database (see

[3] I use a valence model for affect rather than examining discrete emotions. This valence model focuses on simple negative or positive reactions, rather than a discrete emotional response. Models of affect and its influence on information processing focus on a diffuse mood, rather than a discrete response to a particular object (Bower 1981). This is an important distinction; given that I argue an affective response is created by language, a targeted emotional response would be directed at words rather than the political target.

[4] 154 subjects were assigned to the neutral language control group and 162 were assigned to the negative emotional language treatment group.

[5] The mean for ideology, on a 7 point liberal to conservative scale, is 3.51. 55% of subjects are female, and 46% have a bachelor's degree. About 6% of the sample is African-American, and 4.8% Hispanic.

[6] Treatment texts from study 1 are available in Appendix A.

[7] Each article contains approximately 250 words, so only about 7% of the words in each article are replaced between the control and treatment groups.

Bradley and Lang 1999)[8]. The negative words have an average ANEW valence rating of about 2.22 (s.d. 0.47), considerably lower than the neutral score of 5.0. This differs from standard mood inductions, which typically do not occur at the same time that information is provided. Here, I argue that mood is not specific because the affective language is not targeted at anything in particular: it is difficult for an individual to determine whether their negative feelings are directed at the bill itself, its supporters, or its opposition.

In this study, I expect subjects will engage in heuristic processing. While voter identification laws have been considered or enacted in many states, it is an issue that has not been on the agenda for a very long time and one that is of relatively minor importance in people's day to day lives. In this study, all subjects read an article that is *opposed* to the Voter ID law. If subjects have limited information about Voter ID laws, this negatively framed article should guide all subjects to evaluate the law negatively. However, I argue that negative affective language provides another piece of negative information about the law: an individual's mood. This should lead to *more* negative evaluations in the treatment group.

First, I examine how negative affect influences assessments of two political objects, the proposed Voter ID law and the fictional politician, Ben Griffin, mentioned in the news article. There was a difference between the negative language treatment and neutral language control groups in ideology, with the treatment group being more conservative. Given that the Voter ID legislation has a distinct ideological base of support in conservatives, the lack of balance on political ideology between treatment and control groups could bias my results. Additionally, this lack of balance on ideology is unexpected, and could indicate a lack of balance on unobservable variables. To minimize this bias, I present results controlling for all *observed* variables[9] in the study. These results are presented in table I.

(Table I about here)

On support for the Voter ID act[10], subjects in the negative affective language condition are significantly less likely to support the act than those in the neutral language control group. This effect, while small, is still substantively important, with those in the treatment rating their support of the law nearly seven points lower than those in the control. To put the size of this effect into perspective, the negative affective language treatment results in an effect on support of the Voter ID law larger than that of gender, being African-American, living in state that has enacted a Voter ID law, and a move from the minimum to maximum values of education and political knowledge.

For politician support, I find a similar pattern. Support for Ben Griffin on a 0-100 feeling thermometer decreases by over 4 points for those in the negative affect language group, compared to the neutral language control. While this effect is again rather small, it is over 40% of the magnitude of the effect of moving from very liberal to very conservative. Further, this effect is especially profound when considering that those in the treatment group support Griffin's stance on the Voter ID act more than those in the control. Given that this is the only information they have about Griffin's ideology, these results suggest that feelings matter when individuals are asked to evaluate political figures. Subjects may agree with Griffin more on policy in the treatment group, but they still rate him more negatively on a feeling thermometer. This suggests that negative affect[11] is not targeted at the law itself, but is used to bias all judgments made about the information learned in the article.

Next, I turn to the open-ended responses to assess how information was stored in memory. I asked participants to list any thoughts that came to mind when they considered the Voter ID law. These responses were coded to identify predicted observable implications from the AIM for different processing styles. For example, negative affective language should influence memory recall and coding: thus, I have coded whether individuals recalled basic information from the article, or made a negative judgment of the Voter ID law. Since heuristic processing should be adopted, I expect there to be no difference between the treatment and control groups in these responses. Individuals

[8] In the ANEW database, Bradley and Lang (1999) rate over 1000 English words on the dimensions of valence, arousal and dominance. I focus on the valence, or positive/negative, dimension. Words are rated on a scale of 1-9, with words rated closer to one highly negative, closer to nine highly positive, and those rated near five neutral.
[9] All control variables, with the exception of age, are coded 0-1. Balance checks on demographic variables are included in Appendix B.
[10] Support for the Voter ID Act was assessed on a 0-100 scale, with 100 indicating the highest level of support.
[11] Unfortunately, I did not measure negative affect in this study. However, in study 2, I do find increased negative affect among the treatment group.

are using affect as a heuristic, rather than having it influence their search in memory while deciding what conclusion to arrive at. Table II[12] presents the differences in the first three responses[13] to the open-ended question about the Voter ID law that subjects read about.

(Table II about here)

There is little discernible difference between those who read the story with negative affective language and those who read the story with neutral language on these measures. In both groups, subjects wrote approximately 130 characters, or roughly 43 characters per response, suggesting that negative affect does not spur increased cognitive elaboration in this processing task. They were also equally likely to make at least one mention of a topic not mentioned in the article, with about 55% of subjects in each group saying at least one thing[14] about an outside topic. Here, I code outside mentions as any reference to something not directly mentioned in the article; these responses typically included references to other places where identification was required, claims about which political party supported or opposed the law, or claims of potential racial bias in the law. Between both groups, roughly 26% of individuals were able to repeat a statement made in the article, such as the law's effect on the poor and elderly and problems with fraud in absentee voting. Here, I coded mentions of factual statements in the article as being made if subjects mentioned a topic that was discussed in the text of both articles[15].

Lastly, I look at instances where subjects made a statement in the open-ended responses that was negative towards the Voter ID law. Here, I code negative responses as any instance where subjects mention that they dislike or are opposed to the law. Interestingly, there was a slightly higher proportion of individuals in the neutral language control who expressed a negative opinion of the law than those in the negative language treatment (though, this difference does not approach statistical significance), 46% to 42%. This suggests that the previous responses about support of the law and Ben Griffin were not results of a deep thought process, but instead were quick decisions made using affect as a heuristic[16]. Negative affect should lead to more considerations of external information (Bless and Fiedler 2006) and better recall of relevant information (Forgas, Laham, and Vargas 2005) when a more effortful processing approach is taken. Here, we see that is simply not the case, suggesting that individuals are using the faster, more superficial heuristic processing style when making this judgment. It appears that subjects are not attaching their feelings to the Voter ID law when storing it in memory, causing the influence of affective language to dissipate when they are later asked to engage in a more cognitively challenging task.

Study 2 – Affect and Constructive Processing

For study 2, subjects were recruited both on Amazon's Mechanical Turk and from undergraduate political science courses at a private, Southern university in March 2012. Subjects from Mechanical Turk were paid $2.50 for an omnibus study on public opinion, which took about 30 minutes to complete. Student subjects completed the same study in a laboratory on campus in exchange for course credit. A total of 281 student subjects and 248 non-students completed the study, for a total *n* of 529 subjects[17]. Of these, 426 were assigned to either the treatment or control group for the current study[18]. Subjects were rather similar across the two modes of study with regards to gender, race and ideology – approximately 53% of subjects were female, 7% African-American, 5% Hispanic and both groups leaned slightly liberal, though not largely so. As expected, there were differences in age; subjects on Mechanical Turk had an average age of about 35, while subjects in the lab had an average age of about 20.

[12] Regression models with a full set of controls provide similar results, and are available in the reviewer's appendix.
[13] Subjects could give a maximum of seven total responses. For ease of comparability to Study 2, I have restricted this analysis only to the first three responses.
[14] Here, I look at the proportions of individuals who mentioned a topic not in the article, recalled a fact from the article, or said something negative about the law in at least one of the first three responses, compared to those who made no mention of these.
[15] I excluded, for example, references to "dead" voters, since it is unclear if that is mentioning an abstract thought (in the control group) or recalling information (in the treatment group).
[16] One could argue that negative affective language simply provides a stronger information signal than neutral language. In this instance, I would expect voters to use that information in their free responses – since they have learned more negative information about the law than the control group, they should continue to evaluate the law more negatively even with a more complex task.
[17] In all analyses in this section, I pool subjects from the student and mturk samples. Statistical analyses on each sample individually provide similar results. Subjects in the lab were more like to recall information and mention abstract information than those on Mturk, while those on Mturk were more likely to make a negative comment about the politicians than those in the lab. In both groups, the treatment effect was similar.
[18] Subjects that did not receive an article about the political scandal are excluded from analysis.

In this study, subjects were first presented with brief background information about two candidates, Eric Thomas and Arthur Spencer, that they were told were competing in a gubernatorial election in a different state[19]. Afterwards, subjects were presented an article to provide them more information about this election. While the overall content and information presented in both articles was similar, subjects were randomly assigned to receive an article about accusations of a political scandal with neutral affective language, or a similar article including negative affective language, a design similar to that of study 1. Here, 36 words[20] were replaced in the treatment article. These words have an average ANEW valence rating of 2.37 (s.d. 0.55), similar to the average rating in study 1 and again, far towards the negative end of the nine point ANEW valence rating scale.

I expect that this study will present subjects with a more difficult judgment task than the previous study; here, subjects are presented with accusations of corruption against Spencer by Thomas; Spencer then denies these charges. This judgment task is designed to be difficult – there is no certainty as to which politician is telling the truth, forcing subjects to make that evaluation on their own. Given that this is a fictional election, subjects have no pre-existing attitudes towards the election, making the task more challenging. Because of this, subjects must spend some time deliberating – there are no easy cues such as proof of who is correct or partisanship upon which to base their decisions. Such deliberation, however, has been shown to have no effect on the quality of decision making (Jackman and Sniderman 2006); suggesting that, in this context, subjects may be especially confused on who to believe. Since I expect a constructive processing style to be adopted, subjects will make a detailed search in their memory when making evaluations (Forgas 1995). As such, I predict that affect will influence what subjects think about when considering this election and, contrary to a heuristic processing situation, cause differences between conditions on what they think about in regards to the election in an open-ended response task.

(Table III about here)

In this study, I included a PANAS scale to measure negative affect; this scale features five questions to measure negative affect that have been shown to be highly reliable (see Watson, Clark and Tellegen 1988). To measure generalized negative affect, subjects were asked to report the extent to which they felt afraid, upset, nervous, scared and distressed at that very moment, and responses to these five questions were used to create an additive index to measure negative affect[21]. Individuals in the negative affective language group report significantly higher levels of negative affect. This effect is rather small, a difference of only about .5 on the 20 point scale ($p\sim.06$, one-tailed), though overall levels of self-reported negative affect tended to be low across groups. Despite this difference in affect, table III shows little difference between the negative affective language and neutral language groups in their evaluations of the two candidates, Arthur Spencer and Eric Thomas[22]. Here, both candidates are rated, on average, near the midpoint of the feeling thermometer across groups, and subjects are roughly equally likely to say they would vote for Spencer or Thomas.

Why does negative affective language not lead to harsher evaluations of the political candidates on these standard survey measures? Here, it is possible that affect is simply not being used as a heuristic, which is exactly what would be expected in constructive processing, where individuals think more deeply about judgments and do not simply ask how they feel about objects (Forgas 1995, Eich et al. 2008). In examining the open-ended responses from subjects, it does appear that many take sides in the election, choosing to believe either Spencer or Thomas[23]. However, *which* candidate subjects support is not being influenced by the affective language treatment. Along these lines, effortful thinking has been shown to increase ambivalence with regards to candidate preferences (Rudolph and Popp 2007). Compared to the previous study, with a more simple judgment task, subjects here may be more likely to see the negatives in both candidates and have a harder time choosing who to side with. With this constructive processing task, we should see an influence of negative affective language on how individuals arrive at judgments.

[19] Full text available in Appendix A.

[20] The articles were roughly 275 words long in this study, meaning approximately 13% of the words in the treatment article were negatively valenced words.

[21] Responses were on a five point scale, ranging from 0-4. For the negative affect measure, values theoretically range from 0 (no negative affect) to 20 (highest negative affect). Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$.

[22] Results presented are difference of means or difference of proportions tests. Models estimated using OLS and controls for race, age, gender, partisanship and ideology produce substantively and statistically similar results.

[23] There is no predictable pattern for what characteristics predict negative responses about either candidate, other than Hispanics than non-Hispanics make more negative comments about Spencer, and women make more negative comments than men about Thomas. Partisanship or ideology do not predict negative evaluations of either candidate.

(Table IV about here)

The results in table IV[24] demonstrate that negative affective language does indeed have consequences for information processing and cognitive effort. When subjects are asked to list their thoughts about the election, those in the negative affective language condition write approximately 25 characters more over the three response options. They also spend about 12 seconds longer (69 seconds, compared to 57 for the control group) answering these prompts, though this difference is completely mediated by the increased length of their responses. Open ended responses were coded in a manner similar to study 1, with a focus on recall of information, mention of outside information, and negative responses to the candidates.

Negative affective language increases the recall of factual information; roughly 24% of subjects in the treatment group mentioned a fact from the introduction about the candidates in their three memory responses, while only 18% of the neutral language group did. Those who read the article with negative affective language also mentioned external considerations more often, with 32% mentioning a topic not supplied in the article as coming to mind when they think of the election, compared to just 22% of the control group. Here, subjects typically mentioned other politicians they were reminded of (the most mentioned were John McCain and Mitt Romney), other political scandals, or drew conclusions about either candidate's partisanship. Subjects in the negative affective language treatment also provided harsher assessments of both candidates in their open-ended responses, despite not rating the candidates differently on the feeling thermometer. Roughly 19% in the treatment group made at least one negative comment about Spencer in their open-ended responses, and 25% made a negative comment about Thomas, compared to only 13% and 18%, respectively, in the control group. Negative sentiment about Spencer often called him a liar, corrupt, and out of touch with the average citizen. Thomas, meanwhile, was often characterized as immature, desperate, and unwilling to focus on the issues. Here, we do see some evidence that affect is influencing evaluations of the candidates; those exposed to negative affective language have more negative things to say about both candidates[25]. This suggests that individuals are thinking about their likes and dislikes of the two candidates, and that reading an article with negative language leads to more dislikes about both candidates, even though this effect did not appear in the previous, more direct measures.

Of course, there are limitations to the inferences that can be drawn from this study. While subjects received the same background information about both candidates in the fictional election, Spencer, the attackee, was a considerably more experienced candidate than Thomas, the attacker. While feeling thermometer ratings of the two candidates did not differ, subjects were more likely to provide negative open-ended comments about Thomas than Spencer, regardless of assignment to the treatment group. This may suggest that negative affective language leads to more negative evaluations generally, as shown in Study 1, or it may lead to more negative evaluations of the candidate being accused, but only lead to increased negative evaluations if the accuser if individuals do not especially care for the candidate to begin with. Further work is needed to adjudicate these effects.[26]

Summary and Conclusions

These findings provide insight into how the words used by the news media and politicians can influence political decision making. In an ideal world, word choice should not be relevant to how citizens evaluate politics and develop political attitudes. However, word choice is certainly deliberate – politicians use rhetoric strategically in ways that they believe will increase the general public's support of them (Riker 1996). If *what* politicians say is important, how they say it should be important as well. When presented with information highlighting the negatives of a proposed policy, individuals evaluate the policy more negatively when the article includes negative affective language. In accordance with how affect infusion should work in a heuristic processing scenario, they also evaluate a politician opposed to the policy more harshly, even though they are more in agreement with his policy stance. However, there is no effect of affective language on recall of information, mention of external information or negative responses toward the policy, suggesting affect is merely used as a heuristic. Here, subjects evaluate the policy more negatively when asked for a quick judgment, but are not more likely to express a negative opinion when asked to elaborate on

[24] These results are robust to regression controlling for demographic characteristics.
[25] However, there are clear limitations to this study. Typically, individuals do not engage in decision making about candidates without a partisan cue, as they were forced to in this study. That said, the study may be especially applicable to competitive primaries, as primary elections with quality challengers and no incumbents are more prone to negativity (Peterson and Djupe 2005).
[26] I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the potential for this effect.

what they think of the policy. This suggests that negative affective language can create a mood that is available for a quick judgment, in this scenario of heuristic processing, but this effect may not persist for long, as the policy is not judged any more negatively in memory.

In contrast, exposure to negative affective language in a constructive processing task leads to negative reactions in memory. Here, a scenario where accusations are made between two political candidates leads to more negative evaluations of both candidates in open-ended cognitive responses when negative affective language is used, even though there is no difference in feeling thermometer ratings. This suggests that the consequences of negative affective language may be longer term in more difficult cognitive tasks. It seems that information may be encoded into memory differently when negative affective words are present, leading to longer lasting effects. This comports with predictions of both the Affect Infusion Model (Forgas 1995) and Kahneman's system 2 information processing model (2011). Taken together, these results suggest that, while affective language operates differently based on the challenge of the information processing task, it has important consequences in general for how individuals process information and arrive at political decisions.

Politicians, it seems, may need to be careful about using affectively charged language when making accusations. In this study, subjects reported more negative responses to the politician accusing misconduct compared to the one accused of misconduct, and these negative feelings were more prevalent when affective language was used. This suggests that affectively charged mudslinging may be less effective, as it damages both the attacker and the attackee.

Of course, it is still possible that affective language is considered to be stronger negative information than neutral language, suggesting that the strength of the language is what is causing these results. Given the difference in results between study 1 and study 2, I believe that this is not the case. If negative affective language was simply a stronger information signal than neutral language, it would be difficult to explain the divergent results among the two studies. If negative language serves as more negative information, evaluations should be harsher regardless of processing style or measurement type. There are distinct differences in how affect influences political decision making depending upon the scenario, which aligns nicely with the predictions of the Affect Infusion Model. Taking these two studies together, I believe that negative mood, rather than negative information, is the route through which negative affective language influences political judgments.

It is important to consider how long these effects persist. While existing psychological theories suggest that, in constructive processing tasks, affect should influence how information is coded in memory, I am unable to test this prediction long term. Future work should focus on the effects of affective language over the periods of days, weeks, and months, to test this prediction.

Politicians are often in close elections, and may be looking for any avenue possible to increase support and ensure their election. My findings present an interesting "Catch-22" for politicians: using negative affective language can decrease support for a policy they don't like, but this appears to come at the expense of increasing negative evaluations of the politician who is also associated with these negative words. However, in heuristic processing scenarios, this effect does not seem to persist very long. Politicians are also faced with a dilemma, though, when attacking their opponents, and perhaps one that is more damaging. The use of affective language in the context of negative campaigning does increase negative opinions about the target of the negative campaign, but it also increases negative opinions about the accuser, as well. In situations where individuals must engage in deeper processing of political information, such as when they must determine whether negative accusations in a political campaign are true or not, mood congruence does appear to occur in memory about the candidates. In the context of real political campaigns, this might suggest that politicians are better off using Super PACs to levy attacks against their opponent, to avoid association with the negative advertising and the consequences for judgments that come along with it.

This work also has implications for mass polarization. If individuals differ in how they get their political information, and certain types of information are more affect laden, my research suggests that those who receive emotional content will become more polarized in their political attitudes. Given self-selection into agreeable political information (Mutz 2006), emotional content may serve to widen the gap between liberals and conservatives, leaving those who consume less emotional media somewhere in the middle. This proposition is interesting, but may be difficult to test. It is still important to consider how different sources of political information can influence judgments.

There has also been considerable debate about the effects of negative advertising, with some arguing it has negative consequences (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), and others arguing it has positive consequences (see Geer 2006). I add to that by suggesting that we need to go beyond the study of the message of an advertisement, but also on how it is delivered. With incivility on the rise (Herbst 2010), attacks could become more vitriolic and include more negative affective words. In this instance, it is important to consider how negativity can be enhanced and influenced by the type of language used.

How individuals receive and process political information, and how that influences their evaluations of political objects, have important consequences for politics generally. I present results that suggest that when individuals are exposed to language that makes them feel generally negative, they also feel more negatively towards the political objects presented along with this language.

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Table I. Effect of Negative Affective Language on Political Attitudes - Study 1

	Support for Voter ID Law	Support for Ben Griffin
Negative Affective Language	**-6.97***	**-4.78***
	(3.43)	**(2.82)**
Conservative Ideology	52.58**	-11.03*
	(6.29)	(5.17)
Age	-0.31*	-0.03
	(0.15)	(0.12)
Female	-3.98	0.03
	(3.62)	(2.98)
Education	5.90	3.28
	(8.62)	(7.09)
Income	11.42*	-8.62+
	(6.78)	(5.57)
African-American	-1.40	1.43
	(7.09)	(5.83)
Hispanic	-15.60*	-10.22+
	(8.24)	(6.77)
Other Race	-4.55	4.33
	(6.16)	(5.07)
Unemployed	-6.91+	3.03
	(4.78)	(3.93)
Student	9.35*	0.25
	(5.38)	(4.42)
Political Knowledge	3.71	0.44
	(6.52)	(5.36)
Lives in State with Voter ID Law	4.48	-3.48
	(3.73)	(3.07)
Constant	27.45**	62.59**
	(9.76)	(8.02)
N	307	307
R^2	0.2688	0.0617

Table entries are OLS coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis.
+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, one tailed

Table II. Effect of Negative Affective Language on Cognitive Elaboration – Study 1

	Length of responses in characters	Proportion mentioning topic not in article	Proportion mentioning fact from article	Proportion mentioning negative opinion of law
Neutral Language	129.98 (7.36)	0.56 (0.04)	0.25 (0.04)	0.46 (0.04)
Negative Language	129.49 (7.26)	0.54 (0.04)	0.28 (0.04)	0.42 (0.04)
Difference	-0.49 (10.34)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.06)
t	-0.047	-0.27	0.49	-0.74
N	316	316	316	316

Table entries are means or proportions for each group with standard errors in parenthesis.
+- p<.10, * - p<.05, ** - p<.01, one-tailed

Table III. Effect of Negative Affective Language on Political Evaluations – Study 2

	Self-Reported Negative Affect	FT Evaluation – Arthur Spencer	FT Evaluation – Eric Thomas	Proportion voting for Spencer
Neutral Language	7.26 (0.25)	46.64 (1.30)	48.02 (1.15)	0.49 (0.03)
Negative Language	7.83 (0.27)	47.81 (1.32)	49.89 (1.22)	0.51 (0.03)
Difference	0.57+ (0.36)	1.17 (1.85)	1.87 (1.68)	-0.02 (0.05)
t	1.58	0.63	1.11	0.58
N	426	426	426	426

Table entries are means or proportions for each group with standard errors in parenthesis.
+- p<.10, * - p<.05, ** - p<.01, one-tailed

Table IV. Effect of Negative Affective Language on Cognitive Elaboration – Study 2

	Length of responses in characters	Proportion mentioning topic not in article	Proportion mentioning fact from introduction	Proportion mentioning negative opinion of Spencer	Proportion mentioning negative opinion of Thomas
Neutral Language	92.45 (5.32)	0.22 (0.03)	0.18 (0.03)	0.13 (0.02)	0.18 (0.03)
Negative Language	117.32 (5.96)	0.32 (0.03)	0.24 (0.03)	0.19 (0.03)	0.25 (0.03)
Difference	24.87** (4.05)	0.10* (0.04)	0.06* (0.04)	0.06+ (0.04)	0.07* (0.04)
t	2.86	2.32	1.65	1.62	1.75
N	426	426	426	426	426

Table entries are means or proportions for each group with standard errors in parenthesis.
+- p<.10, * - p<.05, ** - p<.01, one-tailed

Appendix A – Treatment Texts

Study 1

C1: Neutral language condition

Senate to Vote on Voter ID Law Tomorrow

The state senate will vote tomorrow on Senate Bill 37, also known as the Voter ID Act, which will require all voters to present government issued photo identification at the polls. This legislation aims to reduce voter fraud, but those who do not support the bill claim that there is no evidence of this, and that the bill has unintended consequences. The opponents of the Voter ID Act claim that it will create barriers to voting for low income groups, especially the elderly.

"This bill doesn't do anything to make elections fairer," Senator Ben Griffin, a staunch opponent of the bill, told reporters this morning. "When fictitious voters are voting in elections, it's done via absentee ballots, not at polling stations." Griffin noted that a driver's license is the most common form of identification, causing the poor and the elderly to be most impacted by this requirement. In many counties, the number of registered voters without identification would be enough to change the election outcome. Under the current law, there is no requirement for state residents to have photo identification.

Opponents of the legislation anticipate that it will pass and soon be signed into law by the governor. Senator Griffin still suggests that individuals should arrive at the State Capitol tomorrow to show supporters how broad resistance to the Voter ID Act is. "I expect that debate will be contentious," Griffin says, "and showing how constituents feel is how we will make sure this bill does not pass."

C2: Negative affective language condition

Senate to Vote on Voter ID Law Tomorrow

The state senate will vote tomorrow on Senate Bill 37, also known as the Voter ID Act, which will require all voters to present government issued photo identification at the polls. This legislation aims to reduce voter fraud, but those who do not support the bill claim that there is no evidence of this, and that the bill **betrays** its purpose. The opponents of the Voter ID Act are **terrified** that it will create barriers to voting for those in **poverty**, and especially **hurt** the elderly.

"This bill fixes an election system that isn't **broken**," Senator Ben Griffin, a **frustrated** opponent of the bill, told reporters this morning. "When **dead** voters are voting in elections, it's done via absentee ballot **abuse**, not by **deceit** at polling stations." Griffin noted that a driver's license is the most common form of identification, causing the poor and the elderly to be most **burdened** by this requirement. In many counties, the number of registered voters without identification would be enough to change the election outcome. Under the current law, there is no **punishment** for state residents who **fail** to obtain photo identification.

Opponents of the legislation **fear** that it will pass and soon be signed into law by the governor. Senator Griffin still suggests that **angry** individuals should arrive at the State Capitol tomorrow to show supporters how broad **hostility** towards the Voter ID Act is. "I expect that the debate will be **ugly**," Griffin says, "and showing how constituents are **enraged** is how we will make sure this bill is **defeated**."

Study 2

Candidate Introduction

Please consider the following two candidates for Governor in another state:

Arthur Spencer is a five term state senator who has spent the past four years as the majority leader in the state senate. Prior to entering politics, Spencer served in the U.S. Air Force and received a Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam. Spencer is married with three grown children.

Eric Thomas is serving his first term as state treasurer. He previously served one term as mayor of the second largest city in the state. Before entering politics, Thomas was a businessperson. Thomas is married with one young child.

C1: Neutral Language Condition

Accusations Fly between Gubernatorial Candidates

Gubernatorial candidate Eric Thomas has levied a strong claim against his opponent, state senator Arthur Spencer, accusing him of misconduct in his support of state financing for a natural gas pipeline. Thomas suggests that this may go beyond simple cronyism, as Spencer is a large shareholder in Access Energy, the company building the pipeline. Spencer denies claims of impropriety, noting that this support of the pipeline arose from his longstanding support of clean energy and not due to his personal connection to the company.

"These allegations are not the truth, but are driven by my opponent's standing in the polls. I would never let the voters down. I would never misuse my political power," Spencer said at a press conference yesterday. Spencer said he was rattled by the allegations, noting that he's worked to uncover ethical issues in the state legislature for years. "I will continue my campaign to be your next governor, despite Mr. Thomas' efforts to undermine both my political career and my reputation," Spencer stated.

The claims are problematic for Spencer, and could cut the twenty point lead he holds in the polls with the election still months away. Thomas believes that this news shows Spencer's lack of integrity, and could revive his own candidacy. He has already called for an investigation into whether Spencer did anything improper regarding his support of the pipeline. "The state budget is already tight, and Senator Spencer convinced the legislature to budget hundreds of millions of dollars to benefit himself. He belongs in a courtroom, not the Governor's mansion," Thomas told reporters, "Arthur Spencer is a detriment to democratic government."

C2: Negative Affective Language Condition

War of Words between Gubernatorial Candidates

Gubernatorial candidate Eric Thomas has dropped a **bomb** against his opponent, state senator Arthur Spencer, accusing him of misconduct in his support of state financing for a natural gas pipeline. Thomas is **afraid** that this may go beyond simple cronyism, as Spencer is a large shareholder in Access Energy, the company building the pipeline. Spencer **rejected** claims of **foul** play, noting that his that this support of the pipeline arose from his longstanding support of **pollution** reduction and not due to **selfish** considerations.

"This **assault** is a **disgusting lie**, driven by my opponent's **jealousy** and **gloomy** poll numbers. I would never **betray** the voters. I would never **abuse** my political power," Spencer said at a press conference yesterday. Spencer said he was **insulted** by the allegations, noting that he's been **hostile** towards **corruption** and **fraud** in the state legislature for years. "I will continue my campaign to be your next governor, despite Mr. Thomas' **perverse** efforts to **crucify** both my political career and my reputation," Spencer stated.

This **crisis** is a **nightmare** for Spencer, and could **destroy** the twenty point lead he holds in the polls with the election still months away. Thomas believes that this **scandal** shows Spencer's **bankrupt** integrity, and could bring his own candidacy back from the **dead**. He has already called for an investigation into whether Spencer is **guilty** of anything **criminal** regarding his support of the pipeline. "The state is **drowning** in **debt**, and Senator Spencer **deceived** the legislature into holding hundreds of millions of dollars **hostage** to benefit himself. He belongs in a **jail cell**, not the Governor's mansion," Thomas told reporters, "Arthur Spencer is a **cancer** to democratic government."

Appendix B. Balance Checks

Study 1

	Control	Treatment	Diff	p
Conservative Ideology	0.4	0.437	-0.037	0.25
Age	35.7	33.3	2.45	0.08
Female	0.552	0.586	-0.034	0.54
Education	0.711	0.703	0.008	0.72
Income	0.503	0.471	0.033	0.27
African-American	0.084	0.037	0.047	0.08
Hispanic	0.045	0.049	-0.004	0.87
Other Race	0.078	0.111	-0.033	0.32
Unemployed	0.169	0.154	0.015	0.73
Student	0.104	0.191	-0.087	0.03
Political Knowledge	0.646	0.633	0.013	0.68
Lives in State with Voter ID Law	0.312	0.302	0.009	0.86

Study 2

	Control	Treatment	Diff	p
Conservative Ideology	0.459	0.437	0.02	0.42
Age	26.6	26.8	0.2	0.85
Female	0.529	0.541	-0.012	0.8
Education	0.623	0.619	0.004	0.9
Income	0.558	0.578	-0.02	0.56
African-American	0.067	0.087	-0.02	0.44
Hispanic	0.048	0.078	-0.03	0.21
Trust in Government	0.056	0.513	-0.007	0.73