Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9187
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9187

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Leader Effects in an Era of Negative Politics: Who Has a Negativity Bias?

Loes Aaldering [1], Frederico Ferreira da Silva [2], Diego Garzia [2], Katjana Gattermann [3], and Alessandro Nai [3]

[1] Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[2] Institute of Political Studies, University of Lausanne, Switzerland
[3] Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Loes Aaldering (l.aaldering@vu.nl)

Submitted: 15 August 2024 **Accepted:** 11 February 2025 **Published:** 10 April 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Legitimacy and Followership in National and International Political Leadership" edited by Femke van Esch (Utrecht University) and Rudolf Metz (HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences/Corvinus University of Budapest), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i387

Abstract

It is well known that voters' evaluation of candidates on leadership traits influences their overall candidate assessment and vote choice (i.e., leader effects). It remains unclear, however, whether positive or negative leader trait evaluations are most influential. We argue that especially in current-day political reality—in which ideological and affective polarization are skyrocketing and the political climate is fueled with negativity, high levels of incivility, and negative campaigning—the negative leader effects outweigh the positive ones. Moreover, we expect this negativity bias in leader effects to be conditioned by partisanship and political dissatisfaction. To test these expectations, we triangulate multiple studies. First, we use data from a multi-country election survey to examine the relation between perceived leadership traits of real candidates and party preferences, providing observational evidence from the US, the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Second, focusing on the causal mechanism, we test the negativity bias in a survey experiment among American voters. Here, we manipulate how leadership traits (competence, leadership, integrity, empathy) of a fictitious candidate are presented in terms of valence (positive, negative), and test the impact of these cues on voters' candidate evaluations and vote choices. The findings indicate, as predicted, that negative leader effects influence voters most strongly. Thus, the role of party leaders is mainly a push instead of a pull factor in elections. Additionally, we show that partisanship and political dissatisfaction seem relevant only for candidate evaluations, not for vote choice. This article pushes the field of candidate evaluations forward by examining the dynamics of the negativity bias in leader effects in an era of negative politics.

Keywords

candidate evaluation; leader effects; negativity bias; political polarization

1. Introduction

The year 2024 had been anticipated as a "record year" of elections around the globe—even before some momentous elections were announced, such as those that took place in Iran or France in the summer (Masterson, 2023). What most elections have in common is that the political leaders running for office play an important role. This applies to those in executive office (such as the president of the US, the prime minister of Poland, or the president of the European Commission), their challengers/opposition leaders (such as Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico or Keir Starmer in the UK), or other party leaders (such as far-right party leaders in France and Austria). A long line of existing research shows that leaders can be decisive in vote choice and election outcomes in democratic elections (e.g., Bittner, 2011; Garzia et al., 2020; Lobo & Curtice, 2014).

Amid the rise of polarization in democratic societies, both with respect to party positions (e.g., Lönnqvist et al., 2020) and citizen attitudes (e.g., Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008), as well as affect (e.g., Garzia et al., 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012), we ask whether leader effects apply more to those who decide for a specific party because of their leader or more to those whose vote choice is based on their antipathy towards another party's leader. More specifically, we examine whether positive or negative leader trait evaluations are most influential for overall leader assessment and vote choice. Based on the theory of a negativity bias, which is shown to exist in politics, media, and society (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Soroka, 2014), one would expect the negative leader effects to outperform the positive ones. Past research has tried to tackle this question, but the findings remain largely inconclusive with some showing that positive leader effects are strongest while others finding the opposite (e.g., Aaldering et al., 2018; Aarts & Blais, 2013; Nai et al., 2023).

Our article seeks to shed new light on this issue making a three-fold contribution to the literature. First, theoretically, we argue that the presumed negativity bias in leader effects is conditional upon partisanship and political dissatisfaction. Conceptually, we conceive of leader effects as professionally relevant traits (Kinder, 1986) being decisive for both candidate evaluations and vote choice. Second, methodologically, we triangulate cross-sectional survey data from the US, France, the Netherlands, and Germany with experimental data from the US, to assess the causality of our assumptions. Third, substantially, we provide new empirical evidence on the dynamics of the negativity bias in leader effects, which is particularly important in current times of negative politics, with increased polarization, incivility, populism, democratic backsliding, and the popularity of politicians with dark personality traits.

2. Theory

A large scholarship on candidate evaluations and leader effects shows that party preferences and vote choice are influenced by voters' assessment of the political candidate (e.g., Aarts et al., 2013; Bittner, 2011; Garzia, 2013; Lobo & Curtice, 2014; Mughan, 2000). The exact scope of this impact is debated and, for instance, it is argued to be dependent on political institutions (e.g., Curtice & Hunjan, 2013), partisan de-alignment (e.g., Kriesi, 2012), or time—for instance, some research on the personalization of politics states that the strength of the impact of the perceptions of candidates on the vote decision has increased over time (e.g., Garzia et al., 2020; Hayes & McAllister, 1997; McAllister, 2007; but see also Clarke et al., 2004; King, 2002; Nadeau & Nevitte, 2013). That notwithstanding, the underlying claim that voter's evaluations of candidates affect their party preferences and voting behavior is hardly disputed. These

candidate evaluations, oftentimes effectuated through media coverage of politicians (e.g., Aaldering, 2018; Aaldering et al., 2018; Bos et al., 2011; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2017; Gattermann & Marquart, 2020), mostly strengthen pre-existing party preferences. However, they also can incentivize voters to deviate from their previous preferred party. As these candidate perceptions are somewhat short-term and dynamic attitudes, especially compared to the (relatively) stable socio-demographics, partisanship, and political ideology, they help explain individual-level electoral volatile behavior (Miller & Shanks, 1996; Stokes et al., 1958; van der Meer et al., 2012).

Much of the research on leader effects focuses on the leadership traits of politicians: Voters' perceptions of the leadership qualities of a politician are used as a heuristic for the overall evaluation of the politician (Greene, 2001; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Shabad & Andersen, 1979). Thus, whether voters perceive a political candidate as, for instance, knowledgeable, trustworthy, or decisive, matters for their evaluation of that politician and in the end, their vote decision. There is a lively scholarly discussion on which traits, or trait dimensions, are specifically important for candidates (see for instance Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016; Bittner, 2011; Greene, 2001; Simonton, 1986). The common denominator in all these trait-typologies is that they focus on (behavioral) characteristics of politicians that are related to the quality of their performance as a politician. As per the seminal work of Kinder (1986), for instance, voters prefer their representatives to be competent and empathic and show leadership and integrity. Thus, voters' positive assessments of political candidates on these leadership traits are rewarded, shown by increased positive candidate evaluation and electoral popularity of the candidate's party (i.e., positive leader effects). Likewise, voters' negative assessment of candidates on these leadership traits is penalized and tends to result in less favorable candidate evaluations and a lower likelihood to vote for the candidate's party (i.e., negative leader effects; e.g., Aaldering et al., 2018; Bittner, 2011; Ferreira da Silva & Costa, 2019).

Although both the positive and the negative leadership trait evaluations are expected to affect voters, these effects are most likely not equal in strength. It is unclear, however, whether political leaders are mainly a pull factor to convince voters for support, or a push factor into the camp of the political opponent. Thus, what remains unknown is whether positive or negative leader effects most strongly affect voters.

A long line of psychological research shows the existence of a negativity bias (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992): stronger impact of negative information than positive information. The general asymmetry in the effects of positive and negative information can be translated to the political realm as well, as stronger effects for negative information compared to positive information are found in response to campaign information (Lau & Pomper, 2002), economic information (Soroka, 2006), and candidate information (e.g., Lau, 1982). It has been shown, for instance, that positive information about political candidates is less influential on the overall perceptions of candidates and vote choices than negative candidate information (e.g., Holbrook et al., 2001; Klein, 1991; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Soroka, 2014). In line with the negativity bias, thus, one would expect that negative leadership trait evaluations have a stronger effect on candidate favorability and vote choice than positive leadership trait evaluations.

The current-day political reality is likely to exacerbate this negativity bias in leadership effects. Western democracies experience a rise in various forms of polarization. On the one hand, from an ideological standpoint, parties tend to move towards more extreme positions and further away from each other (i.e.,

party polarization; e.g., Lönnqvist et al., 2020; Pierson & Schickler, 2020), which coincides with an increased ideological distance among their electorates (i.e., attitude polarization; e.g., A. I. Abramowitz, 2010; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). On the other hand, we see a stark rise in *affective* polarization, unfolding as deepening hostile feelings experienced by voters towards the out-party and their supporters (e.g., Garzia et al., 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020). These various forms of polarization have led to a coarsening of the political debate with an oppositional and conflictual style. We witness, for instance, a rise in negative campaigning and attack politics among political elites (e.g., Nai, 2020), employing a more aggressive style, for instance using more uncivil language (e.g., Rossini et al., 2021). Relatedly, we see a rise of political leaders with dark personality traits (e.g., Nai & Maier, 2024) and the popularity of ring-wing populist parties, employing a negative worldview in which the "evil" elites harm the "pure" people (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018; Mudde, 2007, 2019) and which capitalize on (and instigate) fear among their followers, for instance against immigrants (e.g., Wodak, 2015). The grim environment in which political elites operate spills over to the public at large, which shows increased incivility in political discussion online (e.g., Rossini, 2022) and an increased willingness to support hostility towards out-group politicians and voters, or even accept physical violence against political opponents (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). Furthermore, the overwhelming negativity in the political sphere leads to increased negative partisanship (e.g., Medeiros & Noël, 2014) and negative voting, i.e., a vote choice mainly driven by negative assessment of the out-party than by positive evaluations of the in-party (e.g., Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022a, 2022b; Weber, 2021).

We believe that this harsh political climate also affects leader effects. Voters encounter predominantly negative political information, including about political candidates, and they are thus primed to be affected more strongly by this negative information in their overall candidate evaluation and vote decision. This is in line with Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2021) who show that average candidate evaluation scores have decreased over time, while the association between out-party leader dislike and vote choice have become stronger over time. All in all, in the current political environment, we expect that voters are more likely to be affected in their overall candidate assessment and vote choice by negative leader trait evaluation than by positive leader trait evaluation. Thus, we hypothesize:

> H1: Negative leader trait effects on overall candidate evaluation and vote choice are stronger than positive leader trait effects.

Although the existence of a negativity bias in numerous information processes seems today incontrovertible, when it comes to *leader effects* the literature finds mixed and inconclusive results. Surprisingly, not all studies testing the asymmetrical effects of positive and negative leadership evaluation on overall candidate assessment and vote choice point in the same direction. Some studies show that, as expected, negative information about candidates has a stronger impact (e.g., Holbrook et al., 2001; Klein, 1991; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2013; Soroka, 2014), while others show the opposite and find that positive information about a candidate actually has a stronger effect on voters (e.g., Aaldering et al., 2018; Aarts & Blais, 2013; Wattenberg, 1991). A likely explanation for these puzzling conflicting findings is that the negativity bias is not universal, but rather some citizens will be affected more strongly by negative candidate information while others follow a different dynamic. Thus, not everyone is likely to be affected by negative and positive candidate information in a similar way. In this article, we examine the two most likely intervening factors: partisanship and political dissatisfaction.

First, the most obvious conditioning factor for variation in the strength and scope of leadership effects is partisanship or pre-existing ideological preferences. The leader effects literature has overwhelmingly shown that party preferences are not only a result, but also a driver of candidate assessments (e.g., Page & Jones, 1979). Thus, due to reciprocal causality, partisan attitudes muddle the examination of leader effects. Some scholars have attempted to isolate the leadership effects from partisanship, for instance by taking an instrumental variable approach (Garzia, 2012) or by considering exogenous mediated leader effects (Aaldering, 2018; Aaldering et al., 2018; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2017). However, the conditioning role of partisanship for the *negativity bias* in leader effects was not directly tested, while there are strong reasons to suspect that it plays an important role.

Motivated reasoning research indicates, broadly speaking, that citizens engage in biased information processing. Because the defense of pre-existing beliefs and dispositions is an innate goal in humans, any new information that is at odds with such beliefs (e.g., any type of persuasive or incongruent message; Vargiu et al., 2024) is by default much more likely to be resisted and discarded (Kunda, 1990). It is, for instance, shown that partisans display more scrutiny towards arguments of opposing parties than towards arguments of their own party (Taber & Lodge, 2006) and that support for a proposed policy plan increases when the opposing party advocates against that policy (Bolsen et al., 2014). This process is mainly studied in relation to partisan beliefs (e.g., Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006), although more recently, motivated reasoning based on other belief systems is studied as well (e.g., Boyer et al., 2022; Landrum et al., 2017). If we apply this psychological mechanism to positive and negative leader effects, it implies that negative information about an out-party candidate is more easily accepted than negative information about the in-party candidate—because the latter is at odds with pre-existing positive beliefs about the in-party candidate. Likewise, positive information about the in-party candidate will more easily be believed than positive information about an out-party candidate. These differentiating processes will result in a stronger negativity bias in leader effects for out-party politicians than for in-party politicians. Therefore, we expect:

> H2: Negative leader trait effects on overall candidate evaluation and vote choice are stronger than positive leader trait effects, particularly for out-party candidates compared to in-party candidates.

Second, we argue that besides partisanship, political dissatisfaction should also be a conditioning factor in leader effects. In Western democracies, we see an increase in political dissatisfaction, political cynicism, and political distrust over time (e.g., Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Dalton & Weldon, 2005; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). These trends are related to the stark rise in popularity of populist parties (e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2023), for which anti-elitism is a core element of their ideology, which fuels the dissatisfaction among their supporters with the political establishment (e.g., Mudde, 2007; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Among the non-populist voters, there might be dissatisfaction with the political system due to the anti-democratic and authoritative turn these established democracies make as a result of the increasing success of right-wing populist parties (e.g., M. J. Abramowitz et al., 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019. This indicates that citizens increasingly have a baseline negative pre-disposition towards politics and become discontent with the current political system as a whole. This political dissatisfaction towards politics and the political system seems to spill over towards the politicians operating in them, as research shows that the traits voters associate with politicians, in general, are becoming increasingly negative over time and include things like power-hungry, sleazy, and manipulative (Van der Pas et al., 2024).

We argue that these negative attitudes towards politics and politicians affect how voters are impacted by positive and negative leadership trait information. As with the conditioning factor of partisanship, motivated reasoning is likely to play a role in the moderating impact of political dissatisfaction on the negativity bias in leadership effects as well. As discussed previously, motivated reasoning theory predicts that citizens are less likely to accept and more likely to counterargue information that does not align with pre-existing beliefs (Kunda, 1990). As politically dissatisfied voters have an overall negative assessment of politics, parties, and politicians in general, new negative information about politicians will be more easily accepted by them, compared to politically satisfied citizens. Simultaneously, new positive information about political leaders is likely to be reviewed with more scrutiny, as this does not match their existing beliefs about the political realm. Thus, we expect that the negativity bias in leader effects is most pronounced for politically dissatisfied voters, leading to the following hypothesis:

> H3: Negative leader trait effects on overall candidate evaluation and vote choice are stronger than positive leader trait effects, particularly for politically dissatisfied voters compared to politically satisfied voters.

In the following, we test our hypotheses in two different studies. We deal with them one after the other before we discuss the results in detail.

3. Study 1

3.1. Data

Study 1 seeks to gather initial empirical evidence of the extent to which (perceived) candidate leadership traits influence overall candidate evaluations and voting decisions through observational data. Study 1 relies on data from four post-electoral online surveys collected on a sample of the respective voting populations in the aftermath of the respective presidential elections in the US (N = 1,064; 2020), and national parliamentary elections in Germany (N = 999; 2021), the Netherlands (N = 1,007; 2021), and France (N = 1,165; 2022). As age, gender, and macro-region of residence were used as quota factors, the samples are representative on these aspects. Participants were drawn from traditional, actively managed, double-opt-in market research panels and received an email invitation informing them about the research purpose and expected length (8–10 minutes). No deception was involved.

3.2. Methods and Measures

Our key independent variables are constructed based on the so-called "Kinder battery" (Kinder, 1986), encompassing leadership, empathy, competence, and honesty. Respondents are asked to rank party leaders on each of these four traits on a scale from 1 = *not well at all* to 5 = *extremely well*. First, we have computed a unified "core" measure that averages, for each candidate, their scores on the four traits, ranging from 1 to 5. This measure forms a coherent construct, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.91. Second, to test the asymmetric effect of negative and positive candidate perceptions, we adapt the empirical strategy employed by previous studies (Aarts & Blais, 2013; Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2021; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Soroka, 2014), computing two separate dummy variables for each candidate tapping into whether they are perceived by respondents as either scoring high or low on our trait index. Accordingly, trait positivity is coded 1 for all

respondents reporting values in the 66–100th percentiles of the original trait index variable, and 0 for all other respondents. Trait negativity is coded 1 for all respondents reporting values in the 0–33rd percentiles of the original variable, and 0 for all others. Thus, individuals in the 34–65th percentile are coded 0 on both trait negativity and trait positivity variables. This enables us to capture all of the variance in candidate trait evaluations but allows for data on one side of neutral to have a different effect than data on the other side of neutral. Unlike previous studies, we chose a cut-off point criterion based on the distribution rather than on values of the answer scale (i.e., the mid-point) due to the stark differences between candidate scores on traits and the highly skewed nature of the distribution of observations, particularly among partisans.

Our dependent variables are respondents' thermometer evaluations of party leaders (0–100 scale in the US, divided by 10 to recode into a 0–10 scale; and 0–10 scale in France, Germany, and the Netherlands) in each of the countries and their vote choice. Our analyses include as baseline controls the strength of identification with a given party (if any) on a 4-point scale (0 = *not identified with that party*; 1 = *only a sympathizer*; 2 = *fairly close*; 3 = *very close*). The data does not include a direct measure of political satisfaction on the individual level. To gauge this political attitude, we constructed a variable measuring the mean score assigned by respondents to all parties in their respective country, as a proxy for overall individual-level party system support.

We have stacked the data matrix so that the unit of analysis is located at the party*respondent combination. In other words, every respondent appears in the dataset as many times as there are parties for which the respondent evaluated party leaders' personality traits. We test our hypotheses by means of OLS regression with country fixed-effects (to account for cross-country variation) and robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level (to account for the stacked structure of the data). Results are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

3.3. Results

Model 1 in Table 1 shows that, even after controlling for ideological proximity and strength of party identification, perceived trait positivity bears a significant positive relationship with respondents' thermometer assessment of the party leaders. Results do not change if we re-estimate the model with a logistic specification and vote choice as dependent variable (see Model 1 of Table 2). Thus, we find full support for positive leader effects. Model 2 of Table 1 replaces trait positivity with trait negativity and shows that also the latter is significantly correlated with the dependent variable, although with an opposite sign. As before, results are the same if we replace the dependent variable with party vote choice. Thus, the results show a negative relationship between respondent's leader trait assessment of party leaders and their overall candidate evaluation and vote choice, thereby fully supporting the expectation of negative leader effects.

To test the reciprocal effect of both trait positivity and negativity, we have included in Model 3 of Table 1 both variables and compared the respective regression coefficients. They remain statistically significant and signed in the expected direction. When compared, we observe that trait negativity's coefficient is slightly larger in magnitude. Moreover, tests for nonlinear combinations of estimators show that the difference in (absolute) magnitude between the two effects is statistically significant ($b = 0.30$, $p = 0.000$), thereby offering empirical support for a negativity bias in leader effects (H1). For example, the baseline predicted value for a candidate scoring 0 on trait positivity and negativity is 4.42; for a candidate scoring 0 on trait negativity and 1 on trait positivity it is 5.78; but for a candidate scoring 1 on trait negativity and 0 on trait positivity it is 2.75—thus, the relative effect vis-à-vis the baseline value is substantially stronger for trait negativity.

Interestingly, the magnitude of the difference between the two effects is even higher if we use vote choice as dependent variable. And here as well, the test for nonlinear combinations of estimators shows that the difference between the effects is significant ($b = 0.45$, $p = 0.041$). For example, the baseline predicted value for a candidate scoring 0 on trait positivity and negativity is 0.16; for a candidate scoring 0 on trait negativity and 1 on trait positivity it is 0.20; but for a candidate scoring 1 on trait negativity and 0 on trait positivity it is 0.10.

To test the differential effect of trait positivity and negativity on in-party and out-party leaders respectively, we resorted to two interactions between both our trait measures and respondents' declared strength of identification with the parties. Model 4 of Table 1 shows a positive significant interaction between trait positivity and strength of partisanship, but no significant negative interaction between trait negativity and strength of partisanship. Thus, we do not find evidence of a particularly strong negativity bias in leader effects for out-partisans. Model 4 of Table 2 also shows no significant results for vote choice, thereby lending no support for H2. Note that the results hold even if we employ a categorical instead of a linear specification of strength of partisanship (see Table A3 in the Supplementary File).

Lastly, we employ a similar strategy to tap into whether more dissatisfied voters are actually those for whom trait negativity matters more than trait positivity. Results in Model 5 of Table 1 show no statistically

Table 1. Effect of leader trait assessment on candidate evaluation.

	Model 1 B/(SE)	Model 2 B/(SE)	Model 3 B/(SE)	Model 4 B/(SE)	Model 5 B/(SE)
Trait positivity	1.96*** (0.06)		1.36*** (0.05)	1.28*** (0.06)	1.53*** (0.17)
Trait negativity		−2.18*** (0.06)	−1.66*** (0.06)	−1.66*** (0.06)	−1.26*** (0.17)
Trait positivity#PID				0.20*** (0.06)	
Trait negativity#PID				−0.17 (0.19)	
Trait positivity#System-level support					−0.04 (0.04)
Trait negativity#System-level support					−0.10* (0.04)
Party feeling thermometer	0.58*** (0.01)	0.56*** (0.01)	0.49*** (0.01)	0.50*** (0.01)	0.47*** (0.01)
Strength of party identification (PID)	0.22*** (0.03)	0.33*** (0.03)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.10 (0.06)	0.29*** (0.02)
System-level support (mean all parties)					0.13*** (0.03)
Constant	0.75*** (0.05)	2.44*** (0.07)	2.09*** (0.07)	2.13*** (0.07)	1.54*** (0.15)
N (respondents)	2,739	2,739	2,739	2,739	2,739
N (observations)	14,114	14,114	14,114	14,114	14,114
R-squared	0.66	0.67	0.69	0.69	0.69

Notes: The dependent variable in this table is party leader feeling thermometer on a scale from 0 to 10 and presented are the regression coefficients; PID is strength of party identification; all models include country fixed-effects and robust standard errors clustered at the respondent-level in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 2. Effect of leader trait assessment on vote choice.

	Model 1 B/(SE)	Model 2 B/(SE)	Model 3 B/(SE)	Model 4 B/(SE)	Model 5 B/(SE)
Trait positivity	1.33*** (0.10)		0.89*** (0.10)	0.89*** (0.12)	0.95** (0.30)
Trait negativity		−2.14*** (0.19)	−1.61*** (0.20)	−1.36*** (0.21)	−1.81** (0.56)
Trait positivity#PID				−0.01 (0.13)	
Trait negativity#PID				−0.23 (0.18)	
Trait positivity#System-level support					−0.19 (0.07)
Trait negativity#System-level support					0.02 (0.14)
Party feeling thermometer	0.27*** (0.02)	0.28*** (0.02)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.36*** (0.02)
Strength of party identification (PID)	1.84*** (0.06)	1.87*** (0.06)	1.61*** (0.20)	1.89*** (0.12)	1.73*** (0.06)
System-level support (mean all parties)					−0.41*** (0.06)
Constant	−3.68*** (0.10)	−2.52*** (0.14)	−2.83*** (0.15)	−2.86*** (0.16)	−1.18*** (0.28)
N (respondents)	2,479	2,479	2,479	2,479	2,479
N (observations)	13,000	13,000	13,000	13,000	13,000
R-squared	0.64	0.64	0.65	0.65	0.61

Notes: The dependent variable in this table is party vote choice and the models present logistic regression analysis and log odds coefficients; PID is strength of party identification; all models include country fixed-effects and robust standard errors clustered at the respondent-level in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

significant interaction between trait positivity and system-level support, while the interaction is significant and negatively signed in the case of trait negativity and system-level support. Model 5 of Table 2 shows no evidence of a moderation effect based on political dissatisfaction on the relationship between trait positivity/negativity and vote choice. Thus, the negativity bias in leader effects is stronger for politically dissatisfied voters (H3) regarding candidate evaluations, but not vote choice. Tables A4 and A5 in the Supplementary File show a robustness analysis in which the four leadership traits are included as separate variables, instead of the combined trait assessment. The results are consistent with the main analyses. Our robustness tests also include a re-estimation of the models for both candidate evaluations and vote choice (Model 3 from Tables 1 and 2) on a country-by-country basis. The results largely corroborate the findings from the main analysis (see Tables A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File).

So, the results of Study 1 show that there is a negativity bias in the relationship between leadership trait assessment on the one hand and candidate evaluation and vote choice on the other. Contrary to our expectations, these relationships do not seem to be conditional upon partisanship and political dissatisfaction. As these findings are based on survey data from four countries with varying political systems and a diverse set of politicians, the external validity of the results is strong. However, due to the

observational nature of the data, the causal mechanism could not be tested. Especially given the reciprocal relationship between leader evaluations and party preferences (see e.g., Garzia, 2012; Page & Jones, 1979), these findings cannot tell us whether these leadership traits assessments caused overall candidate evaluation and vote choice. This is where Study 2 comes in, which employs a survey experiment with the main goal of providing more certainty of the causality in the negativity bias in leader effects, while controlling for partisanship and pre-existing candidate evaluations by design. So, while the generalizability of these findings is more challenging, as Study 2 only examines the particular case of the US, its internal validity is strong.

4. Study 2

4.1. Data

Study 2 employs an experimental design testing the causality in the negativity bias in leader effects. We fielded a survey experiment in March 2021 among a convenience sample of US respondents through the online data platform of Amazon's MTurk. Although MTurk samples are not representative of the US population, they perform reasonably well compared to other convenience samples (Berinsky et al., 2012). The original sample consisted of 1,829 participants, but after exclusion based on failing an attention check or English not being their first language, we have a final sample of 1,705 participants. A priory power analysis with G*Power indicates that to detect small-to-medium effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.25$) with an independent sample t-test with 5% Type I error and 80% power, almost 1,800 participants are warranted. This means that our final sample is slightly underpowered. The sample consists of 50.9% men and liberals are overrepresented (48.8% Democrats; 23.4% independents; 27.8% Republicans), which is usual for this type of sample.

4.2. Design

We developed a 4*2 (plus control) post-test-only survey experiment, in which the leadership traits (competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy; Kinder, 1986) and the tone in which they are discussed (positive/negative) of a fictional candidate are manipulated. We created nine mock newspaper interviews with a fictive candidate—independent Paul Bauer—who is running for a seat in the US House of Representatives for Minnesota's 9th congressional district (note that Minnesota only has 8 districts). Participants were randomly exposed to one of the nine vignettes, which were all set up as a short introduction about Bauer by the journalist, followed by the beginning of the interview. Leadership traits were cued by a short descriptive statement by the journalist in the introductory text: "Bauer has a reputation of being dynamic and…" (for the positive trait evaluations)/"dynamic, but…" (for the negative trait evaluations). Furthermore, as a second leadership trait cue, the candidate was asked to describe which "fictional character" he would like to be "for just a single day." The idea of this second cue is that respondents would recognize the personality of the candidate by association with the personality of known fictional characters (see also Nai et al., 2023). The ninth vignette (control) did not include any descriptors related to leadership, nor the "fictional character for a day" question, but instead comprised a neutral paragraph in which the candidate introduced himself. To avoid any associations with leadership traits, the candidate only talked about his place of residence and family constellation. We are aware, however, that this might still make him relatable to some voters and potentially lead to slightly more favorable evaluations. Table 3 presents all leadership trait cues and Appendix B in the Supplementary File shows the full text of all vignettes.

Table 3. Leadership trait cues in the experiment.

Trait	Tone	Adjective	Fictional character	N
Empathy	Positive	Caring	I always had a fascination for sympathetic characters. So I would perhaps choose Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones*; he always cares about his friends and takes into account people's feelings. A fictional character with similar traits is Mary Poppins, which I also appreciate.	191
Empathy	Negative	Cold	I always had a fascination for emotionless anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Geoffrey Baratheon, the cruel infant king from *Game of Thrones*; he is unburdened by the feelings of other people and does what is best for him. A fictional character with similar traits is Draco Malfoy from the Harry Potter franchise, which I also appreciate.	184
Competence	Positive	Competent	I always had a fascination for smart characters. So I would perhaps choose Tyrion Lannister, the clever and astute dwarf from *Game of Thrones*; he has a great mind for strategic thinking and a strong professional ethos. A fictional character with similar traits is Sherlock Holmes, which I also appreciate.	193
Competence	Negative	Ineffective	I always had a fascination for amateurish anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Robert Baratheon, the unfortunate king from *Game of Thrones*; though he wasn't particularly skilled and his reign had little success, he still got to sit on the iron throne. A fictional character with similar traits is Homer Simpson, which I also appreciate.	187
Integrity	Positive	Trustworthy	I always had a fascination for honorable characters. So I would perhaps choose Ned Stark, the virtuous lord from *Game of Thrones*; he was an honest leader and always strived to do the right thing. A fictional character with similar traits is Harry Potter, which I also appreciate.	192
Integrity	Negative	Insincere	I always had a fascination for conniving anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Cersei Lannister, the manipulative queen from *Game of Thrones*; she reaches her goals by lying and deceiving and does whatever it takes. A fictional character with similar traits is the lead character in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, which I also appreciate.	194
Leadership	Positive	Decisive	I always had a fascination for strong-willed characters. So I would perhaps choose Daenerys Targaryen, the brave queen in *Game of Thrones*; she never hesitated to tackle problems upfront and was not afraid to make difficult decisions. A fictional character with similar traits is Black Panther, which I also appreciate.	198
Leadership	Negative	Indecisive	I always had a fascination for insecure anti-heroes. So I would perhaps choose Theon Greyjoy, the meek and faltering boy from *Game of Thrones*, who wanted to be a real leader but did not have what it takes. A fictional character with similar traits is Michael Scott from *The Office*, which I also appreciate.	184
Control	—	—	I was born in Minneapolis but grew up in a small town just outside Duluth. I studied at the University of Minnesota, where I met my wife, with whom I have two children. We are now living closer to St. Cloud, and I also really like it here. Although I admit I sometimes miss the lake, we live in a lively area, which makes up for it.	182

The candidate in the vignette was described as an independent politician, to neutralize partisanship by the experimental design. The downside of this is that we cannot test H2, which assumes that the negativity bias in leader effects is larger for out-partisan candidates. To test this expectation, we would have needed to double the sample size and manipulate the partisanship of Bauer as Democrat or Republican. Unfortunately, due to monetary constraints, this was not feasible. The hypotheses and the protocol for this study were pre-registered (see https://aspredicted.org/t5x2-m5cg.pdf) and the project received full ERB approval from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Randomization checks indicate a successful indiscriminate distribution of respondents over the nine vignettes according to their gender, age, education, partisanship, interest in politics, and populist attitudes.

Manipulations were fully successful. Respondents exposed to one of the experimental vignettes were significantly more likely to agree that the article describes the traits of the candidate than respondents in the control group (7-point scale), $t = -6.44$, $p < 0.001$, and that it was useful to form an idea about the qualities of the candidate (7-point scale), $t = -6.38$, $p < 0.001$. Respondents exposed to a negative trait vignette were significantly more likely to agree that the candidate was portrayed negatively in the article compared to the control group (7-point scale), $t = -27.32$, $p < 0.001$, and respondents in the positive trait vignettes were more likely to agree that the candidate was portrayed positively in the article than those in the control group (7-point scale), $t = 21.59$, $p < 0.001$. Lastly, exposure to the negative (positive) specific trait condition leads to lower (higher) ratings on evaluating the candidate on that specific trait, compared to the control condition. For example, respondents who read the vignette with positive empathy cues for Bauer also rated him higher on empathy than respondents in the control group. This was the case for all four traits and both positive and negative evaluations.

4.3. Measures

The dependent variables are a thermometer score for Bauer (0–100) and the propensity to vote for him if they got the chance to do so in an election (0–10). The models additionally control for the socio-demographics gender (1 = female), age, and level of education. Furthermore, they control for (strength of) partisanship (7-point scale, 0 = *strong Democrat*, 6 = *strong Republican*), political interest (4-point scale, 0 = *not at all interested*, 3 = *very interested*), and populist attitudes (based on the scale by Akkerman et al., 2024; 1 = *low populist attitudes*, 7 = *high populist attitudes*), and whether they knew the fictional characters that were used in the second leadership trait cue in the stimulus material.

4.4. Results

Figure 1 plots the effects for the models that test the direct leader effects (the full analyses of these models are shown in Table C1 in the Supplementary File). The results in Figure 1 provide full support for negative leader effects (the diamonds in Figures 1a and 1b). Exposure to a vignette in which the candidate is described as scoring high on negative leader traits significantly and substantially reduces positive evaluations for the candidate and the likelihood of voting for the candidate's party. However, contrasting our expectations and the results of Study 1, the findings do not indicate positive leader effects (the circles in Figures 1a and 1b), as exposure to a vignette that describes a candidate scoring high on positive leader traits does not affect candidate evaluations or vote choice. This already lends initial support for the negativity bias in leader effects (H1).

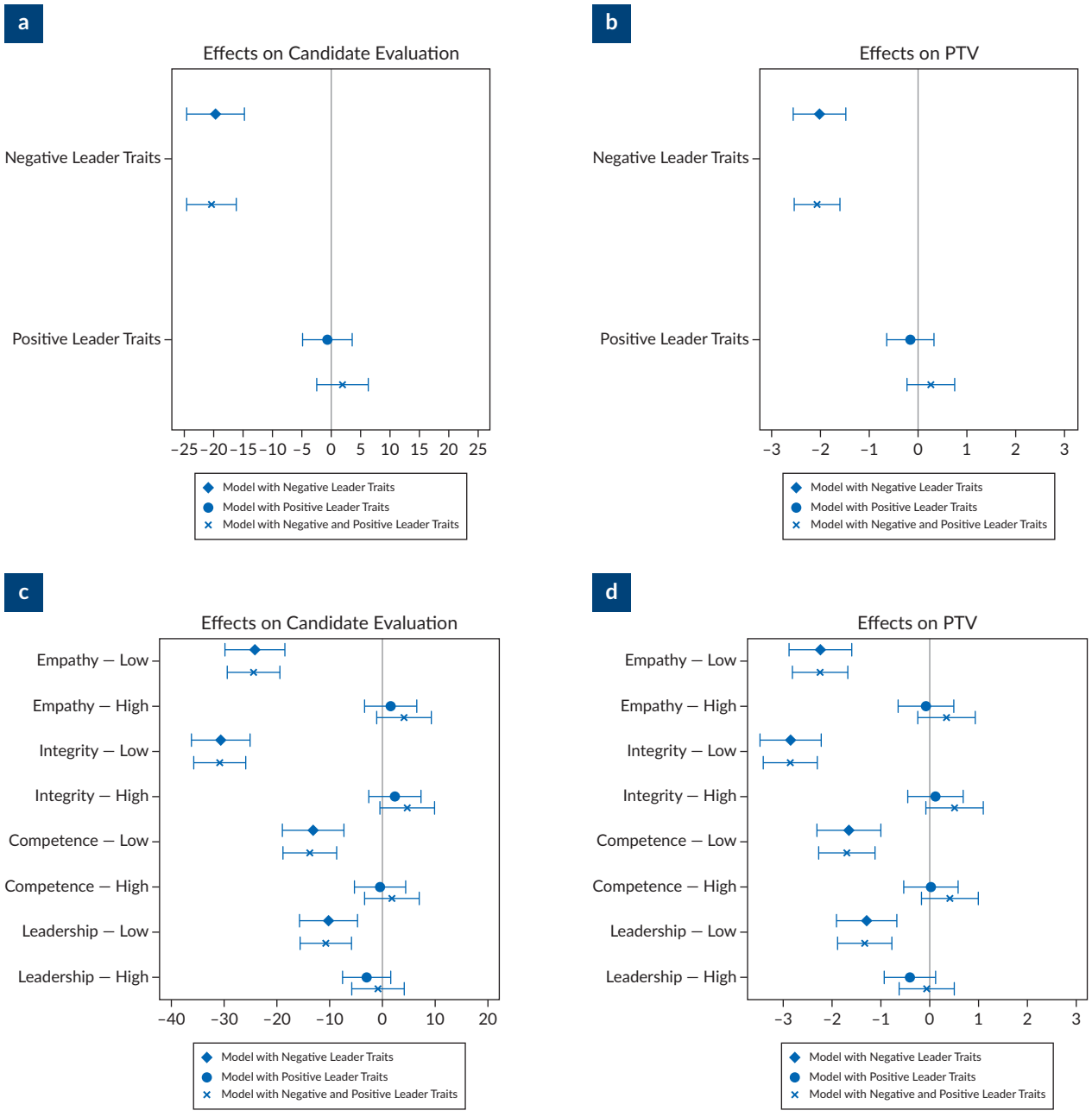

Figure 1. Effects plot of direct leader effects. Notes: Plotted are the OLS regression coefficients of the direct leader effects on candidate evaluation—(a) and (c)—and propensity to vote for the party of the candidate—(b) and (d)—with their 95% confidence intervals; these models additionally control for gender, age, education, partisanship, political interest, populist attitudes, and whether or not the respondents are familiar with the fictional characters employed in the stimulus material; the full models can be found in Tables C1 and C2 in the Supplementary File.

A formal test of the negativity bias is represented by the plotted X in Figures 1a and 1b, which tests the effects of both positive and negative experimental conditions compared to the control group simultaneously. It shows, indeed, that exposure to a vignette in which a candidate is described with negative leadership traits reduces positive candidate evaluations and the likelihood to vote for the candidate's party, whereas exposure to a candidate described with positive leadership traits does not affect candidate evaluations and vote choices.

Importantly, a test for nonlinear combinations of estimators shows that the difference in (absolute) magnitude between the two effects is statistically significant, both for candidate evaluation ($b = 18.49$, $p < 0.000$) and for vote choice ($b = 1.81$, $p < 0.000$). Figures 1c and 1d present the models in which the leadership traits are tested separately (Table C2 in the Supplementary File) and show consistent results. All negative leadership traits effects are significant and negative, while none of the positive leadership trait effects reach levels of statistical significance. All in all, we find convincing evidence that negative leader trait cues are more impactful than comparable positive ones, confirming H1.

H3 states that the negativity bias in leader effects is particularly pronounced for politically dissatisfied voters. We use populist attitudes as a proxy for political dissatisfaction and test this expectation by moderating them with the positive and negative leadership trait conditions. Figure 2 plots the marginal effects of these analyses and Table C3 in the Supplementary File presents the full models. The findings show, first, that positive leader

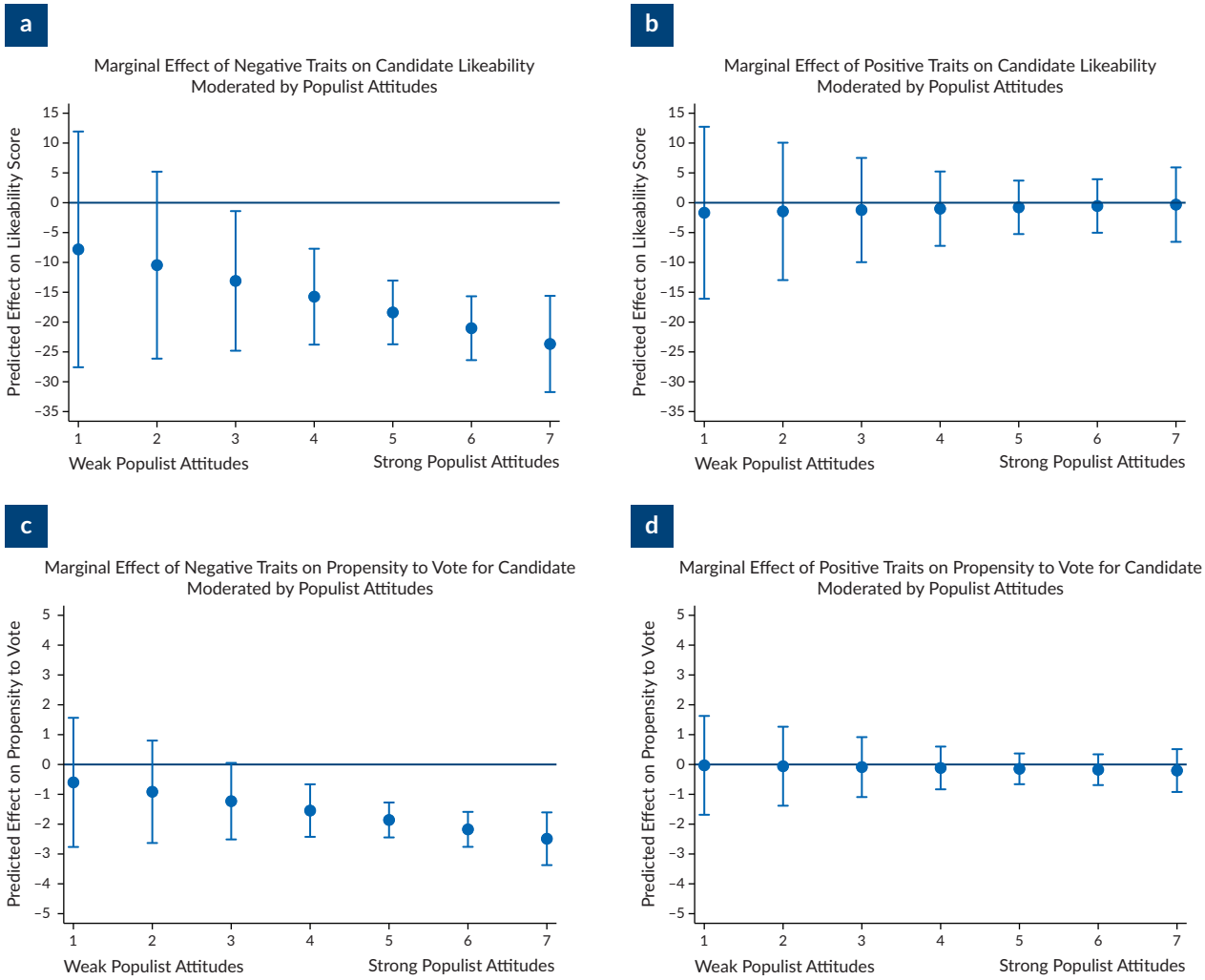

Figure 2. Marginal effects plot of positive and negative leader effects, moderated by populist attitudes. Notes: Plotted are the marginal effects of positive and negative leader effects on candidate evaluation—(a) and (b)—and propensity to vote for the party of the candidate—(c) and (d)—moderated by populist attitudes, with their 95% confidence intervals; these models additionally control for gender, age, education, partisanship, political interest, populist attitudes, and whether or not the respondents are familiar with the fictional characters employed in the stimulus material; the full models can be found in Table C3 in the Supplementary File.

effects, both on candidate evaluation (Figure 2b) and vote choice (Figure 2d), are not moderated by populist attitudes. Exposure to a vignette in which a candidate is described positively in terms of their leadership traits does not affect either outcome, irrespective of the level of populist beliefs. For negative leader effects, the findings are slightly less clear-cut. The interaction terms in the models are insignificant, but the marginal effects in Figure 2 show that only for respondents with strong populist attitudes the effects on candidate evaluation (Figure 2a) and vote choice (Figure 2c) are negative, while for individuals with weak populist attitudes, they are insignificant. This is partly explained by relatively few participants in our sample having weak populist attitudes, resulting in larger confidence intervals. However, especially for candidate evaluation, we do see a clear downward trend. Nevertheless, these findings do not lend (convincing) support for H3.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we examine the negativity bias in leader effects by triangulating data from a multi-country election survey with an experimental study among US voters. We conclude, firstly, that there is overwhelming empirical evidence for the negativity bias in leader effects. Both the survey and the experimental research show that negative leader effects are more impactful than positive ones, for both voters' candidate evaluations and vote choice. This implies that leaders do not so much incentivize voters for political support (a pull factor), but more so drive them in the camp of the opponent (a push factor). The positive leader effects were even completely absent in the experimental data of Study 2. The support for the negativity bias in leader effects is in line with a negativity bias found in other forms of political decision-making (e.g., Holbrook et al., 2001; Lau, 1982; Nai et al., 2023; Soroka, 2014).

The results on the conditionality of the negativity bias, secondly, are mixed. The negativity bias in leader effects does not seem to be larger for out-partisan candidates than for in-partisan leaders, as shown in Study 1. More specifically, negative leader effects seem unrelated to partisanship, while positive leader effects are larger for in-partisans. However, the moderation of positive leader effects on partisanship is only found for candidate evaluations, as for vote choice both positive and negative leader effects are unrelated to party identification. Thus, the role of partisanship is less clear than we expected. Additionally, conditionality upon political dissatisfaction also shows varied results. Negative leader effects seem to be more impactful for voters with low party-system support (Study 1) or strong populist attitudes (Study 2), but only for candidate evaluations, not for vote choice. So, the findings cautiously provide some indication that partisanship and political dissatisfaction have a moderating role in the dynamics of positive and negative leader effects, but this is far less clear-cut and uniform than we expected based on motivated reasoning theory.

To be sure, our results remain constrained by the boundaries of the empirical settings leveraged—for instance, the fact that the experimental evidence comes from a single exposure to mock politicians whose description builds on fictional and pop culture characters—suggesting caution when drawing broad conclusions. As a silver lining, recent developments in American politics have shown that elites do not shy away from associating themselves with fictional characters, including characters with a decidedly dark profile (see, for instance, Trump's repeated references to Hannibal Lecter on the 2024 campaign trail).

The prevalence of negative leader effects over positive ones might not be surprising. The current era of "negative politics" unfolds via high levels of negative partisanship (e.g., A. I. Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Medeiros & Noël, 2014), negative voting (e.g., Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022a, 2022b; Weber, 2021), and

affective polarization (e.g., Garzia et al., 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020), and a political communication climate that is dominated by incivility (e.g., Rossini et al., 2021) and negative campaigning (e.g., Nai, 2020). Voters predominantly come across negative political information, which primes them to also be more strongly affected by negative than positive information in their political assessments and decision-making. It would be interesting for future research to examine whether there is a rise in the negativity bias in leader effects over time, coinciding with the coarsening of the political sphere.

In the title of this article, we pose the question: Who has a negativity bias in leader effects? Unfortunately, this is still somewhat of an open question as our findings regarding the conditionality of the negativity bias in leader effects show mixed results. We urge future studies to dive into this puzzle more and test, for instance, the role of ideological and affective closeness to the party, which might be more telling than partisanship, which constitutes something different in two-party systems like the US than in multi-party systems found in Western Europe. Moreover, it would be highly interesting to test whether the psychological make-up of voters is a factor to consider. It has been shown, for instance, that high agreeableness and extraversion, and low levels of negative emotionality, are strong predictors of negative partisanship and (the strength of) negative affect towards the out-party (e.g., A. I. Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Webster, 2018) and therefore might impact negativity in leader effects as well.

All in all, this article shows that the role of party leaders is mainly a push instead of a pull factor in elections and that partisanship and political dissatisfaction seem relevant only for candidate evaluations, not vote choice.

Acknowledgments

We thank the thematic issues editors Femke van Esch and Rudolf Metz, and the anonymous reviewers, for their careful reading and constructive suggestions during the revision process—which were instrumental in the reworking of this article and in getting it to its current form. All remaining mistakes are of course our responsibility alone.

Funding

Part of this research has been financed by an Eccellenza grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation (PCEFP1_186898 to D.G.). Publication of this article in open access was made possible due to the institutional membership agreement between Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All data and codes are available for replication and re-analysis at the following OSF repository: https://osf.io/FXT69/

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

References

Aaldering, L. (2018). The (ir)rationality of mediated leader effects. *Electoral Studies*, *54*, 269–280.

Aaldering, L., van der Meer, T., & Van der Brug, W. (2018). Mediated leader effects: The impact of newspapers' portrayal of party leadership on electoral support. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*(1), 70–94.

Aaldering, L., & Vliegenthart, R. (2016). Political leaders and the media. Can we measure political leadership images in newspapers using computer-assisted content analysis? *Quality & Quantity*, *50*, 1871–1905.

Aarts, K., & Blais, A. (2013). Pull or push? The relative impact of positive and negative leader evaluations on vote choice. In K. Aarts, A. Blais, & H. Schmitt (Eds.), *Political leaders and democratic elections* (pp. 165–186). Oxford University Press.

Aarts, K., Blais, A., & Schmitt, H. (Eds.). (2013). *Political leaders and democratic elections*. Oxford University Press.

Abramowitz, A. I. (2010). Transformation and polarization: The 2008 presidential election and the new American electorate. *Electoral Studies*, *29*(4), 594–603.

Abramowitz, A. I., & Webster, S. (2016). The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of US elections in the 21st century. *Electoral Studies*, *41*, 12–22.

Abramowitz, A. I., & Webster, S. (2018). Negative partisanship: Why Americans dislike parties but behave like rabid partisans. *Political Psychology*, *39*, 119–135.

Abramowitz, M. J., Blinken, A., & Kuzmich, H. (2018). *The Democracy Project report*. Freedom House. http://www.democracyprojectreport.org/report

Bafumi, J., & Shapiro, R. Y. (2009). A new partisan voter. *The Journal of Politics*, *71*(1), 1–24.

Baldassarri, D., & Gelman, A. (2008). Partisans without constraint: Political polarization and trends in American public opinion. *American Journal of Sociology*, *114*(2), 408–446.

Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, *5*(4), 323–370.

Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis*, *20*(3), 351–368.

Bittner, A. (2011). *Platform or personality? The role of party leaders in elections*. Oxford University Press.

Bolsen, T., Druckman, J. N., & Cook, F. L. (2014). The influence of partisan motivated reasoning on public opinion. *Political Behavior*, *36*, 235–262.

Bos, L., Van der Brug, W., & de Vreese, C. (2011). How the media shape perceptions of right-wing populist leaders. *Political Communication*, *28*(2), 182–206.

Boyer, M. M., Aaldering, L., & Lecheler, S. (2022). Motivated reasoning in identity politics: Group status as a moderator of political motivations. *Political Studies*, *70*(2), 385–401.

Citrin, J., & Stoker, L. (2018). Political trust in a cynical age. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *21*, 49–70.

Clarke, H. D., Kornberg, A., & Stewart, M. C. (2004). Referendum voting as political choice: The case of Quebec. *British Journal of Political Science*, *34*(2), 345–355.

Curtice, J., & Hunjan, S. (2013). Elections as beauty contests: Do the rules matter? In K. Aarts, A. Blais, & H. Schmitt (Eds.), *Political leaders and democratic elections* (pp. 91–107). Oxford University Press.

Dalton, R. J., & Weldon, S. A. (2005). Public images of political parties: A necessary evil? *West European Politics*, *28*(5), 931–951.

Ferreira da Silva, F., & Costa, P. (2019). Do we need warm leaders? Exploratory study of the role of voter evaluations of leaders' traits on turnout in seven European countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, *58*(1), 117–140.

Garzia, D. (2012). Party and leader effects in parliamentary elections: Towards a reassessment. *Politics*, *32*(3), 175–185.

Garzia, D. (2013). Can candidates' image win elections? A counterfactual assessment of leader effects in the second Italian republic. *Journal of Political Marketing*, *12*(4), 348–361.

Garzia, D., & Ferreira da Silva, F. (2021). Negative personalization and voting behavior in 14 parliamentary democracies, 1961–2018. *Electoral Studies*, *71*, Article 102300.

Garzia, D., & Ferreira da Silva, F. (2022a). Negativity and political behavior: A theoretical framework for the analysis of negative voting in contemporary democracies. *Political Studies Review*, *20*(2), 282–291.

Garzia, D., & Ferreira da Silva, F. (2022b). The electoral consequences of affective polarization? Negative voting in the 2020 US presidential election. *American Politics Research*, *50*(3), 303–311.

Garzia, D., Ferreira da Silva, F., & De Angelis, A. (2020). Image that matters: News media consumption and party leader effects on voting behavior. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *25*(2), 238–259.

Garzia, D., Ferreira da Silva, F., & Maye, S. (2023). Affective polarization in comparative and longitudinal perspective. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *87*(1), 219–231.

Gattermann, K., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). The role of candidate evaluations in the 2014 European Parliament elections: Towards the personalization of voting behaviour? *European Union Politics*, *18*(3), 447–468.

Gattermann, K., & Marquart, F. (2020). Do Spitzenkandidaten really make a difference? An experiment on the effectiveness of personalized European Parliament election campaigns. *European Union Politics*, *21*(4), 612–633.

Greene, S. (2001). The role of character assessments in presidential approval. *American Politics Research*, *29*(2), 196–210.

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C. (2018). Framing blame: Toward a better understanding of the effects of populist communication on populist party preferences. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *28*(3), 380–398.

Hayes, B. C., & McAllister, I. (1997). Gender, party leaders, and election outcomes in Australia, Britain, and the United States. *Comparative Political Studies*, *30*(1), 3–26.

Holbrook, A. L., Krosnick, J. A., Visser, P. S., Gardner, W. L., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2001). Attitudes toward presidential candidates and political parties: Initial optimism, inertial first impressions, and a focus on flaws. *American Journal of Political Science*, *45*(4), 930–950.

Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *76*(3), 405–431.

Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2015). Fear and loathing across party lines: New evidence on group polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(3), 690–707.

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society*, *47*(2), 99–127.

Kalmoe, N. P., & Mason, L. (2022). *Radical American partisanship: Mapping violent hostility, its causes, and the consequences for democracy*. University of Chicago Press.

Kinder, D. R. (1986). Presidential character revisited. In R. Lau & D. O. Sears (Eds.), *Political Cognition: The Nineteenth Annual Carnegie Symposium on Cognition* (pp. 233–255). Lawrence Erlbaum.

King, A. (Ed.). (2002). *Leaders' personalities and the outcomes of democratic elections*. Oxford University Press.

Klein, J. G. (1991). Negativity effects in impression formation: A test in the political arena. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *17*(4), 412–418.

Kriesi, H. (2012). Personalization of national election campaigns. *Party Politics*, *18*(6), 825–844.

Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, *108*(3), 480–498.

Landrum, A. R., Lull, R. B., Akin, H., Hasell, A., & Jamieson, K. H. (2017). Processing the papal encyclical through perceptual filters: Pope Francis, identity-protective cognition, and climate change concern. *Cognition*, *166*, 1–12.

Lau, R. R. (1982). Negativity in political perception. *Political Behavior*, *4*, 353–377.

Lau, R. R., & Pomper, G. M. (2002). Effectiveness of negative campaigning in US Senate elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, *46*(1) 47–66.

Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2019). *How democracies die. What history reveals about our future*. Penguin Books.

Lobo, M. C., & Curtice, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Personality politics? The role of leader evaluations in democratic elections*. Oxford University Press.

Lönnqvist, J. E. M., Ilmarinen, V. J., & Sortheix, F. M. (2020). Polarization in the wake of the European refugee crisis: A longitudinal study of the Finnish political elite's attitudes towards refugees and the environment. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *8*(1), 173–197.

Masterson, V. (2023, December 15). 2024 is a record year for elections. Here's what you need to know. *World Economic Forum*. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/12/2024-elections-around-world

McAllister, I. (2007). The personalization of politics. In R. J. Dalton & H. Klingeman (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political behavior* (pp. 571–588). Oxford University Press.

Medeiros, M., & Noël, A. (2014). The forgotten side of partisanship: Negative party identification in four Anglo-American democracies. *Comparative Political Studies*, *47*(7), 1022–1046.

Miller, W., & Shanks, J. M. (1996). *The new American voter*. Harvard University Press.

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. Wiley.

Mughan, A. (2000). *Media and the presidentialization of parliamentary elections*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Nadeau, R., & Nevitte, N. (2013). Leader effects and the impact of leader characteristics in nine countries. In K. Aarts, A. Blais, & H. Schmitt (Eds.), *Political leaders and democratic elections* (pp. 127–146). Oxford University Press.

Nai, A. (2020). Going negative, worldwide: Towards a general understanding of determinants and targets of negative campaigning. *Government and Opposition*, *55*(3), 430–455.

Nai, A., Aaldering, L., Ferreira da Silva, F., Garzia, D., & Gattermann, K. (2023). The dark side of the mood. Candidate evaluation, voter perceptions, and the driving role of (dark) personality traits. *Electoral Studies*, *86*, Article 102715.

Nai, A., & Maier, J. (2024). *Dark politics. The personality of politicians and the future of democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press.

Ohr, D., & Oscarsson, H. (2013). Leader traits, leader image, and vote choice. In K. Aarts, A. Blais, & H. Schmitt (Eds.), *Political leaders and democratic elections* (pp. 187–214). Oxford University Press.

Page, B. I., & Jones, C. C. (1979). Reciprocal effects of policy preferences, party loyalties and the vote. *American Political Science Review*, *73*(4), 1071–1089.

Pierson, P., & Schickler, E. (2020). Madison's constitution under stress: A developmental analysis of political polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *23*(1), 37–58.

Reiljan, A. (2020). 'Fear and loathing across party lines' (also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, *59*(2), 376–396.

Rooduijn, M., Pirro, A., Andrea, L. P., Halikiopoulou, D., Froio, C., van Kessel, S., de Lange, S. L., Mudde, C., & Taggart, P. (2023). *The PopuList 3.0: An overview of populist, far-left and far-right parties in Europe*.

Rossini, P. (2022). Beyond incivility: Understanding patterns of uncivil and intolerant discourse in online political talk. *Communication Research*, *49*(3), 399–425.

Rossini, P., Stromer-Galley, J., & Zhang, F. (2021). Exploring the relationship between campaign discourse on Facebook and the public's comments: A case study of incivility during the 2016 US presidential election. *Political Studies*, *69*(1), 89–107.

Shabad, G., & Andersen, K. (1979). Candidate evaluations by men and women. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *43*(1), 18–35.

Simonton, D. K. (1986). Presidential personality: Biographical use of the Gough Adjective Check List. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*(1), 149–160.

Slothuus, R., & de Vreese, C. H. (2010). Political parties, motivated reasoning, and issue framing effects. *The Journal of Politics*, *72*(3), 630–645.

Soroka, S. N. (2006). Good news and bad news: Asymmetric responses to economic information. *The Journal of Politics*, *68*(2), 372–385.

Soroka, S. N. (2014). *Negativity in democratic politics: Causes and consequences*. Cambridge University Press.

Stokes, D. E., Campbell, A., & Miller, W. (1958). Components of electoral decision. *American Political Science Review*, *52*(2), 367–387.

Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, *50*(3), 755–769.

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1992). Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, *5*, 297–323.

van der Meer, T., & Hakhverdian, A. (2017). Political trust as the evaluation of process and performance: A cross-national study of 42 European countries. *Political Studies*, *65*(1), 81–102.

van der Meer, T., Van Elsas, E., Lubbe, R., & Van der Brug, W. (2012). *Kieskeurige Kiezers: Een onderzoek naar de veranderlijkheid van Nederlandse kiezers, 2006–2010*. University of Amsterdam.

van Der Pas, D., Aaldering, L., & Bos, A. L. (2024). Looks like a leader: Measuring evolution in gendered politician stereotypes. *Political Behavior*, *46*(3), 1653–1675.

Vargiu, C., Nai, A., & Valli, C. (2024). Uncivil yet persuasive? Testing the persuasiveness of political incivility and the moderating role of populist attitudes and personality traits. *Political Psychology*, *45*(6), 1157–1176.

Wattenberg, M. P. (1991). *The rise of candidate-centered politics: Presidential elections of the 1980S*. Harvard University Press.

Weber, T. (2021). Negative voting and party polarization: A classic tragedy. *Electoral Studies*, *71*, Article 102335.

Webster, S. W. (2018). It's personal: The Big Five personality traits and negative partisan affect in polarized US politics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *62*(1), 127–145.

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage.

About the Authors

Loes Aaldering is an associate professor in comparative politics at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her research mainly focuses on women in politics, political leadership, gender stereotypes, political communication, political representation, and voter attitudes and behavior.

Frederico Ferreira da Silva is a senior researcher at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. He works on elections, public opinion, and voting behavior in Western democracies, with a recent interest in affective polarization in a comparative perspective.

Diego Garzia is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Lausanne. His research interests focus on elections, public opinion, and voting behavior in a comparative perspective. He currently serves on the steering committee of the Consortium for National Election Studies (CNES).

Katjana Gattermann is an associate professor in political communication and journalism at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam. Her current research interests comprise media–politics relations, election campaigns, political contestation, disinformation, and the media's role in democratic attitude formation within and across the European Union.

Alessandro Nai is an associate professor of political communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam. His work focuses on the use of negativity and incivility in election campaigns in a comparative perspective, the (dark) personality traits of politicians, and radical partisanship in voters.