

Negative News Habituation, Political Knowledge, Media Literacy, and Political Ideology as Factors in Presidential Approval among High-Achieving, Affluent, Suburban High School Students: An Experiment-Based Empirical Analysis

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1 Personal

Since the age of three, I have been engrossed by the desire to serve this country, to help rid its government of enmity, and to provide a voice to all those unduly ignored. And so when my research teacher called on each student to choose a topic to research and describe in a twenty-page report, my response had nothing to do with aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases or the studying time of the average high school student.

It had to do with something that affects us all, and that strikes at the very heart of America. It was a promise to attempt to understand a phenomenon of America's sociopolitical fabric.

Throughout the history of this nation, the news media has assumed the trusted role of the fourth estate. It has been the great equalizer of the national rhetoric and the guarantor of the public debate. It has, for centuries, been the avuncular institution of truth and dependency. In recent years, however, this trusted institution has crumbled into deceit and despair. Its impartial outlook has transformed into a view riddled with the discordances of bias and prejudice. What was once a thirty-minute update on America's most important stories has become a twenty-four hour tournament of endless politicking and gossip.

I thought of how the office of the President of the United States was once respected by the news media as a place of honor and dignity. The "Leader of the Free World" was once regarded as unimpeachable and irreproachable. He was the guiding light for a world of tumult and despair. Now, though, his personal, financial, and religious ideologies have become a source for talking points and censures.

How will this dramatic shift in presidential news coverage affect the country's perception of the President? How will the abounding negativity surrounding the office of the President, from the fall of Nixon to the impeachment of Clinton to the wars of Bush, influence the President's public approval ratings? With our first black president in our history, how will the talk of socialism and prejudice and inexperience affect approval ratings? That is what I set out to understand. But my answers were so much more.

2 Prior Research

The public's perception of the President of the United States has been a widely studied aspect in American politics since the birth of the nation in the eighteenth century. In recent years, with the inception of the 24-hour news cycle as a prevalent social characteristic, political scientists have deliberately analyzed the potential effects of the news media and its portrayal of the president on the public's approval of him (Cohen, 2000; Wolf & Holian, 2006; Woessner, 2005; Schiffer, 2009; Cohen, 2004). These studies have concluded that issue saliency and media biases do have a significant effect under certain conditions; when considering an issue that is not salient, and presenting it to persons with little previous knowledge of political affairs, the news media can have a significant effect on the public. But when a salient issue is presented to a politically knowledgeable public with predisposed affiliations, the media effect on presidential approval becomes minimal.

The majority of these studies, however, does not theorize on the effects of negative media portrayal, but rather focuses on basic media priming, issue salience, and their effect on public opinion. In fact, a long-held assumption of media influence is that when the news media portrays the President in a negative light, his approval ratings drop significantly. Interestingly, however, it has been suggested that this common hypothesis is possibly a misconception.

In 2004, Cohen analyzed the effect of negative news media on presidential approval. While conducting his research, he studied the presidential approval ratings of President Bill Clinton in 1997. Shortly after the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Cohen found that President Clinton's approval ratings actually increased. In 1997, fifty-six percent of voters in a Gallup Poll approved of Clinton's job performance; in July of 1998, that number had risen to sixty-five percent. In addition, he found that from 1977-1992, if the Iran-Contra affair is excluded, there is actually a nearly perfect positive correlation between negative presidential news and presidential approval ratings. Thus, he concluded that excepting "major negative events," adverse news actually leads to increased approval ratings. Cohen attributed these findings to varied factors: a shrinking news audience, source credibility decline, public habituation to negative news about the President, and a counter-reaction by the public to the bevy of exceedingly negative news which consumes today's news reportage.

In a study which analyzed the effect of the Iraq War as a salient issue on presidential approval, Schiffer (2008) modeled media coverage of the war as a function of presidential news-making efforts and American casualties in 2007. By measuring the daily public approval of the Iraq War in conjunction with presidential approval ratings, Schiffer was able to deduce that the War had no effect on the public's perception of the president. This conclusion seems to align itself with that of Cohen (2004): negative news does not influence presidential approval. At the time Schiffer conducted his study, about 77% of Americans believed the War was going badly. Accordingly, the news about the War was often times, if not all the time, negative. The fact that Iraq War news seemed to have no effect at all on the public supports the notion that negative news is of negligible value when measuring presidential approval.

Schiffer's reasoning for this phenomenon, however, seems flawed. He suggests that the news media lacks the power to alter public perception of the President with its short-term agenda. As Wolf & Holian (2006) and Cohen (2004) suggest, this reasoning is fallacious. It has been suggested by these studies that the media does indeed have the power to influence the public; however, myriad factors play crucial roles in determining whether this effect would be expressed.

3 Research Design

To analyze the effect of negative news in the media on public approval of President Obama, a conventional survey was limited in its ability to accurately gauge realistic opinion. Looking at the official public approval of the President would be a flawed approach, due to the fact that this approval simply measures adults' approval of President Obama, and fails to take into account the salient effect of negative news on his actual approval.

In devising the experimental design, I ask whether short-term exposure to negative news media can negate one's approval of President Obama, and whether those with more numerable political affiliations and less knowledge of American politics would be more inclined to change their opinions of the President. In addition, I analyze whether habituation and public counter-reaction decrease the degree to which the public is influenced by the news media.

I hypothesize that the reporting of negative news in the media will not negatively affect the public's perception of the President of the United States, and that a significant percentage of inconsistency between presidential favorability and presidential approval will exist. In addition, I assume that religious and political affiliations and political knowledge will affect the degree to which the public is influenced by negative news, while habituation and public counter-reaction will decrease the degree to which the public is influenced by the news media.

This analysis is based on a week-long experiment designed to test the hypotheses described above. Before commencement of the experiment, four video clips taken from various right-wing media sources were compiled onto a DVD.

The first video clip is a three-minute excerpt taken from a live episode of Glenn Beck, in which he rails against President Obama as a socialist. Beck defends his assertions by discussing the recent developments of President Obama's announcement of his willingness to speak with elements of the Taliban, and his lifting of the federal ban on stem cell research.

The second video clip is a one-minute interview of Karl Rove on Fox News, in which he discusses the recent uproar surrounding President Obama's bow to the Japanese Emperor. He explains how United States Presidents should never bow, and that so doing professes an air of weakness to the rest of the world.

The third video clip is a one-minute, live excerpt taken from The O'Reilly Factor, which shows clips of various political figures (Vice President Dick Cheney, Senator Jim DeMint, Liz Cheney, Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey, and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney), at the Political Action Conference convention. Each figure bashes President Obama, calling him a socialist, a coward, and perhaps the worst President in America's history.

Finally, the fourth video clip is a three-minute excerpt of Rush Limbaugh during a live session on his radio show. Mr. Limbaugh calls attention to President Obama's falling approval ratings, describes how his sole purpose as president has been to divide the nation, and how he is "spitting on the Constitution." In addition, Limbaugh calls President Obama "a fraud," who is trying to exploit the government in order to control the American people.

These clips were selected to cover a wide range of conservative political attitude and beliefs, and to expose the experimental group to recent negativity about President Obama in the news media.

On the Monday of the experimental week, a total of about 180 high school students enrolled in social science research and economics classes were assigned a number to remember for the duration of the week. At the time of their respective classes, they were informed that they were participating in an Intel National Science Talent Search experiment, that their responses were confidential, and that they had an absolute right to terminate their participation at any time.

They then were told to respond to a written survey of 32 questions, which included 16 questions measuring their political knowledge and another 16 questions gauging the participant's previous political affiliations, perception of job approval, and approval of character traits of President Obama. The presidential approval questions consisted of a range of answers: (1) Strongly Disapprove, (2) Disapprove, (3) Approve, (4) Strongly Approve. Those who selected 1 and 2 were classified as having a low approval of the President, while those who selected 3 and 4 were classified as having a high approval. Respondent political ideology was also measured with a range of possible answers: (1) Very liberal, (2) Liberal, (3) Moderate, (4) Conservative, (5) Very Conservative. Respondents with answers 1 and 2 were considered liberal, and respondents with answers 4 and 5 were considered conservative.

Subsequently, all groups (except for the control group) were told to sit side by side and refrain from speaking. They then were exposed to the first video clip. After the completion of the clip, they were allowed to return to normal routine. This same viewing procedure repeated itself for the next three days. On the Friday of that week (the last day of the experiment), the experimental groups each watched the fourth video. After completion of this video, however, they were again told to respond to a written survey. This time, the survey consisted of a mere 13 questions. (The first question on this posttest asked the respondent to write down his number which he received in the beginning of the week.) This posttest did not include the political knowledge quiz, but did ask the respondents to answer the same questions about their approval of President Obama which they answered on the pretest. In addition, three new questions gauging the respondents' perception of negative

news in the media and their media literacy were added to the survey. After completion, the participants were informed that the experiment was concluded.

This data was analyzed through the computation of Pearson correlations and t-tests. Specifically, Pearson correlations were used to determine: (1) the degree to which media literacy affected perception of negative news, (2) the degree to which the participants perceived the influence of the negative news on their approval of the President, (3) the degree to which affiliations and political knowledge influenced negative news perception, and (4) the degree to which liberalism and conservatism affected the approval of President Obama. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to (1) determine whether exposure to negative news actually influenced the participants' perception of the President, and (2) whether there was a significant percentage of inconsistency between presidential favorability and presidential approval. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine (1) whether political knowledge affected the degree to which the public perceives the influence of negative news, (2) differences of President Obama's approval ratings between the Democratic and Republican participants, (3) and whether party affiliation affected the degree to which the participants changed their approval of the President.

4 Important Tables and Results

Output 6

Perception of Amount of Negativity Correlated with Change in Approval of President Obama

		Change in Approval	Negativity in the News Media
Change in Approval	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.253*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.048
	N	64.000	62
Negativity in the News Media	Pearson Correlation	-.253*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.048	
	N	62	62.000

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The above correlation is the foundation and “breakthrough” of my study. It compared the participants’ perception of the amount of negativity about President Obama in the news media with the change in their approval of him. The data suggests that as the participants’ perception of the amount of negativity about President Obama in the news media increases, then the participants’ approval changed less; the reverse is also true ($r = -.253$, $p = .048$). The r^2 value of .06 asserts that the amount of negativity in the news media is responsible for about 6% of the change in approval ratings. This data seems to clearly support the notion of negative news habituation.

Output 11

Perception of Negative News Influence Correlated with Change in Approval of President Obama

		Perception of Negative News Influence	Change in Approval
Perception of Negative News Influence	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.320*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.014
	N	59.000	59
Change in Approval	Pearson Correlation	-.320*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	
	N	59	63.000

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In addition to the aforementioned results of this study's hypotheses, I conducted an additional Pearson correlation to gauge the reliability of the participants' perception of the influence of negative news (see Output 11). The results were startling. I discovered that the degree to which the respondents perceived the influence of the negative news on their approval of the President was largely incorrect. As perception of the influence of the negative news increased, the true change in approval actually decreased ($r = -.320$, $p = .014$).

These findings are perhaps one of the most important of the study. The results suggest that the public is largely unaware of the influence the negative news is actually having on them. The fact that the students changed their approval more when they believed they were changing it less can perhaps be a token of the significant effect of the news media and its ability to sway public opinion.

Output 4

Perception of Influence of Negative News Correlated with Amount of Television News Watched Daily

		Perception of Influence of Negative News	Amount of Television News Watched Daily
Perception of Influence of Negative News	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.347**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	103.000	103
Amount of Television News Watched Daily	Pearson Correlation	-.347**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	103	104.000

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The next hypothesis tested was “Habituation and public counter-reaction will decrease the degree to which the public is influenced by the news media.” Through a Pearson correlation (see Output 4), I discovered that the degree to which the participants perceived the influence of the negative news on their approval of the President was largely influenced by the amount of television news they watched daily ($r = -.347$, $p = .000$). The r^2 value is .12, which suggests that the amount of television news watched by the participants accounts for about 12% of their perceived influence of the negative news.

This data suggests that people with higher “media literacy” (those who watch more television news) tend to be less influenced by negative news in the media, while those with low “media literacy” tend to be influenced more by negative news in the media. This finding is upheld by previous literature, which also suggests that media influence is largely dependent upon the amount of television news watched. These results also make realistic sense because people who watch a high level of news will be habituated to negative news, and would thus feel less influenced by it. On the other hand, those who watch only some or no news will not be habituated to the negative news, and would thus be impacted to a greater degree. As the previous literature and my hypotheses suggest, this is a classic case of negative news habituation.

Output 5

Perception of Influence of Negative News and Political Knowledge

	Political Knowledge	N	Mean	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)
Perception of Influence of Negative News	High	47	2.26	-.566	.031
	Low	56	2.82		

The next independent samples t-test (see Output 5) supports the previous findings by analyzing the effect of political knowledge on the participants' perceived influence of the negative news. Those who were classified as having high political knowledge (index political knowledge score over 8) had a mean perception of influence score of 2.26, while those with low political knowledge (index political knowledge score below 8) had a mean value perception of influence of 2.82. The difference between these means is statistically significant ($p=.031$). The null hypothesis is thus rejected.

This data asserts that those with high political knowledge are less likely to perceive the media as an influence on their approval of President Obama, while those with low political knowledge are more likely to perceive an influence. This is strikingly similar to the results presented above. In fact, there is a probable relationship between the two. As the amount of television news watched by the participants increased, then so should their political knowledge. With this increased political knowledge, they are less likely to perceive that negative news had an influence on their approval of the President. This political knowledge, in effect, could perhaps act as a bulwark against the multitude of negative news in the media. With increased political knowledge, the public is more habituated to the negative news in the media.

5 Conclusions and Suggestions

Heretofore, the long-held general belief of a simple correlation between negative news and public approval of the President of the United States permeated American society. The study concludes that this consensus is in dire need of rethinking and reform. It has become clear that presidential approval is not a simple statistic, but rather a complex equation,

riddled with hidden influences, political biases and knowledge, negativity, and public counter-reactions. As negativity about the president increases, therefore, it is no longer safe to say that his approval will decrease.

The study has concluded that those with higher levels of political knowledge and “media literacy” tend to be influenced less by negative news in the media. This particular finding is of the utmost importance. In future election campaigns, for example, political campaign managers might choose to target a less media literate audience, such as those watching comedy or reality TV shows, and exploit their lack of knowledge. These so-called “media illiterates” would, according to the present study, change their perceptions of the candidate more than would somebody watching a news channel, such as CNN; therefore, the campaign would save vital resources, time, and money by targeting this less-knowledgeable audience, instead of attempting to change the hardened beliefs of those with high levels of knowledge in politics and news.

In addition, the study expanded the previous perception of the impact of party affiliation of public approval of the President. I concluded that in addition to the adult population, even high school students are influenced by their party affiliations and their liberal or conservative ideologies. Previous studies simply neglected the study of high school students, possibly due to the fact that they are not of voting age. This idea, however, is flawed and in need of rethinking. High school students are among the great political catalysts in this country, and understanding their political ideas is not only beneficial, but essential. If a political candidate can understand the political leanings of high school students, he can cater to a certain audience to provoke change from below, instead of simply from above.

In closing, it is necessary to note a rather alarming finding in the study, and a possible source of future investigation. These results have revealed that high school students (even in this high-achieving, affluent neighborhood) are largely ignorant of the political world around them. With only a handful of participants receiving a passing grade on a rather straightforward quiz on American politics, questions must be asked as to why the students of this generation are unaware and uninformed. What has gone wrong with American education when only about 10% of high school students in a top-rated public school could select from a list the leading Republican in the House of Representatives? What has gone

wrong when less than 20% of these students know whether President Obama has increased or decreased the number of American troops in Afghanistan? This knowledge gap must not be ignored. This lack of knowledge must be researched and evaluated, and we must receive answers. These are not simply numbers on a graph. They are reality, they are startling, and they are the future of America.

With the completion of my year-long study, it has become clear to me that a research project composed of endless analysis and tireless work has within it the potential to be so much more. With all of the tables and all of the statistics, all of the writing and all of the execution, there is an eventual and overarching purpose. Whether it be to illuminate a phenomenon of American society, to find a cure for a dastardly disease, or to understand the complexities of science, we are all working for one unconquerable reason. Have no misgivings. Hold no feelings of doubt. Fear not the mountain of work ahead, for you too will be to the mountaintop.

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