BASIC AND APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, 30:219–229, 2008

ISSN: 0197-3533 print/1532-4834 online
DOI: 10.1080/01973530802375011

Psychology Press
Taylor & Francis Group

Trait-Focused Spin in Presidential Debates: Surviving the Kisses of Death

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In the context of presidential debates, 2 experiments explored the impact of ''trait-focused spin''—messages interpreting potentially negative personality traits in terms of broader, positive frameworks—in comparison to unfocused spin—messages simply predicting positive performance. Of interest were differences between high and low Need for Cognition (NFC) participants in their willingness to accept these messages. In Experiment 1, high NFC participants responded well to trait-focused spin but found unfocused spin unpersuasive. Low NFC participants responded equally well to both. In Experiment 2, high NFC participants again rated the target candidate more positively after trait-focused but not after unfocused spin, whereas low NFC participants did the opposite. Thus trait-focused spin can influence even those suspicious of unfocused spin.

A range of studies shows that perceptions of presidential debates can be affected by information potential voters receive before, during, and after the debates themselves. One line of research has explored the impact of predebate spin (Norton & Goethals, 2004) and showed that viewers' perceptions of debates were strongly influenced by whether they had been led to believe that a candidate would do well or poorly. Viewers given a positive message about a candidate's performance tended to give that candidate more favorable ratings, whereas viewers given a negative message tended to give less generous ratings. In this article, we investigate whether a specific kind of spin, one that attempts to reframe specific negative character traits in a positive way, can be effective in those cases where simple spin falls short.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF DEBATES

Perceptions of presidential debates are important because of the role they play in our quadrennial election campaigns. These debates are being watched by increasingly large numbers of people, with an estimated 62.5 million individuals viewing the first debate of 2004 (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004). Although there has always been some skepticism about the educational value of debates, evidence does show that voters learn from them—especially about candidates with whom they are not very familiar (Holbrook, 1999). There is also a strong correlation between a person's view of who won a debate and his or her choice on Election Day (Schrott, 1990; Sears & Chaffee, 1979).

Although our interest is in the impact of predebate spin, many additional variables influence debate perceptions. For example, prior political leanings and attitudes toward the candidates are predictive of final impressions (Sears & Chaffee, 1979; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1984). In a representative study, Fazio and Williams (1986) found high correlations between predebate candidate favorability ratings and postdebate ratings of candidate

performance in a debate from the 1984 election cycle. In fact, the political science literature generally concludes that perceptions of all political actions are strongly influenced by one's initial leanings (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Kinder, 1998). Media reports are also important. For example, Ranney (1983) and Steeper (1978) documented the effect of news stories on perceptions of President Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe in the 1976 debates. Ford had said that Eastern Europe was not under the domination of the Soviet Union. Although this remark did not hurt Ford immediately after the debate, news coverage convinced people that he had made a serious mistake, and he was subsequently perceived to have lost. In addition, a study of the effect of quietly cheering spectators during the third 1992 Bush–Clinton–Perot debate showed that viewers' perceptions are influenced by their peers' reactions (Fein, Goethals, & Kugler, 2007). Clearly then, a range of factors influences perceptions of presidential debates.

THE QUESTION OF AUDIENCE

Although it is clear that both positive and negative spin can have powerful effects, numerous further questions remain about the conditions under which such influence works. Harking back to the classic formulation of Lasswell (1948), who suggested that researchers consider "who says what to whom and with what effect," we can begin to think about how different audiences are affected by different messages under different conditions. In this article we are particularly concerned with how spinners might devise convincing messages when the candidates they support have obvious negative attributes. Examples include John F. Kennedy's inexperience, Bob Dole's aggressiveness, and George W. Bush's inarticulacy.

In each of these cases, a simple positive spin might arouse suspicion. At least with some audiences, all of the glowing predictions in the world could only do so much to counter these candidates' very real problems and limitations. Surely the sophisticated hordes of journalists and commentators would not be easily fooled. One individual difference measure from the persuasion literature, Need for Cognition (NFC), may simulate the likely behavior of these highly motivated and involved individuals. NFC measures the extent to which a person is intrinsically driven to think, separating out "chronic cognizers" from "cognitive misers" (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). It figures prominently in the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986; Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996). People high in NFC are more likely to devote cognitive resources to evaluating persuasive messages. Consequently, they are more likely to employ the central route to persuasion, focusing on message content and resisting peripheral distraction. They are also harder to overtly manipulate. Petty (2001) reviewed the literature and explained that, relative to those with low NFC, people with high NFC are less likely to be influenced by blatant primes and more likely to be influenced by subtle ones.

Based on these findings, our first prediction for the studies presented here is that people who are high in NFC, those who are highly motivated to think carefully, will prove resistant to the effects of simple spin messages, which we hereafter refer to as Unfocused Spin, when those messages seem inconsistent with candidates' negative qualities, whereas their low NFC counterparts will show the usual positive response to these simple messages.

TRAIT-FOCUSED SPIN

For sophisticated and involved high NFC viewers, we propose an alternative approach to predebate spin. These individuals might be more influenced by framings that cast specific, potentially negative, qualities in a favorable light. We call these framings Trait-Focused Spin. They essentially attempt to spin straw into gold. A real-world example of this type of spin is explained in the work of Jamieson and Waldman (2002) on media framing in the 2000 presidential campaign. These researchers discuss how the media created a narrative that provided an interpretive frame for George W. Bush's performance in the 2000 debates. The issue was Bush's vagueness about specific policies. This attribute could be seen as a sign of intellectual shallowness, but it could also be portrayed as part of a particular management style. In the summer before the debates, the Bush campaign promoted their candidate as the MBA president, concerned with the big picture and not trivial details. This depiction created a positive frame. When the press later evaluated Bush's performance in the debates, his vagueness cued memories of his business school background as opposed to inferences about his intelligence.

Chronic cognizers might be engaged by and even enjoy such counterintuitive interpretations. These framings might overcome their skepticism and resistance to simple assertions. This effect would be similar to their more positive response to subtle primes (Petty, 2001). The reasoned nature of the persuasive message sidesteps their defenses. After Trait-Focused Spin they can say, "That performance was an example of his top-down management style; I have no problem with it." In short, Trait-Focused Spin stipulates that Candidate X has a particular, potentially negative trait but that that trait is actually helpful in debates, or more important, in governing. When more discerning high NFC viewers

later see the potentially negative trait in the debate, they will have this more elaborate and reasoned frame to consider as they absorb and interpret it. For them, such a message has more impact. This very advantage, however, could have the reverse effect on cognitive misers. Rather than interpret a complex debate in terms of a sophisticated and perhaps counterintuitive message, they could easily become disinterested. For them, more straightforward assertions would have greater impact, as with more blatant primes.

Thus our second prediction is that Trait-Focused Spin, which explains how a potentially negative trait can be seen in a positive light, will be more influential with high NFC participants than low NFC participants. This prediction contrasts with our earlier prediction, that high NFC participants will be less influenced by Unfocused Spin than low NFC participants.

In the studies that follow we explore the differential effectiveness of Unfocused versus Trait-Focused Spin for individuals varying in their NFC in two experiments on presidential debates. In both experiments unfocused spin and trait-focused conditions are compared to a control condition where no information about the candidates is provided. Furthermore, for additional comparison purposes, and to create a 2×2 factorial design, a "trait" condition is included in which the troublesome trait is mentioned but no spin is offered as to its impact on debate performance. Thus the two factors in each study are Spin (Present or Absent) and Trait (Mentioned or Not Mentioned). We have no clear prediction for the trait mentioned/spin absent conditions. Our discussion of NFC differences suggests that although low NFC participants may not process or be affected by such trait information, high NFC participants might find it intriguing and might think about how it could affect debate performance, one way or another. If the high NFC participants thought about how the trait could enhance debate performance, we would find that both trait mentioned conditions produce more positive debate appraisals for those high versus low in NFC. This seems plausible, and we therefore tentatively predict that high NFC participants will be positively influenced when traits are mentioned, with or without spin, whereas low NFC participants will be relatively less influenced when traits are mentioned.

EXPERIMENT 1

For Experiment 1, we decided to use a 25 minute segment of the 1976 vice presidential debate between Republican Senator Bob Dole and Democratic Senator Walter Mondale. Pilot participants expressed no knowledge of the debate in question and, at best, only passing familiarity with the candidates. Despite its current lack of notoriety, this debate was famous, or perhaps infamous, for Bob Dole's extreme aggressiveness. Even Dole himself has acknowledged his poor performance. When asked their opinion of Dole's performance, pilot participants responded in a manner consistent with the historical consensus, describing Dole as petty, immature, and aggressive. Clearly Dole's aggressiveness is the kind of straw that trait-focused spin might turn into gold.

Prior to watching the tape, participants were given one of four articles purportedly from the *New York Times*. In a control condition, no spin was included in the article. In an unfocused spin condition, the article predicted a Dole victory. In a trait-focused spin condition, the article claimed that Dole's cutting wit and constant attacks would bring him victory. For comparison purposes we also included an aggressive condition in which Dole's aggressiveness was described but no favorable prediction was made. These four conditions formed a 2 (spin: absent or present, i.e., Dole was not or was mentioned as the likely winner) $\times$ 2 (trait: not mentioned or mentioned, i.e., Dole's aggressiveness was not or was reported) design.

We expected, on the basis of pilot data, that both high and low NFC participants in the control condition would have a highly negative view of Dole and his performance. In addition, we expected high NFC participants not to be persuaded in the unfocused spin condition that simply predicts a Dole victory. We predict, however, that they will rate Dole more positively in the trait-focused spin condition, which notes the effectiveness of his aggressive style. As previously noted, it is more difficult to predict the reactions of high NFC participants in the aggressive condition. Simply describing Dole as aggressive may reinforce the reaction seen in the pilot data that Dole is highly obnoxious. But describing him that way might also create a positive frame for his behavior, a frame including the idea that he is strong and active. Thus their reactions in the aggressive condition could be either positive or negative. We were intrigued with the possibility that high NFC persons would respond positively to this trait information, and we tentatively believed that the results would support that possibility.

We further expect that low NFC participants will be positively influenced in the simple unfocused spin condition, as has been found in other studies (Norton & Goethals, 2004) but that they will be not be positively influenced in the more reasoned trait-focused spin or aggressive conditions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 83 undergraduates (34 male, 49 female) participating for either extra credit in introductory

psychology or $8 cash. On a 10-point Likert-type scale, participants were slightly more liberal than conservative ($M = 6.54$, $SD = 1.91$).

Materials

Prior to watching the debate, participants received a "Study Description" and a "*New York Times*" article. The Study Description informed the participants that they were watching a vice presidential debate, gave them some brief biographical information about the candidates (including pictures), and directed them to "read the attached *New York Times* article from the day of the debate and fill out the following questionnaires." The background information was written so as to have as little impact on expectancies as possible. This served as a cover page for the predebate packet, which also included the manipulation article, the predebate questionnaire, and an NFC questionnaire.

The "*New York Times*" article was modified from an actual piece published the day of the debate. It was presented in the format of a Proquest Historical Newspapers printout, including an appropriately grainy picture. In addition to being cut for length, this article was also modified to include the spin manipulation. Each variation included a headline and a suitable supporting paragraph containing a quote from a fictitious senate correspondent.

In the control condition, the headline read, "TV Producer Says Clash Between Vice Presidential Candidates May be 'Liveliest of All'" and said nothing further about Dole or the likely outcome. In the unfocused spin condition the headline read "Senate Watcher: Dole to 'Overwhelm' Mondale," and the article stated, "[Dole] is the more experienced debater and his engaging style will play well with the audience this evening, as has been the case throughout the campaign." In the trait-focused spin condition, the headline read, "Senate Watcher: 'Aggressive' Dole to 'Overwhelm' Mondale" and stated that Dole would be "severely highlighting his differences" with Mondale using his "invective" and "sharp wit" and that this approach would "play well." In the aggressive condition, the headline read, "Senate Watcher: Dole to be 'Aggressive'" and included the description of Dole's aggressiveness from the trait-focused spin condition without adding that Dole's approach would play well.

A predebate questionnaire was created to obtain demographic and political attitudes information. The political attitudes section asked participants for their party affiliation and for ratings of themselves on a 10-point conservative–liberal scale. In addition to questions on those topics, the questionnaire also contained scale items asking about participant expectations regarding overall performance for each candidate and relevant personality traits: aggressiveness, friendliness, and persuasiveness. These last items served as a manipulation check. The 18-item NFC questionnaire was appended after this sheet.

The debate tape used for the study was an edited version of the 1976 vice presidential debate with Bob Dole (R) and Walter Mondale (D). As previously noted, the tape showed the last third of the debate and had a length of about 25 min. It included questions on the power of organized labor, Watergate and the Nixon pardon, and Governor Carter's spending proposals as well as the closing statements.

The first question on the postdebate questionnaire asked participants to indicate their opinion as to who won the debate, Dole or Mondale. Following that, there were 10-point Likert-scale questions for each candidate asking how well they had performed. There was also a series of 9-point Likert scales for various personality traits including effective, friendly, aggressive, strong, arrogant, hostile, petty, rude, and professional.

Procedure

The experiment was run in a classroom-style room with participants reporting to the experiment in groups of 4 to 7. Upon arrival, participants were given a standard consent form. The predebate packet was distributed and the experimenter introduced the study. The experimenter explained, "Since pilot subjects didn't know much about the candidates, pictures of the candidates are on the first page and the second page is a *New York Times* article from the day of the debate." The participants in a given section were often in different conditions; this procedure allowed for more complete randomization and had proved unproblematic in pilot testing.

After the predebate questionnaires were completed, they were collected. Participants were told they were about to watch the debate and were asked to remain silent throughout. The experimenter then left the room, returning just before the tape ended. Upon returning, the experimenter stopped the tape, turned on the lights, and told participants that there was one more questionnaire to complete before they were done. The postdebate questionnaire was then distributed. Participants were thanked and dismissed when this final questionnaire was completed.

Results

It has been observed that spin often influences perceptions of a candidate's opponent as much as those of the target candidate themselves (Norton & Goethals, 2004). For example, spinning the target candidate positively might lower their opponent's ratings as much as it

raised their own. Because we are interested in relative standings, Mondale's scores were subtracted from Dole's on all trait data. Two composite variables were computed from these difference scores. The first was a Likeability composite ($\alpha = .79$) formed by combining the scores for arrogant, hostile, petty, and rude. The second was a Performance composite ($\alpha = .85$) that combined strong, effective, professional, and the rating of overall performance. Participants' NFC scores were computed from the NFC form ($M = 52.30$, $SD = 7.58$).

Party affiliation (43 Democrats, 21 Independents, 12 Republicans, 7 Other) was not significantly related to NFC status and did not appear to interact with any of our independent measures. There was a slight but nonsignificant tendency for viewers to favor the candidate from their own party, consistent with previous research (Fazio & Williams, 1986; Sigelman & Sigelman, 1984).

Manipulation Check

A multiple regression analysis was run on the manipulation check measures using the two manipulated variables (Spin × Trait), NFC , and their interaction terms as predictor variables. The Spin factor reflected whether the article described Dole as the likely winner. The Trait factor indicated whether the newspaper article noted Dole's expected aggressiveness. Dole's expected performance ($\beta = .42$), $t(75) = 4.05$, $p < .001$ (relative to Mondale), was enhanced when the Spin manipulation gave him a favorable forecast. Dole's expected persuasiveness also was higher when the Spin manipulation was included ($\beta = .35$), $t(75) = 3.26$, $p < .001$, but was lower among participants high in NFC ($\beta = -.23$), $t(75) = -2.12$, $p < .05$. Dole's expected level of aggressiveness was significantly enhanced both when the Trait manipulation said he would be aggressive ($\beta = .47$), $t(75) = 5.00$, $p < .001$, and when the Spin manipulation said he would likely win ($\beta = .30$), $t(75) = 3.15$, $p < .01$, though more strongly by the former. Finally, Dole's expected level of Friendliness was diminished when the trait manipulation mentioned his expected aggressiveness ($\beta = -.38$), $t(75) = -3.56$, $p < .001$. All other effects were nonsignificant.

Outcomes

Composites. The same predictor variables were used in regressions for the two composite variables. There were no significant effects on the Likeability composite so it is not discussed further. The Performance composite, however, was significantly influenced by an interaction between NFC and the trait variable ($\beta = .22$), $t(75) = 1.98$, $p = .05$. Follow-up analyses revealed that this was the result of a crossover interaction. In the trait mentioned conditions, NFC had a positive effect on Dole's rating on the Performance Composite ($\beta = .23$), $t(38) = -1.46$, $p = .08$, whereas in the trait not mentioned conditions it had a negative effect ($\beta = -.25$), $t(41) = 1.66$, $p = .05$ (both one-tailed; see Figure 1).

Who-won results. A binary logistic regression was performed on the who-won data using the same predictors as in the previous analyses. Exploratory analyses revealed the Trait factor (B = .83, $SE = .27$), Wald χ^2 (1, $N = 83$) = 9.07, $p < .01$, showing that Dole was evaluated more positively when the trait of aggressiveness was mentioned. This finding was qualified by the expected Trait × NFC interaction (B = .66, $SE = .28$), Wald χ^2 (1, $N = 83$) = 5.67, $p < .05$. These two factors were the only significant predictors, and a model containing them could not be improved by adding any additional factors. Simple effects analyses were conducted looking at the effects of NFC within each pair of trait conditions. In the trait not mentioned conditions, higher levels of NFC were associated with lower probabilities of rating Dole as the winner (B = −1.36, $SE = .57$), Wald χ^2 (1, $N = 40$) = 5.76, $p < .05$. This was not true in the trait mentioned conditions, in which increasing NFC had a nonsignificant but positive effect on the probability of rating Dole as the winner (B = .34, $SE = .33$), Wald χ^2 (1, $N = 43$) = 1.04, $p = .31$. As can be

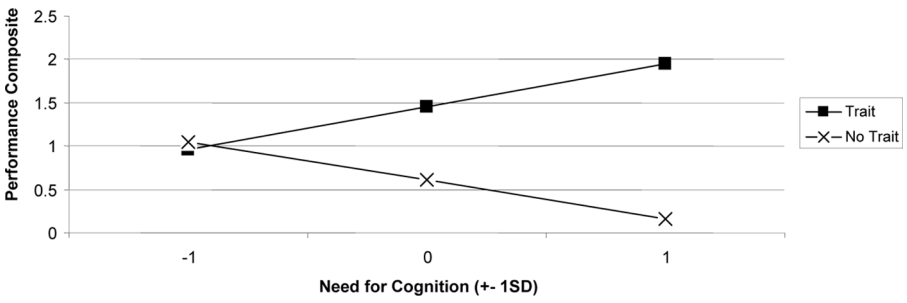

FIGURE 1 The effect of participants' need for cognition and trait spin condition on Dole's standing on the Performance composite (higher numbers indicate greater support for Dole).

seen in Figure 2, high NFC participants are dramatically less likely to say Dole won the debate in the trait not mentioned conditions, whereas low NFC participants are almost equally favorable to Dole regardless of whether the trait is mentioned.

Unfocused spin. In contrast to previous research (Norton & Goethals, 2004), we did not see a clear benefit from unfocused spin, even among low NFC participants. However, support for this prediction is revealed by performing a median split on NFC (51 and below vs. 52 and above). Examining the who-won data in this fashion revealed that the moderate level of support Dole received in the trait not mentioned conditions was driven entirely by low NFC participants in the spin present/trait not mentioned condition, that is, the unfocused spin condition, who judged Dole the winner 50% of the time. In contrast, none of Low NFC participants in the control condition and none of the high NFC participants in either trait not mentioned conditions named Dole as the winner (0% in each condition, different from low NFC unfocused spin at $p < .05$ in all cases).

Discussion

In both the who-won judgments and the performance ratings, a clear pattern emerged. High NFC participants only responded positively to Dole in the trait mentioned conditions. Low NFC participants responded slightly more favorably than high NFC participants when the trait was not mentioned, and the median split on the who-won data suggests that this effect was driven by lows responding positively to unfocused spin.

Although high NFC participants were resistant to unfocused spin naming Dole the likely winner, they were moved by a favorable prediction when the spin was trait-focused, as it was in the trait-focused spin condition. Dole's performance in the debate was bad enough that high NFC participants were not going to let themselves be too easily duped. More detailed and reasoned trait-based spin was necessary to overcome their skepticism. If this effect is consistent in other debates, it would indicate a sizable profit from incorporating trait-focused spin when attempting to influence people who are more thoughtful.

The effects of simply describing Dole as aggressive were dramatic and somewhat surprising. Although one might think that calling attention to this (in the eyes of history) negative trait would lower performance ratings, for high NFC participants doing so had the opposite effect. It led them to evaluate Dole's performance more positively. It appears that merely mentioning the trait had the same effect as spinning it positively. In effect, for high NFC participants, the aggressive condition acted as a trait-focused spin condition. For low NFC participants, mentioning the trait, with or without favorable spin, led to less favorable reactions.

There are several possible mechanisms by which this "aggressive" spin might have worked. One is that labeling Dole's behavior as aggressive incorporated it into a different—and, to judge by the results, more positive—frame from what would otherwise have been the case. When asked to describe Dole's behavior in the debate, pilot participants used starkly negative terms, such as petty, immature, and childish. If, instead of acquiring these harsh overtones, Dole's behavior was understood to reflect the more socially acceptable trait "aggressive"—which also has assertive, active, and generative connotations—that redefinition may help explain the results.

Another related possibility is that the aggressive manipulation constituted forewarning. A reduction in the shock value of Dole's behavior could cushion negative assessments (Cowan, 1995). Because participants in the control condition found Dole's behavior in the debate to be quite negative, giving those participants in the aggressive condition time to brace themselves may have been beneficial.

In terms of practical impact, these two possibilities suggest a useful conclusion. Spinning one's candidate as favored, though helpful if one can do it successfully, is unlikely to go uncontested, and few respectable

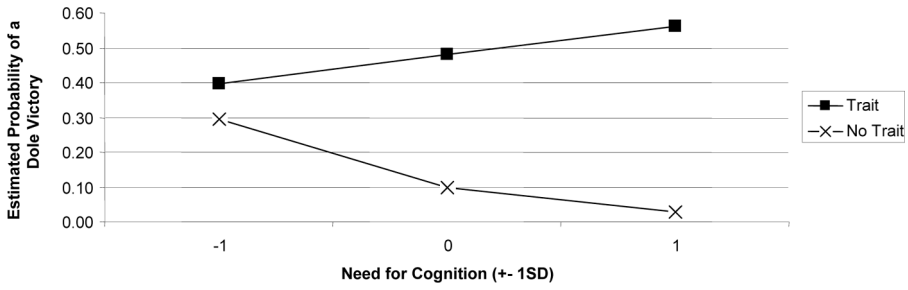

FIGURE 2 The probability that a participant would rate Dole as the debate winner as a function of the participant's Need for Cognition score and their trait spin condition.

newspapers will print a headline like "Dole to Overwhelm Mondale." As was evident in the election of 2000, it is easier for a campaign to attempt to label and frame positively a candidate's potentially negative traits. Even though this framing might still be disputed, it can win more media acceptance—perhaps because of its more informative nature—and thus reach a much larger audience (Jamieson & Waldman, 2002).

EXPERIMENT 2

Any debate experiment has to acknowledge the limitations of using a single debate. One could attempt to explain the results from Experiment 1 in terms of the idiosyncratic features of either the specific debate or the specific spin manipulations. It would be important to ascertain whether the effects of trait-focused spin for low versus high NFC participants can be replicated using another debate, particularly if that debate involves a different trait. The performance selected as well suited to address this concern was that of governor Michael Dukakis versus vice president George H. W. Bush in the second presidential debate of the 1988 cycle.

There can be little question that negative views of Dukakis's performance in the second debate were driven by the exhibition of an unfortunate trait: He was analytical to the point of appearing aloof, detached, and even cold. The segment of the debate used in Experiment 2 contains two questions that illustrate the importance of this trait. The broadcaster asked Dukakis how he felt about widespread perceptions that he "won the first debate on intellect, and yet lost it on heart," going on to clarify "the American public admired your performance, but didn't seem to like you much." Dukakis answered saying "I think I'm a reasonably likable guy." He spent the rest of his response to that question talking about the budget.

The other question was the very first in the debate, the "Kitty" question. "If Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?" It was not an auspicious beginning for Governor Dukakis. He had to react to a very emotionally charged framing of one of his more controversial positions: opposition to the death penalty. Even he believes he flubbed it. Dukakis gave a very analytical answer, briefly questioning deterrent effects of capital punishment before moving back on message to criticize his opponent's handling of the drug war.

The overarching trait that we attempted to assimilate Dukakis's analytical detachment into was "intelligent." A generally positive word that undeniably applies to Dukakis, intelligent can also carry with it the air of detachment, intellectualism, and lack of warmth. This captures both the positive and negative aspects of his performance in the debate and throughout the campaign.

The experiment employed a between-subjects design similar to that of Experiment 1. In the control condition there was no spin for Dukakis. In the unfocused spin condition he was simply described as the likely winner. In the trait-focused spin condition he was described as the likely winner because of his appealing level-headed intelligence. There was also an intelligent condition where Dukakis's intellectual strength was noted but where it was not linked to a prediction that he would win. Manipulations were presented in a fake news article distributed prior to viewing the debate. As in Experiment 1, participants' expectations were measured immediately after the manipulation and their performance and other perceptions were assessed after the debate.

We expected to replicate the results of Experiment 1 with respect to unfocused spin and NFC. That is, consistent with Experiment 1, we expected to see a positive effect of the predictive spin in the unfocused spin condition among low NFC participants but not for those high in NFC. We also expected that describing Dukakis as favored because of his intelligence (trait-focused spin condition) would be very persuasive for high NFC participants but not for those low in NFC. Not knowing exactly how to interpret the results from aggression (spin absent/trait mentioned) condition in Experiment 1, we again tentatively predicted that simply describing Dukakis as intelligent, without saying that that trait worked in his favor, would produce a favorable reaction for high but not low NFC participants. That is, we expected to replicate the Trait æ NFC interaction found in Experiment 1—mentioning Dukakis's intelligence will yield positive responses for high NFC participants but not low NFC participants.

Method

Participants

Participants were 82 undergraduates participating for either for extra credit in introductory psychology or $8 cash.[1] Participants were solicited through e-mail and a sign-up sheet. On a 9-point Likert type scale, participants were slightly more liberal than conservative ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.68$).

Materials

Participants were given a Study Description and a "*New York Times*" article prior to watching the debate. The Study Description informed the participants that

[1]An additional 6 participants reporting extensive knowledge of the debate (above 6 on a 9-point scale) were excluded.

they were watching the second presidential debate of the 1988 cycle and included pictures of the candidates labeled with their 1988 titles. The instructions told participants to "Please read the attached *New York Times* article from the week of the debate and fill out the following questionnaire."

Unlike the article used in the last experiment, no actual piece could be found that was suitable for this debate; all pieces referenced either Bush's lead or the controversy over the creation of the Commission on Presidential Debates. A piece was therefore constructed. It began by announcing that the date for the debate had been set (the World Series had ended early), then discussed format, mentioned issues that might be raised in the debate, and named the moderators. It was presented in the format of a Proquest Historical Newspapers printout.

There were four headlines: "Date Set for Debate, Thursday" (control), "Debate Expert: Dukakis to Triumph" (unfocused spin), "Debate Expert: 'Intelligent' Dukakis to Triumph"' (trait-focused spin), and "Debate Expert: Dukakis to be 'Intelligent"' (intelligent). The control condition contained no further information about Governor Dukakis's expected performance. For the other three conditions, a suitable supporting paragraph was inserted between the discussions of format and possible issues. Once again, the spin was put in the mouth of an impartial observer—in this case, debate expert Michael Norton—who commented on what might be expected in the second debate between the two candidates based on what happened in the first debate. The unfocused spin condition used wording similar to the previous experiment. After a reference to Dukakis looking like what people want in a leader during their first debate, the commentator wrote, "This contrasted favorably with Vice President Bush, who conveyed the opposite impression. We expect to see more of the same tonight, to Dukakis's benefit."

For trait-focused spin, Norton stated that Dukakis appeared smart and that his intelligence would serve him well, and he said that Dukakis is someone who will "not get caught up in the emotions of the moment." He added, "This contrasted favorably with Vice President Bush, who conveyed the opposite impression. The American people are very concerned about these qualities tonight and I expect to see more of the same tonight, to Dukakis's benefit." The Intelligent condition described positive and negative aspects of intelligence: "The American people are going to see a man who is very smart, but also aloof. This contrasts with Vice President Bush, who conveys the opposite impression."

A predebate questionnaire obtained demographic and political attitudes information as well as checks on the manipulations. The manipulation check items were persuasiveness, intelligence, and likeability. The 18-item NFC questionnaire was also included.

The video segment used for the study contained the first 23 min of the second presidential debate of the 1988 election cycle, featuring vice president George H.W. Bush and governor Michael Dukakis. As previously mentioned, Dukakis's intelligent but detached nature was well displayed. Topics ranged from the death penalty, to the drug war, to Dan Quayle's qualifications for vice president, to the budget, taxes, and defense.

The first question on the postdebate questionnaire asked whom the participants believed won the debate, Bush or Dukakis. Following that, there were 9-point Likert scale questions on each candidate asking how well they had performed. There was also a series of 9-point Likert scales for various personality traits, including strong, professional, and presidential, as well as a rating of perceived leadership ability. The final question on this form was a 9-point Likert scale asking, "How much had you heard or read about this debate, or any question in it, prior to today's experiment?"

Procedure

The procedure was the same as in experiment 1.

Results

As was done in Experiment 1, Bush's scores were subtracted from Dukakis's on all performance and trait measures. A Performance composite ($\alpha = .89$) was created from these scores, combining strong (as opposed to weak), professional (as opposed to amateurish), presidential, the rating of how good a leader the candidate would be, and the rating of overall performance. Participants' NFC scores were computed from the NFC form ($M = 47.48$, $SD = 3.26$).[2]

Again, party affiliation (46 Democrats, 17 Independents, 10 Republicans, 9 other) was not significantly related to NFC status and did not appear to interact with any of our independent measures. There was also still the slight but nonsignificant tendency for viewers to favor the candidate of their own party.

Manipulation Check

A multiple regression analysis was run on the manipulation check measures using the two manipulated variables (Spin × Trait), NFC, and their interaction terms as predictor variables. Dukakis's expected performance ($\beta = .29$, $t(74) = 2.59$, $p = .01$ (relative to Bush) was enhanced when the Spin manipulation was positive, as was his expected persuasiveness ($\beta = .40$), $t(74) = 3.69$, $p < .001$. Dukakis's expected level of intelligence was significantly enhanced when the Trait manipulation said

[2]One univariate outlier was removed from all regression analyses.

he would be intelligent ($\beta = .46$), $t(74) = 4.63$, $p < .001$. Finally, Dukakis's expected likeability was enhanced when the Spin manipulation said that he was expected to do well ($\beta = -.32$), $t(74) = 2.93$, $p < .01$. All other effects were nonsignificant.

Outcomes

Performance composite. The same predictor variables were used in a regression on the Performance Composite. As in Experiment 1, the only significant predictor was the interaction between NFC and the trait variable ($\beta = .32$), $t(73) = 2.62$, $p = .01$. Follow-up analyses revealed that this was the result of a crossover interaction. In the trait mentioned conditions, NFC had a positive effect on Dukakis's rating on the Performance Composite ($\beta = .29$), $t(38) = -1.89$, $p = .07$, whereas in the trait not mentioned conditions it had a nonsignificant negative effect ($\beta = -.20$), $t(39) = -1.29$, $p = .20$ (see Figure 3).

Who-won results. A binary logistic regression was performed on the who-won data using the same predictors as the previous analyses. As in Experiment 1, exploratory analyses revealed that the NFC × Trait interaction (B = .88, $SE = .39$), Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 5.05$, $p < .05$, was the only significant predictor and that a model containing it could not be improved by adding any additional factors. Simple effects analyses were conducted looking at the effects of NFC within each pair of trait conditions. In the trait mentioned conditions, increasing NFC had a significant positive effect on the probability of rating Dukakis as the winner (B = .99, $SE = .49$), Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 40) = 4.170$, $p < .05$. In the trait not mentioned conditions, higher levels of NFC were associated with nonsignificantly lower probabilities of rating Dukakis as victorious (B = −.58, $SE = .49$), Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 41) = 1.43$, $p = .23$. As can be seen in Figure 4, high NFC participants are dramatically less likely than low NFC participants to say that Dukakis won the debate in the trait not mentioned conditions, whereas low NFC participants are actually less favorable to Dukakis when the trait is mentioned.

Unfocused spin. In Experiment 1 a median split on NFC scores applied to the who-won data offered some support for the prediction that low NFC participants would be more positively influenced by unfocused spin. In this study, the who-won data examined in this fashion are in the right direction but do not approach significance. However, on the Performance Composite an NFC median split (47 and below vs. 48) and above showed that although high and low NFC participants responded in a similar negative fashion to Dukakis in the control condition, the opinions of high NFC participants were slightly worse in the unfocused spin condition, whereas low NFC participants responded more positively in the unfocused spin condition. Consequently, the low NFC mean was significantly more positive than the high NFC mean in the unfocused spin condition, $t(19) = 2.71$, $p = .01$.

Discussion

The results from Experiment 2 underscore what appears to be a fundamental dynamic in considering a candidate's potentially negative traits: NFC differences. As in Experiment 1, high NFC participants responded very well to mentioning Dukakis's troublesome trait, with or without spinning it as a positive quality. In contrast, low NFC participants showed nonsignificantly *negative* reactions to Dukakis when the trait was mentioned.

As predicted, the very positive response to Dukakis among high NFC participants in the two trait mentioned conditions stands in contrast to their less enthusiastic response in the trait not mentioned (unfocused spin and control) conditions. Discussion of the trait of intelligence yielded positive results for high NFC participants, as we also saw for the trait of aggressiveness in Experiment 1.

That high NFC participants find sufficient cause to respond positively to a discussion of traits while low NFC participants react more negatively under these circumstances may reflect the differential willingness of the two groups to think seriously about a comparatively detailed message. Much more than in Experiment 1,

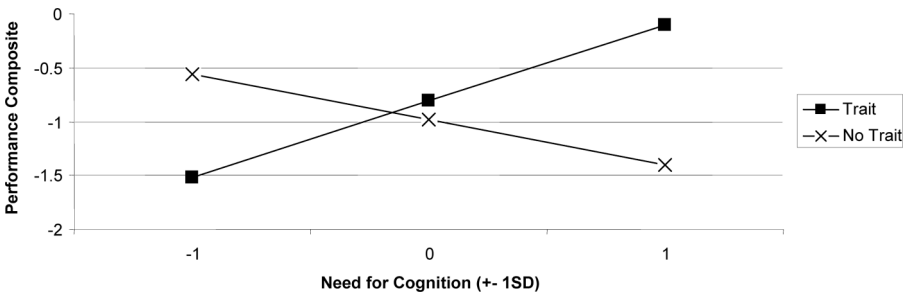

FIGURE 3 The effect of participants' need for cognition and trait spin condition on Dukakis's standing on the Performance composite (higher numbers indicate greater support for Dukakis).

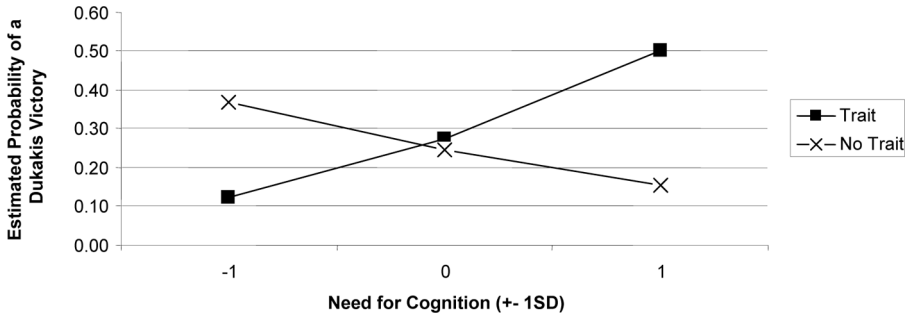

FIGURE 4 The probability that a participant would rate Dukakis as the debate winner as a function of the participant's Need for Cognition score and their trait spin condition.

the manipulation in Experiment 2 was complex and multisided, describing as it did both high intelligence and emotional distance. Our cognitive misers may have lacked the initiative to incorporate such a message into a complex and vivid debate.

The results for the unfocused spin condition were mixed. On the performance measures, but not the who-won data, we find support for the prediction that low NFC but not high NFC participants will respond positively to unfocused spin.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of these two studies tell a largely consistent story of differential responses to predebate messages designed to influence viewers' evaluations of actual debate performance. In both studies, responses to messages that discussed a candidate's potentially negative traits worked better as NFC scores increased, whereas messages that did not mention those traits worked worse as NFC scores increased. That is, high NFC individuals react more positively to reasoned messages about the traits that a candidate brings to a debate, whereas low NFC react more positively to messages that do not discuss those traits.

In both experiments the traits discussed in the predebate messages spoke to potentially troublesome personal qualities clearly shown in the debates themselves—Dole's aggressiveness in the first study and Dukakis's aloof analytic manner in the second. However, the two studies differed in one important way. In the first study the predebate messages in the trait-mentioned conditions discussed an ordinarily negative trait, aggressiveness, whereas in the second they discussed an ordinarily positive trait, intelligence. Yet the results were quite similar. In both studies high NFC participants apparently created a positive frame for the debate performance from the trait information, whereas low NFC participants did not.

Within the conditions in which no trait was mentioned, there was some support for the prediction that unfocused spin would positively influence low NFC individuals but not high NFC individuals. In Experiment 1 that support appeared in the who-won data but not the performance measures, whereas in Experiment 2 the reverse occurred.

These findings have important implications for political psychology. The role of campaign strategists is to make their candidate look good, but this is not always an easy job—candidates have strengths that can be highlighted but also weaknesses that cannot be hidden. Results from the 2 studies reported here suggest clear strategies for working with these weaknesses. Both experiments showed that high NFC participants are willing to be persuaded to incorporate specific potentially negative character traits into positive general schemas. For the Doles and Dukakises of the world, this is wonderful news: Something can be done for them.

A note of warning comes from Experiment 2, in which a message became too elaborate and, though remaining very persuasive to some, seemed to bypass others. Most people pay scant attention to politics (Kinder, 1998), and the less thought required to adopt a spinmasters' view of events the more likely it is that the "cognitive misers" among us will buy in. Added reasoning, however, serves a purpose, because one needs to ensure that the chronic cognizers do not feel they are being manipulated or else they will rebel. If the message is properly constructed, these viewers are willing to devote a fair amount of gray matter to connecting even scattered dots.

Another lesson comes from considering two of the limits of our study. First, it treated all kinds of viewers the same and, second, it did not have any postdebate spin. In actual campaigns, many kinds of spin would be employed and different spin would be presented by different sources to different audiences. This variety allows those inclined to study electoral campaigns at length to be targeted apart from those who are not, providing each group with a suitable level of analysis. Presidential, and even Congressional, campaigns are increasingly expensive affairs and multimillion dollar advertising campaigns are—at least one would expect—more sophisticated than 45-min studies.

Consider this problem also in light of Lazarsfeld's Two-Step Flow model of media messages; Lazarsfeld

and colleagues (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) found that although many people seemed to be under the influence of media messages in presidential campaigns, most would cite friends and colleagues as their sources, not mass media. The Two-Step Flow theory posits the existence of ''opinion leaders,'' people whose views the media directly shapes and who spread their perspectives to their associates. This theory is merely one of many that posit elite-led reasoning (see Kinder, 1998, for a description of others). It is reasonable to suppose—though this is yet untested—that people who might serve as ''opinion leaders'' would also be the people most inclined to think deeply about the campaigns and most able to assimilate complex messages. To bring us back into the media domain, if political commentators are prone to thinking deeply about their specialty, then they should behave like high NFC participants and be perfect candidates for trait-focused spin.

This brings us to postdebate spin. An opinion leader or columnist who believes that Dole won his debate because his aggressiveness was an asset is, most important, a person who believes Dole won. Previous work on postdebate spin (Norton & Goethals, 2004) and conformity effects in debate interpretation (Fein et al., 2007) would suggest that many debate viewers would be susceptible to being led by such a person. It would be interesting to test whether postdebate trait-focused spin from an authority figure is effective for low NFC participants. The aforementioned work from political science and psychology would suggest that it would.

Even Jamieson and Waldman's discussion of the 2000 election was focused on what the shapers of public opinion were saying, not the opinions of the average citizen. The assumption that public views follow from elite interpretations makes perfect sense; the people who weren't paying attention are likely to listen to those who were. Trait-focused spin is aimed at ''chronic cognizers''—or their domain equivalent—and these are precisely the correct targets. although it may not be possible to ''fool all of the people all of the time,'' the real goal is to fool the right people, at the right time. That aim is far more readily attainable.

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