Rather, we focus our comments on pushing this theory to its extremes and inferring that negativity bias is a key factor in accounting for people’s political predispositions (sect. 6, para. 3). We would like to suggest a similarly extreme, yet related, theory that the desire for cognitive coherence provides a broader explanation for much of the research discussed. For example, one line of research that the target article does not discuss is the liberal-conservative life satisfaction gap. Specifically, conservatives tend to be more satisfied with their lives (Napier & Jost 2008; but also see Onraet et al. 2013). If negativity bias is the psychological variable that best distinguishes across ideological lines, it ought to be able to integrate the growing body of work on the liberal–conservative “happiness gap.” This life satisfaction difference has actually been explained by traits such as a positive outlook (Schlenker et al. 2012), which directly contradicts the negativity bias hypothesis. In fact, the basis of the prevailing cognitive–behavioral therapeutic model helps people to recover by getting them to stop focusing on the negative, and generating new cognitions and behaviors that steer them away from the negative. People who wish to be happier go to therapy to reduce their fixation on negative stimuli. Why would people showing a strong tendency to fixate on negative stimuli also report greater satisfaction with life? Why would they be happier?

Models of cognitive coherence (Monroe & Read 2008; Simon et al. 2004), which posit that our attitudes are a product of the simultaneous constraints of existing beliefs, dispositions, and identities can explain both the cited research and a variety of other phenomena related to liberal-conservative differences. The conservative predisposition toward negative emotions such as disgust (Graham et al. 2013; in preparation; Inbar et al. 2012b) and threat sensitivity (Oxley et al. 2008) is clear, and a coherent response to these emotions is to distance ourselves from the sources of disgust (e.g., sexually explicit material) or potential threat (e.g., outgroups). In contrast, liberals may be more willing to suppress their initial emotional reactions and rationalize a dissonant state (Skitka et al. 2002; Wisneski et al. 2009). However, this willingness to live in more dissonant states certainly has hedonic consequences. The liberal mindset could be regarded as contrary to what our natural psychological immune system (Gilbert et al. 1998) does to keep us happy. Indeed, in some of our preliminary data, we find that conservatives who are primed with a threat report that they are better drivers than average, happier, and view themselves more positively, a finding which could either be interpreted as self-deception or as indicative of a functioning psychological immune system (Wojcik et al. 2013).

Coherence explains a variety of other findings that are unaccounted for by negativity bias alone and others (Ly 2011b). Conservatives are more likely to create coherence between their factual and moral beliefs, showing more consistency between their beliefs about the morality and effectiveness of capital punishment (Kesebir et al., under review; Liu & Ditto 2013). This desire for coherence may underlie observed differences in cognitive complexity (Tetlock 1983; Tetlock & Mitchell 1993), a line of research that is orthogonal to negativity bias. Coherence also explains more of our current research where we seek to understand where liberals and conservatives are coming from. The communities where liberals and conservatives live differ in important ways, and these differences lead to widely different life experiences (Bishop 2008; Crail 2000; Motyl et al. 2014; Rentfrow et al. 2008). These diverse experiences contribute to the conflicting narratives that people craft as they try to craft a coherent understanding of their social realities. Conservatives do tend to reside in communities that prioritize safety and security, and in communities with relatively lower crime rates, perhaps in order to encounter fewer negatively biased stimuli than liberals do. In laboratory studies where they are presented with negative stimuli that is uncommon in their daily lives, conservatives may fixate more on that negative, threatening stimuli than liberals do, because they do have a stronger reaction to negative stimuli. Yet we also find that conservatives seek out neighborhoods that have more sports fans, which coheres with having a competitive worldview (Lakoff 2002). If negativity bias were truly the defining feature of conservatism, conservatives should instead shy away from optional competitive situations, like sports, where losses occur half the time and all but one team fails to attain their goal of a championship in each season.

In conclusion, we think that negativity bias accounts for many ideological differences and is an encouraging step forward in thinking about what differentiates liberals from conservatives. At present, this account fits an impressive quantity of the data but a broader theory that considers models of cognitive coherence may be able to explain both negativity bias and seemingly contradictory findings, such as conservative life satisfaction.

Many behavioral tendencies associated with right-leaning (conservative) political ideologies are malleable and unrelated to negativity

doi:10.1017/S0140525X13002889

Christopher Y. Olivola* and Abigail B. Sussman†
*Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, †Booth School of Business, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637.

http://www.chicagobooth.edu/faculty/directory/s/abigail-sussman

Abstract: Recent research has identified several judgment and decision making tendencies associated with right-leaning political ideologies that are difficult (if not impossible) to explain in terms of stable, negative affective appraisals because they (1) are uncorrelated with the negativity of the stimuli being considered, (2) do not reflect divergent affective evaluations, and (3) can be eliminated by superficial manipulations and interventions.

Hibbing et al. propose that variations in political ideology, along the left–right (liberal–conservative) dimension reflect deep-seated, stable, inter-individual differences in physiological and psychological affective responses to negative stimuli. Specifically, they argue that conservatives (those with a right-leaning political orientation) have a negativity bias (they react more strongly to negative stimuli). Hibbing et al. convincingly show that one can overlook much of the counterevidence contained within the psychological research literature. Building on recent findings, we challenge their claim that patterns of behavior moderated by (or correlated with) political orientation are attributable to a stable, affect-based negativity bias among conservatives.

First, a number of behavioral tendencies associated with right-leaning (conservative) political views are uncorrelated with the negativity of the stimuli being considered. For example, right-leaning Americans (i.e., Republicans) are more likely to vote for political candidates who have stereotypically Republican-looking faces, whereas left-leaning U.S. voters (i.e., Democrats) are not influenced by these political facial stereotypes (Olivola et al. 2012). Yet the voting preferences of both Democrats and Republicans are strongly (and positively) predicted by another facial stereotype: how competent the candidates look (Olivola et al. 2012). This pattern of results—Republicans being more influenced by one set of facial features, but equally influenced by another—is difficult to explain within Hibbing et al.’s theoretical framework. It is unlikely that Republican voters react more strongly to “facial-conservatism” than “facial-competence” because the latter is actually a stronger predictor of voters’ preferences (Olivola & Todorov 2010); even among Republican voters (Olivola et al. 2012). As another example, consider political
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consumerism, whereby people deliberately abstain from purchasing products that conflict with their political views (boycotting) and/or deliberately purchase products that accord with their political views (“buying”). Hibbing et al.’s assertion that “[c]onservatives have a negativity bias, whereas liberals do not have a positivity bias” (sect. 6.3, para. 3) implies distinct predictions concerning the tendency for liberals and conservatives to engage in political boycotting (negative product avoidance) versus buying (positive product approach). If conservatives react more negatively (than liberals) to products that are incongruent with their political views then they should be more likely (than liberals) to engage in political boycotting. In contrast, if conservatives are distinguished solely by a negativity bias and liberals do not show a positivity bias then both groups should react just as positively to politically congruent products, and therefore be equally likely to engage in political boycotting. However, the data are inconsistent with these predictions: Conservatives are less or equally likely (than liberals) to engage in political boycotting whereas liberals are more likely (than conservatives) to engage in political boycotting (Katz 2011; Newman & Bartels 2011). Taken together, these examples almost suggest a double-dissociation between politically differentiated behavioral patterns and stimulus negativity.

Second, behavioral tendencies associated with right-leaning (conservative) political views that are correlated with stimulus negativity do not necessarily reflect differences in affective appraisal. For example, we found that people who identify with right-leaning political parties are more likely (than their left-leaning counterparts) to exhibit an irrational aversion to taxes, in the specific sense that they will go to greater lengths to avoid tax-related costs than to avoid equivalent (or larger) financial costs that are unrelated to taxes (Sussman & Olivola 2011). However, this “tax aversion” is driven by differing beliefs about tax usage and not by differing emotional appraisals: left- and right-leaning respondents reported feeling equally angry when their tax dollars were used in ways that they disapproved of, but left-leaning respondents were more likely to believe that their tax dollars were being used in ways that they approved of (Sussman & Olivola 2011). Similarly, although Republicans are less willing to pay a surcharge for emitted carbon dioxide that is framed as a “carbon tax” (vs. “carbon offset”), this tendency is driven by memory retrieval processes and not by affective reactions (Haidt et al. 2010).

Third, behavioral tendencies associated with right-leaning (conservative) political views are too malleable to be the product of deep-seated physiological reflexes. For example, we found that we can decrease (increase) tax aversion among right-leaning participants, simply by asking them to list a few positive (negative) uses of their tax payments (these manipulations did not influence left-leaning participants; Sussman & Olivola 2011). In fact, asking right-leaning participants to consider positive uses of their tax payments eliminated the left-right difference in tax aversion altogether (Sussman & Olivola 2011). Similarly, merely priming political identity (by asking participants which political party and presidential candidate they supported) increased the likelihood that Republicans (but not Democrats) preferred lower-risk (vs. higher-risk) monetary gambles when these were framed as “conservative” (vs. “risk-tolerant”) choice options (Morris et al. 2008).

The above studies demonstrate failures of negativity bias to explain important affective and attitudinal correlates of political ideology, and thus represent empirical challenges to the theory advanced in the target article. More generally, we are skeptical that any single variable or dimension can provide a unifying account of so much complex, malleable, and nebulous as political ideology. Hibbing et al. acknowledge many difficult questions (e.g., “If conservatives are universally more averse to negativity, it would seem that heightened response and attention to the negative should lead to equal amounts of concern over a leveled rainforest and a hostile out-group.” [sect. 6.2, para. 6]). Unfortunately, their attempts to address these issues (e.g., “…it may be the case that conservatives are particularly attuned to threats by an identifiable, malevolent, volitional force such as a bad guy with a gun. Or, perhaps attitudes toward longer term and arguably more amorphous threats such as climate change, pollution, and income inequality are not as connected to negativity biases” [sect. 6.2, para. 6]) lead them to contradict their earlier claims (e.g., “Environmental stimuli that are unexpected, ambiguous, uncertain, or disorderly also appear to generate more response and attention from conservatives than liberals at a variety of levels” [sect. 6, para. 6]). It seems the only way to accommodate existing data is to adopt a definition of “negativity bias” that is so flexible it risks becoming unfalsifiable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Christopher Y. Olivola acknowledges the support of The British Academy and the Royal Society.

Individual differences in political ideology are effects of adaptive error management

doi:10.1017/S0140525X13002690

Michael Bang Petersen and Lene Aarøe
Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/id(d3ff852cb-fdb5-46d7-b58d-0a6813abb3c).html

Abstract: We apply error management theory to the analysis of individual differences in the negativity bias and political ideology. Using principles from evolutionary psychology, we propose a coherent theoretical framework for understanding (1) why individuals differ in their political ideology and (2) the conditions under which these individual differences influence and fail to influence the political choices people make.

Understanding how deep individual differences—such as political ideology—emerge from universal, evolved cognitive biases—such as the negativity bias—is one of the key questions facing the social sciences.

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, cognitive biases—that is, asymmetries between the subjective weights attributed to outcomes in cognitive processes and the probability of the occurrence of the outcomes—are design features that evolved to maximize expected fitness when making decisions under uncertainty (Tooby & Cosmides 1990). Uncertainty implies that errors in identifying situations accurately are possible (Haselton & Nettle 2006; Johnson et al. 2013). By utilizing recurrent statistical relationships in the environment of evolutionary adaptation, cognitive biases maximize fitness by weighting (1) the probability of the occurrence of errors by (2) the fitness consequences of errors if they occurred. Specifically, the negativity bias weights the probability and fitness consequences of erring by failing to identify a situation as involving potential for resource loss (a false negative) relative to the fitness consequences of erring by incorrectly identifying a potentially fitness-enhancing situation as involving potential for resource loss (a false positive). When erring by way of a false negative, the potential for fitness costs is magnified as the individual is off guard. When erring by way of a false positive, individuals shun situations that potentially involve fitness gains. Because false negatives in this case were plausibly associated with greater fitness loss over evolutionary history than false positives (Haselton & Nettle 2006; McDermott et al. 2008), this created a selection pressure for the negativity bias (even if probabilities of the errors were equal). In this perspective, cognitive biases reflect adaptive error management.