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# HOW NEGATIVE INFORMATION AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT SHAPE PROTEST VOTING

RHIANNON LU STRINGER

33 Pages

This study examines the issue of protest voting in American elections. Negative information environments have been shown to significantly shape an individual's propensity to cast a protest vote (i.e. vote for a minor party, write-in candidate, or abstain from voting on a particular race). However, I argue that an individual's trust in government will condition the effect of a negative information environment on the likelihood that he or she will cast a protest vote. Using an online survey experiment conducted in October 2019, I test the hypothesis that individuals with low trust in government will be highly susceptible to negative information about their preferred candidate and will be more likely to protest vote in response than those with high trust in government.

**KEYWORDS:** Protest voting, negative information, trust in government, political efficacy

HOW NEGATIVE INFORMATION AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT SHAPE PROTEST  
VOTING

RHIANNON LU STRINGER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

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HOW NEGATIVE INFORMATION AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT SHAPE PROTEST  
VOTING

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# CHAPTER I: HOW NEGATIVE INFORMATION AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT SHAPE PROTEST VOTING

## **Introduction**

Voting is one of the most studied areas of American Politics. Since Downs (1957) first proposed an economic theory of voting, political scientists have tried to understand why people show up on Election Day, despite this behavior being “irrational.” In two-party dominant systems, such as the US, virtually all individuals that turn out to vote cast their ballots for either the Republican or Democratic candidates (Duverger 1972). However, a non-trivial subset of voters refuses to “play ball.” During a typical presidential election, for instance, between 3-5% of voters will opt to vote for a minor party candidate (Hershey 2017), and around 140,000 people opt for a write-in candidate (Lu and Uhrmacher 2016). It is also not uncommon for individuals to abstain from voting on a particular race entirely. Congressional races and ballot measures have roll-off rates that average around 25%, meaning 25% of people that voted for a candidate for the highest office (the race at the top of the ballot) failed to cast a vote on a particular down ballot race (Milita 2017). This atypical electoral behavior is often referred to as “protest voting,” or is sometimes more colloquially referred to as “throwing away” one’s vote.

Broadly, protest voting is viewed as an outlet for a voter to signal dissatisfaction with the system, available electoral choices, or even a preferred candidate (Bowler and Lanoue 1992; Kselman and Niou 2011). It appears that protest voting intermittently peaks in U.S. elections, reaching an all-time high in the 1992 presidential election when Independent candidate Ross Perot garnered nearly 20% of the popular vote. However, it has received comparatively little scholarly attention, particularly in the American context. Virtually all works that do focus on protest voting in the U.S. seek to explain voters’ broad motivations for doing so, such as

expressing unhappiness with the system (i.e. expressive voting) or a genuine preference for a minor party candidate (i.e. instrumental voting) (Burden 2005). Studies have largely ignored how voters' information environments interact with expressive or instrumental traits to shape one's propensity to cast a protest vote, which is particularly troubling in today's reality of 24 hours news cycles and a focus on negative stories to maximize public attention (Krupnikov 2011).

In this project, I explore the relationship between a negative information environment and the likelihood that an individual will cast a protest vote; that is, that he or she will not vote for a major party candidate. I argue that the influence of negative information about an individual's preferred candidate is condition on his or her level of trust in government. When trust in government is high, negative information about a preferred candidate is discounted. Voters with high trust in government believe in the American democratic system, that the country can survive a couple of "bad apples" (candidates) without spoiling the entire system. On the other hand, when trust in government is low, voters receive a confirmation bias; the system is broken, so it is no surprise to these voters that the candidates running are equally broken or corrupt. This combination of low trust in government and negative information about one's preferred candidate should produce a desire to signal dissatisfaction or an outright refusal to choose between two sub-optimal candidates via casting a protest vote.

I test this hypothesis using two data sources. First, I conduct an original survey experiment using a student sample in October 2019. Respondents are given a hypothetical election scenario where they are exposed to negative information about a candidate that shares their party ID and asked whether they would like to vote for one of the two major party candidates or if they would like to abstain or vote for a non-major party candidate. And second, I



examine nationally representative survey data via the Congressional Cooperative Election Study (CCES) and the American National Election Study (ANES).

### **Who Votes?**

There are three main factors that weigh heavily on an individual's proclivity to vote: party identification, political information, and demographics. Party identification is the primary gauge used to determine whether or not someone is likely to vote and who they will vote for (Bartels 2000; Conover and Feldman 1981; Rahn 1993; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). For example, if someone identifies as Republican, they are likely to vote Republican in an election. Similarly, partisanship (i.e. the strength of one's party identification) is a strong predictor of political activity, including voting (Schattschneider 1960). Party identification has long thought to be a stable and enduring dimension of individuals' political identity (Campbell et al. 1960).

Similarly, political information is widely credited as a major influence on the decision to vote. When individuals have high levels of information about the candidates and the political system overall, they are significantly more likely to get involved and cast their ballots on Election Day (Gomez and Wilson 2001). Closely related to political information is internal efficacy, which captures the extent to which individuals believe that they can understand politics (Craig and Maggionto 1982). When people lack a substantive understanding of politics, they are less likely to vote (Campbell et al. 1960). Most people prefer to hand over decision-making to politicians, due partly to not understanding politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

Demographics are also a powerful predictor of voting. For instance, educational attainment is strongly associated with an increased propensity to vote (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). An individual's socioeconomic status (SES) is also closely linked to voting behavior.

Low SES, in particular, is negatively related to the likelihood of voting (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Rosenstone 1982). Both race and gender also appear to shape political activity, with non-whites and women being, on average, less traditionally participatory than whites or men (Leighley and Nagler 1992).

In sum, the majority of previous works focus exclusively on the issue of who votes, with the implicit assumption that virtually all voters will cast their ballot for one of the two major political parties in America (Duverger 1954; 1972; Hershey 2017). However, each election year, many voters opt to cast what is referred to as a “protest vote.” A protest vote occurs when a vote is cast in any way other than voting for one of the two major parties (Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1984). A protest vote may take the form of a vote for a third or minor party candidate, a write-in candidate, or the decision to abstain from voting entirely on a specific race (despite having shown up to the polls on Election Day). Some protest voting is not intentional, as in the case of roll-off votes. Roll-offs are often common in state and local elections, wherein a voter neglects to vote down a ballot either out of ignorance or simply not caring. Since roll-offs are more common in partisan voters and in smaller elections, I do not consider it to be part of my primary analysis (Bonneau and Loepp 2014).

### **Why (Some) People Protest Vote**

Protest voting is strongly associated with voter frustration or alienation (Herrnson 1997; Hicks 1933; Kselman and Niou 2011; Nash 1959).<sup>1</sup> Individuals that are dissatisfied with their candidate choices or feel like the political system is disconnected from the concerns of everyday Americans are significantly more likely to protest vote (Bowler and Lanoue 1992; Rapoport and

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<sup>1</sup> Political alienation occurs when individuals perceive themselves to be outside observers rather than potential participants in the political system (Aberbach 1969).

Stone 2005). To understand the psychology of protest voting then, we must understand the sources of voter frustration and feelings of alienation from the political system. There are two recurring variables throughout the protest voting literature, each closely linked to voter frustration and alienation: trust in government (or lack thereof) and pervasively negative information environments.

### *Public (Dis)Trust in Government*

Trust in government is defined as the extent to which an individual believes that government can be trusted to “do what’s right” (Hetherington 1998; 1999). Trust in government is famously low in American politics (Pew Research Center 2017).<sup>2</sup> Importantly, trust in government has been found to be a largely stable trait within individuals over time (Peterson and Wrighton 1998). Declining trust over time is thought by some scholars to be a largely generational effect, reflective of younger Americans becoming politically cognizant during turbulent political times (Cook and Gronke 2005; Putnam 2000). While trust in government does fluctuate somewhat year-to-year, it appears to be more reflective of individuals’ “deep-seated orientations toward government” and less of a positive or negative response to current political events (Cook and Gronke 2005).

Moreover, trust in government is strongly linked to protest voting behavior in the U.S. Individuals with low trust in government are significantly more likely to vote for a non-major party candidate or to abstain from voting on specific races (Craig and Maggiato 1981; Donovan, Bowler, and Terrio 2000; Peterson and Wrighton 1998). In short, low levels of trust in

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<sup>2</sup> Though trust in government does have a strong partisan dimension. When Republicans control government, trust in government is significantly higher among Republican voters than among Democratic voters, and vice versa (Pew Research Center 2017; Jerit and Barabas 2012).

government are associated with increased voter frustration and feelings of political alienation (Aberbach 1969; Southwell and Everest 1998).

### *Negative Information Environments*

While trust in government is a relatively stable individual-level trait that is associated with protest voting, the second recurring variable, the presence of a negative information environment, is much more variable year-to-year. The information environment refers to the amount and type of information available to the public in a given year through the mass media (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006). Broadly, information environments can be rich or poor and positive or negative (Kuklinski et al. 2001; Nicholson 2003). With the advent of the 24-hour news cycle, social media, and online social networks, the contemporary information environment is almost always rich, particularly for federal-level election such as congress or the presidency (Milita and Ryan 2019). However, the extent to which it is positive or negative varies considerably between elections (Bennett 1995; Nicholson 2003).

Negative information environments have the potential to encourage protest-voting behavior (Donovan, Bowler, and Terrio 2000). In particular, when individuals encounter negative information about their preferred candidate (close to an election), they are significantly less likely to cast a ballot for said candidate (Krupnikov 2011). Similarly, when voters are confronted with a choice between two candidates that they feel ambivalent toward, they often opt to abstain from voting on that particular race (Krupnikov and Ryan 2017). Intuitively, a negative information environment has the potential to stoke voter frustrations concerning their available electoral choices, which, in turn, makes protest voting more likely.

## **Trust in Government Conditions the Effect of Negative Information**

I argue that trust in government moderates the relationship between the presence of negative information about one's preferred candidate and whether or not an individual casts a protest vote. That is, the effect of negative information is conditional on whether an individual has high trust in government. When trust in government is high, negative information is more likely to be discounted (than when trust is low). Voters who exhibit high trust are likely to believe that the American democratic system is inherently good and that the system can survive a "bad" candidate (i.e. when voters are aware of plausible negative information about a candidate). This means that their vote will be largely unaffected by the presence of negative information on their preferred candidate. They will not become sufficiently frustrated or discouraged so as to cast a protest vote, because they still have faith in the overall system.

*H<sub>1</sub>: When an individual has high trust in government, receiving negative information about his or her preferred candidate will not significantly influence his or her probability of protest voting.*

In contrast, when trust in government is low, negative information about an individual's preferred should have a positive effect on the probability that said individual will cast a vote protest. Voters with low trust in government are likely to believe that "bad" candidates will only make the system worse. When a voter receives negative information about his or her preferred candidate, and has low trust in government, frustration with the available electoral choices is likely to occur.

*H<sub>2</sub>: When an individual has low trust in government, receiving negative information about his or her preferred candidate will increase the probability that he or she will cast a protest vote.*

## Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I use an online survey experiment conducted at Illinois State University in October 2019. A total of 557 undergraduate students completed the survey. In exchange for completing the survey, students received extra credit in a course. Nearly 58% of the sample is comprised of individuals that identify as women. The sample is also highly Democratic, with 53% of respondents identifying as a Democrat (28% are Republican and 13% identify as Independent); the average ideology score is four out of seven, indicating a relatively moderate respondent sample. The median family income is \$80,000-\$89,000.

Respondents are randomly assigned to either a negative information condition or the control condition, followed by a hypothetical election scenario where they are asked to choose between two candidates, one Democrat and the other Republican. Table 1 shows the treatment and control conditions. In the hypothetical election scenario, individuals in the control condition are simply told that there are two candidates, one Democrat and the other Republican. Individuals in the first negative information treatment read the same text plus a statement that the candidate that shares their PID is currently under investigation for tax fraud. And finally, those in the second treatment condition read that the candidate that shares their PID has been recently accused of sexual harassment.

(See Appendix for Table 1).

Immediately following the treatment, respondents are asked how they would vote in this hypothetical election, and are given the options of: vote for the Democrat, vote for the Republican, vote for a third party or write-in candidate, or abstain from voting on this race. I include both a professional and personal negative information treatment to examine the effects of the two major types of negative campaign information (Popkin 1991).

### *Measuring the Dependent Variable: Protest Voting*

An individual is considered to have cast a protest vote if they opted not to vote for a major-party candidate. That is, if a respondent opts to vote for a minor party or write-in candidate or if they wish to abstain from voting on that particular race, they are classified as having cast a protest vote and are assigned a value of “1.” If they voted for either the Democratic or Republican candidate, they are denoted by a score of “0,” indicating that they did not cast a protest vote.

### *Measuring the Independent Variables: Negative Information and Trust in Government*

Individuals assigned to either negative information conditions (professional or personal) are coded as “1,” while those in the control conditions are assigned a value of “0.” To measure trust in government, I ask respondents how often do they trust government to “do what’s right.” Individuals can respond that they “always,” “most of the time,” “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never” trust government to do what’s right. This question appears early in the survey, prior to the experimental treatment.

### *Control Variables*

Notably, I do not randomly assign trust in government (many scholars would argue that this is not possible). Therefore, I include seven control variables. Each variable has an established relationship with both trust in government and voting behavior.

- *Political Efficacy*: Broadly, political efficacy refers to an individual’s sense of political empowerment. Efficacy can be either internal or external (Craig and Maggionto 1992). Internal political efficacy is the extent to which an individual believes that they are capable of understanding the operations of government and the key policy issues of the day. In contrast, external political efficacy captures the extent to which individuals

believe that their political input matters. Individuals with high levels of efficacy are more likely to turnout to vote and tend to have higher trust in government than those with low efficacy (Peterson and Wrighton 1998). To measure external efficacy, I ask individuals about the extent to which they agree with the following statement (using a seven-point ordinal scale): “I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.” To measure internal efficacy, I ask whether people believe that “sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.” These questions are used by Craig and Maggiotto (1992) to measure both types of political efficacy.

- *Race*: Non-whites are significantly more likely to have low trust in government and to experience frustration with the political system (Howell and Fagan 1988). Thus, I include three dummy variables to capture respondent race (Black, Hispanic, and Asian), with white respondents as the omitted category.
- *Party ID*: I also control for an individual's party identification. Independents and third party members are much more likely to refuse to vote for a major party candidate than are those that actually identify as a Democrat or Republican (Hershey 2017). Thus, I include two dummy variables, one denoting whether an individual identifies as an independent and the other indicating whether or not an individual prefers a third party.
- *Ideological Extremism*: An individual's ideological extremism (i.e. the extent to which he or she is “extremely liberal” or “extremely conservative”) is likely to influence both trust in government and the likelihood of protest voting (Powell 1986). I measure ideological extremism by folding a the traditional seven-point ordinal scale, where the minimum



value of “0” denotes ideological moderation and the maximum value of “3” indicates that an individual holds an “extreme” ideology (extremely liberal or extremely conservative).

- *Family Income*: Individuals with high SES tend to feel better represented and thus, on average, should be more trusting in government and less likely to protest vote (Winters and Page 2009). I measure Family Income using a 12-point ordinal scale beginning with “Less than \$10,000/year” and ending with “More than \$150,000/year.”
- *Social Media Use*: Individuals that are high users of social media are likely to be exposed to negative information than those that are either low or non-users (Brooks 2015). Thus, individuals with high social media use may have lower trust in government and are likely to be more frustrated with politics than those with lower social media usage. I first ask respondents how much time they typically spend on social media each day. Individuals that spend “less than one hour” or “one to five hours” are assigned a score of “0” denoting that they do not have high levels of social media use. Individuals that spend “5-10 hours” or “more than 10 hours” are coded “1” to indicate that they have high social media usage.
- *Risk Aversion*: An individual’s risk orientation refers to the extent to which he or she is comfortable taking risks (Levy 1992). In particular, risk aversion, the state where an individual is extremely uncomfortable taking risks, is associated with a desire to minimize uncertainty (Milita, Bunch, and Yeganeh Forthcoming). Thus, when a risk averse individual is confronted with negative information about a candidate that shares their party ID, they should be more likely to protest vote, rather than risk helping to elect a bad candidate.

## *Method*

Because my dependent variable is binary, I use a logit regression to examine the influence of negative information and trust in government on whether or not an individual said they would cast a protest vote in the hypothetical election scenario. While I am able to randomly assign negative information about an individual's preferred candidate, I cannot (and do not) randomly assign an individual's trust in government. Thus, I measure respondents' pre-existing levels of trust in government and include a number of relevant control variables, as noted above.

## **Results**

My hypothesis is that those who have low trust in government respond to negative information about a preferred candidate by protest voting, and vice versa for those with high trust in government. When analyzing the results of my experiment, I found the opposite to be true. Two logit models, presented in Table 2, show that *Trust in Government* exerts a significant influence on the probability of casting a protest vote. A one-unit increase in *Trust in Government* decreases the probability of a voter casting a protest vote when the voter does not receive negative information. Conversely, a one-unit decrease in *Trust in Government* increases the probability of a protest vote. What this means is that, on average, those who have low trust in government are less likely to protest vote, while those with high trust in government are more likely to protest vote. This is exactly the relationship that is expected given past literature. The coefficient for *Negative Information*, however, is not significant. However, this not necessarily mean that the variable has no discernible effect on protest voting, given that *Negative Information* is hypothesized to be conditional on the value of *Trust in Government*.

(See Appendix for Table 2.)

Since the effect of *Negative Information* is hypothesized to be different across high and low values of *Trust in Government*, it is critical to examine the marginal effects. In Figure 1, the effect of receiving the *Negative Information* treatment across all potential values of *Trust in Government* values is illustrated. Neither Hypothesis 1 or 2 is supported by Figure 1. Receiving *Negative Information* has a significant positive effect on the probability of casting a protest vote when *Trust in Government* is high; while those who exhibit low values of *Trust in Government* are no more or less likely to cast a protest vote when they receive *Negative Information* about their preferred candidate. In other words, it appears that for individuals with very low *Trust in Government*, receiving additional negative information about candidates or the political system has a negligible effect on their propensity to protest vote. As *Trust* moves toward its maximum value (“Always trust government to do what’s right”), the positive effect of *Negative Information* on the likelihood of protest voting increases. That is, perhaps individuals with high *Trust* are less likely to want to vote for a candidate they believe will harm or worsen the political system, a system they intrinsically trust. Whereas, individuals with very low *Trust* are unlikely to see the addition of one bad candidate as having a noticeable effect on system that they already have little faith in. While examining marginal effects helps us understand the conditional relationship between *Trust in Government* and *Negative Information* (on an individual’s propensity to protest vote), logit coefficients are not intuitive or innately meaningful. Rather, we are interested in the changes to the *probability* of protest voting. Table 3 contains the predicted probabilities of protest voting under conditions of high and low *Trust in Government* with either the *Negative Information* or control condition.

(See Appendix for Figure 1.)

When *Trust in Government* is low (“Never trust government to do what’s right”), and the individual receives Negative Information about the preferred candidate, he or she has a 57.4% probability of casting a protest vote (95% CI: 43.8%-70.0%). If that same individual were to receive no negative information, they would have a 45.8% probability of protest voting (95% CI: 27.1%-64.7%). Notably, these two confidence intervals overlap, indicating that for respondents with low *Trust in Government*, receiving *Negative Information* about one’s preferred candidate does little to change their propensity to protest vote. However, for individuals with high *Trust in Government*, there is a significant difference in the probability of protest voting across the *Negative Information* condition. High *Trust* individuals in the control condition have an 8.0% probability of not voting for a major party candidate (95% CI: 2.9%-15.5%). Yet, when these individuals are exposed to *Negative Information* about their candidate, their probability of protest voting increases to 37.8% (95% CI: 25.4%-52.3%), a nearly 30-percentage point change in the probability of casting a protest vote.

(See Appendix for Table 3).

#### *Professional Versus Personal Scandal*

I am also interested in seeing whether there is a difference in the responses when *Negative Information* is personal (tax fraud) or professional (sexual harassment). Table 4 replicates the model from the main analysis but stratifies the sample by the type of Negative Information provided. Column 1 contains the results for the *Personal Scandal* model, and Column 2 contains the results from the *Professional Scandal* model. The results are comparable, as each of the key explanatory variables are identically signed.

(See Appendix for Table 4).

Figure 2 shows the marginal effects of receiving *Negative Information* that is either *Personal* or *Professional* in nature. Across both panels in Figure 2, we observe that when *Trust in Government* is low, *Negative Information* has a negligible effect on the likelihood of protest voting. In contrast, when *Trust* is high *Negative Information* has a strong positive effect on the probability of casting a protest vote for both *Personal* and *Professional* scandals. The effect size appears to be slightly larger for the *Personal* scandal than for the *Professional* scandal. However, the end result is comparable across both models.

(See Appendix for Figure 2).

#### *Observational Data: ANES Model*

There is a potential opportunity to replicate the main analysis using observational (rather than experimental) data. The 2016 presidential election was widely described as “overwhelmingly negative” (Sutton 2016). Thus, we can make the argument that in 2016 there was a significant negative information treatment relative to the previous 2012 presidential election. Respondents from 2016 are coded as having received a significant negative information treatment, while those from 2012 are not. In both years, the ANES asks individuals about the extent to which they believe government can be trusted to do what’s right. And they are asked about their vote presidential candidate choice each year.

Individuals claiming to have voted for either the Democratic or Republican nominee are denoted by “0,” indicating that they did not cast a protest vote. While those that voted for a non-major party (third party or write-in) candidate are coded “1,” indicating the presence of a protest vote. It should be noted that this measurement of protest voting does not include individuals that opted to abstain from voting for a presidential candidate. Thus, the analysis admittedly does not capture every individual that protest voted. Table 5 contains the results of a simplified logit

regression where the independent variables are trust in government and negative information.

The results are highly similar to those found in the main experiment. When *Negative Information* is equal to “0,” an increase in *Trust in Government* appears to decrease the likelihood of casting a protest vote. Similarly, when trust is low, receiving *Negative Information* increases the probability of protest voting.

(See Appendix for Table 5).

Figure 3 shows the margins effect of *Negative Information* on the likelihood of protest voting across each level of *Trust in Government*. The results are similar to those in the previous figures. When *Trust* is very low (i.e. “never trust government to do what’s right”), receiving *Negative Information* has a small effect on the probability of protest voting. However, when *Trust* is very high (i.e. “always trust government to do what’s right”), receipt of *Negative Information* is significantly more likely to result in a protest vote.

(See Appendix for Figure 3).

### **Conclusion**

This thesis examines whether trust in government and negative information about one’s preferred candidate influence the probability of casting a protest vote. The question of protest voting is critically under addressed in the voting literature, as most previous works find little to no value in a vote not cast for a major party candidate (Campbell et al 1960; Duverger 1954; 1972; Craig and Maggiotto 1982; Gomez and Wilson 2001; Hershey 2017). In today’s environment, where news is in a twenty-four hour cycle, it has likely become much easier for the average voter to become frustrated, which is the perfect environment for protest voting (Herrnson 1997; Hicks 1933; Kselman and Niou 2011; Nash 1959). A key goal in this research is

to place value in these protest votes, which have been overlooked by much of the primary voting literature in political science.

My argument is that trust in government will moderate the relationship between negative information intake about a voter's preferred candidate and the probability of casting a protest vote. I believed that people with high trust in government will discount negative information they receive about their preferred candidate; thus, said negative information should not affect their decision of whether or not to cast a protest vote in light of negative information about their preferred candidate. High-trust voters likely believe the system of government is fundamentally capable of doing good, and that even if a bad candidate is elected to office, the rest of the government can balance him or her out. Conversely, I argued that those who have low trust in government would be significantly impacted by negative information, which should cause the likelihood of a protest vote to increase. Low-trust voters believe that the government system is not capable of doing what's right, and that a bad candidate will only make things worse.

These hypotheses were tested with an online survey experiment conducted in October of 2019 at Illinois State University. Undergraduate students, who were offered extra credit in exchange for their responses, were randomly assigned to either a negative information condition or a control condition in which no negative or positive information was given apart from the candidate's party ID. Respondents then received a hypothetical election scenario and were asked to choose between two major party candidates (a Democrat and a Republican); they were also given the option to cast a protest vote (i.e. abstain or vote for a non-major party candidate).

The results were the opposite of what was expected. Those who had low trust in government were unaffected by the negative information and voted for their preferred (party) candidate. Those with high trust in government were much more likely to protest vote when they

received the negative information treatment. In hindsight, these results make sense. Those with low trust in government already believe the system is broken, so learning information that reinforces that belief (i.e. negative information about one's preferred candidate) does not change the way they feel. Contrariwise, those with high trust in government are more likely to adversely react when they hear negative information about their preferred candidate, which will cause an increase in the likelihood of a protest vote, since they do not want the negative candidate in office, contributing to the deterioration of a system they trust.

While this study does give value to protest votes that previously would have been written off as entirely irrational or characteristic only of those with low levels of political information, it is not without its limitations. One major limitation of my study is that it is comprised entirely of college students. Because of the time and financial constraint on my study, I was not able to go beyond a student sample. This limits the generalizability of the results and brings into question the external validity of the study. Future work should be done to see if these results can be replicated beyond a student population.

Another major limitation is how simplified the election scenario is. It does not consider that there is often not just one piece of negative information that voters receive, but many negative pieces of information. The design also fails to factor in a candidate's rhetorical response to the negative information (i.e. how it is framed in a damage control campaign). Nor does this study give attention to where the information comes from, be it the candidate, a worker, a family member, or some external source (i.e. how credible is the source?). And lastly, the simple experiment does not allow for the reality that both candidates likely have negative information circulating about them, rather than just the one (or how long or prominently the negative information has been featured in the media). Future studies could better simulate an actual



election atmosphere. For instance, an experiment could be conducted during an actual election and use negative information circulating during the campaign rather than relying on simulated information and hypothetical candidates.

This study, while pointing to new evidence of the cause of protest voting, has many limitations. However, I believe it lays an important groundwork for future researchers. Future works could take the question of ‘why protest vote?’ and posit it in different ways. Do these dynamics only work for bigger high-stakes elections, like for the US Presidency or Congress? Or are the same factors at play in state or local elections? Are trust in government and negative information US specific factors? Or will they apply to elections internationally as well? Even though this design is relatively simple, its simplicity may lend itself to future scholars building off of it and creatively studying this often-overlooked phenomenon even further.

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APPENDIX: TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 1. Negative Information Treatments**

Condition Type	Treatment Wording
Control Condition	Two individuals are running for Congress. One is a Democrat and the other is a Republican.
Negative Information: Professional	Two individuals are running for Congress. One is a Democrat and the other is a Republican. Shortly before the election, negative stories emerge about the <Respondent's PID> candidate. Reputable outlets are reporting that the < Respondent's PID> candidate <b>is under investigation for tax fraud.</b>
Negative Information: Personal	Two individuals are running for Congress. One is a Democrat and the other is a Republican. Shortly before the election, negative stories emerge about the < Respondent's PID> candidate. Reputable outlets are reporting that the < Respondent's PID> candidate <b>has been recently accused of sexual harassment.</b>



**Table 2. The Effect of Negative Candidate Information and Trust in Government on the Probability of Casting a Protest Vote**

<b>DV: Did <i>i</i> Protest Vote?</b>	(1)	(2)
Negative Information	.143 (.794)	.059 (.839)
Trust in Government	-.490** (.224)	-.597** (.243)
Negative Info x Trust	.330 (.270)	.403* (.284)
External Efficacy	-	-.154** (.073)
Internal Efficacy	-	.014 (.064)
Black	-	-.566** (.302)
Hispanic	-	-.353 (.315)
Asian	-	.390 (.592)
Independent	-	.585** (.283)
Third Party	-	1.417** (.478)
Ideological Extremism	-	-.242** (.106)
Family Income	-	-.070** (.031)
High Social Media Use	-	-.101 (.244)
Risk Averse	-	.166** (.073)
Constant	.218 (.648)	.259 (.831)
N	557	557
Log-Likelihood	-354.973	-333.742
LR Chi2	36.600**	79.060**

*Note:* Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.  
 \*\* denotes  $p < .05$  (one tailed test), \* denotes  $p < .10$  (one tailed test)

**Table 3. Predicted Probability of Protest Voting**

	<b>Negative Information</b>	<b>No Negative Information</b>
<b>Low Trust in Government</b>	57.4% (43.8%-70.0%)	45.8% (27.1%-64.7%)
<b>High Trust in Government</b>	37.8% (25.4%-52.3%)	8.0% (2.9%-15.5%)

**Table 4. The Effect of Negative Candidate Information and Trust in Government on the Probability of Casting a Protest Vote (Personal vs. Professional Scandal)**

<b>DV: Did <i>i</i> Protest Vote?</b>	<b>Personal Scandal</b>	<b>Professional Scandal</b>
Negative Information	.140 (.990)	-.178 (.989)
Trust in Government	-.550** (.249)	-.643** (.254)
Negative Info x Trust	.456* (.331)	.434* (.226)
External Efficacy	.104 (.093)	.185** (.097)
Internal Efficacy	-.012 (.069)	-.020 (.070)
Black	-.260 (.392)	-.503* (.389)
Hispanic	-.293 (.400)	-.218 (.443)
Asian	1.124* (.725)	-.519 (.815)
Independent	1.025** (.386)	.603** (.348)
Third Party	1.533** (.564)	1.645** (.637)
Ideological Extremism	-.182* (.133)	-.476** (.139)
Family Income	-.028 (.040)	-.088** (.042)
High Social Media Use	-.152 (.306)	-.165 (.325)
Risk Averse	.214** (.093)	.169** (.093)
Constant	-.417 (.921)	.688 (.939)
N	372	372
Log-Likelihood	-212.30	-202.80
LR Chi2	70.09**	63.70**

*Note:* Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\*\* denotes  $p < .05$  (one tailed test), \* denotes  $p < .10$  (one tailed test)

**Table 5. ANES Data**

**DV: Did *i* Protest Vote?**

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Negative Information	.63** (.29)
Trust in Government	-.51** (.19)
Negative Info x Trust	.37** (.21)
Constant	-2.96** (.26)

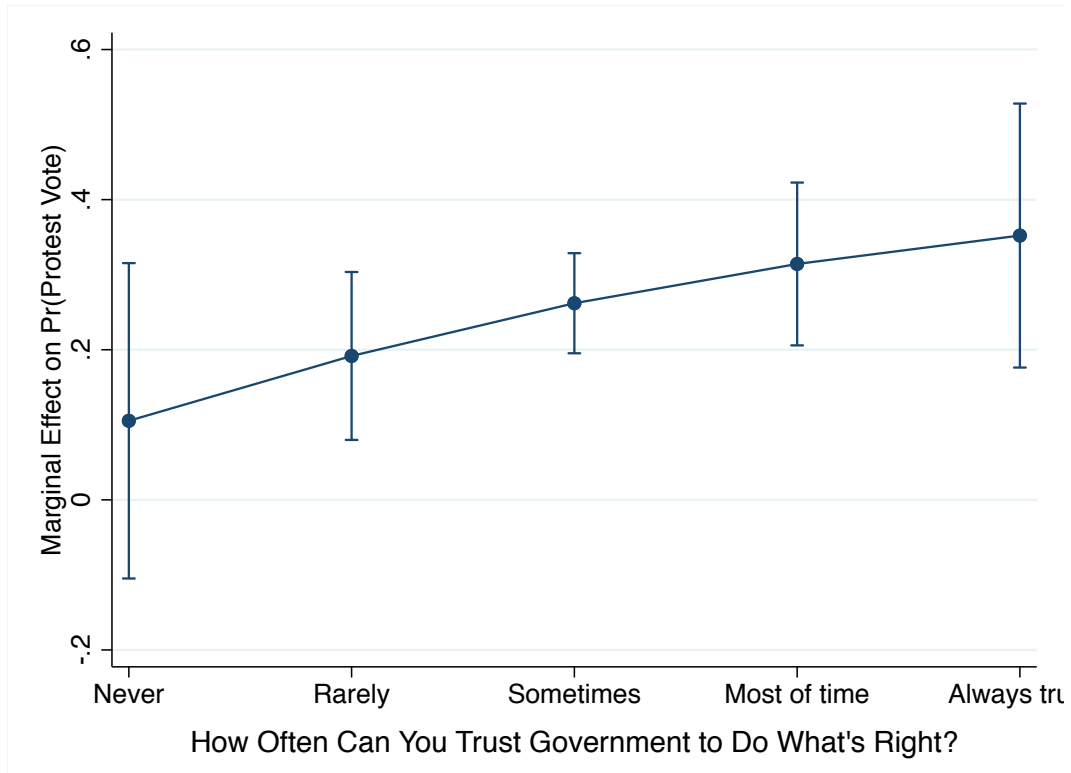
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N	4,586
Log-Likelihood	-908.65
LR Chi2	49.86**

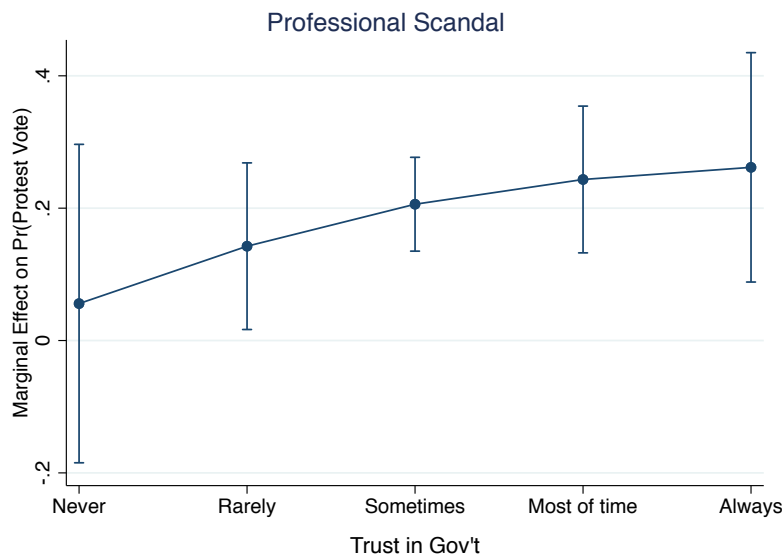
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*Note:* Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

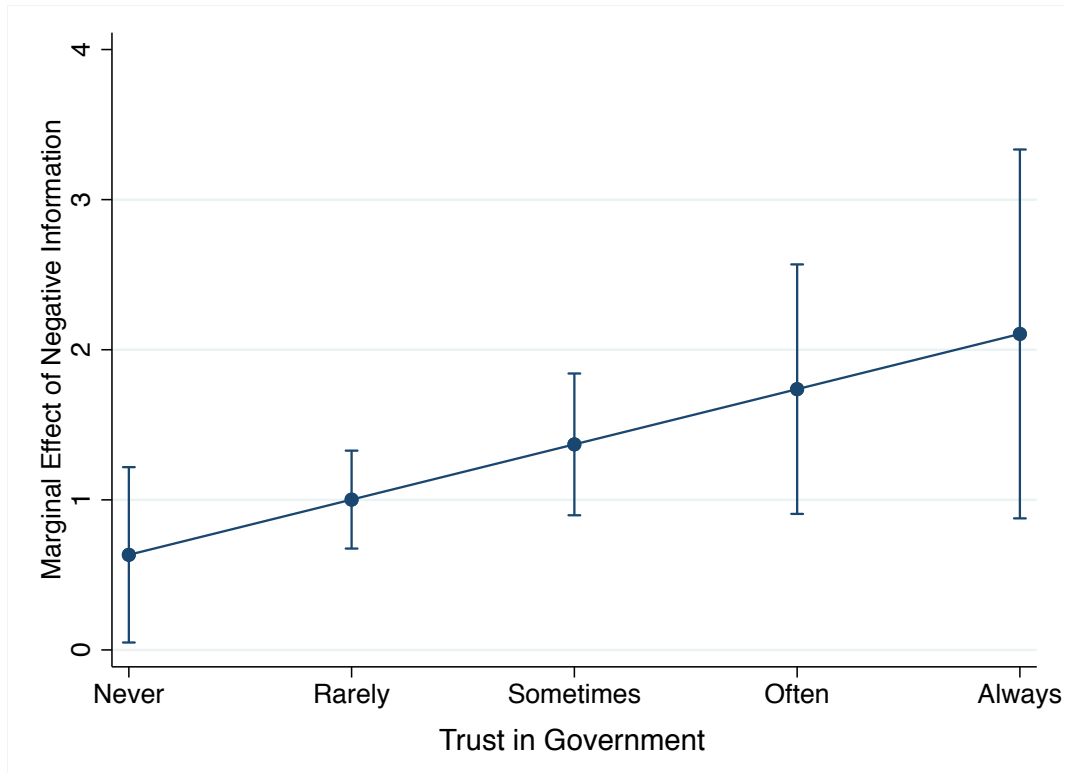
\*\* denotes  $p < .05$  (one tailed test), \* denotes  $p < .10$  (one tailed test)



**Figure 1. Marginal Effect of Receiving Negative Candidate Information on the Probability of Casting a Protest Vote**



**Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Receiving Negative Information Candidate Information on the Probability of Casting a Protest Vote (Personal vs. Professional Scandal)**



**Figure 3. Marginal Effect of Receiving Negative Candidate Information on the Probability of Casting a Protest Vote (ANES Data)**