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It's Hard to Shake a Bad Reputation

As the Republican and Democratic national conventions draw near, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton find themselves among the most disliked presidential candidates in U.S. history. Americans have registered their negative views for the candidates in poll after poll, and their dissatisfaction runs deep. Why is the dislike for the leading presidential candidates so widespread? And is it possible to change voters' opinions?

While it may be tempting to point to the polarization of American politics as the answer, we think that more fundamental elements of human judgment are also at work. Political candidates often have well-known pasts composed of what constituents might perceive as both admirable actions and bad behavior. Our research suggests that people view these "mixed bags" in a systematic way: A bad reputation comes from doing bad deeds. A good reputation, in contrast, requires not only doing good deeds, but also *not* doing bad deeds.

In [a study](#) published in the journal *Social Cognition*, we explore this question of a "moral tipping point" and present evidence that people tend to judge immoral behaviors harshly and judge moral behaviors with skepticism. When judging others, we're much faster to diagnose moral decline than moral improvement.

In a series of controlled experiments, we asked participants, mostly average Americans in their 30s and 40s, to read about and evaluate the actions of fictional people who behaved in either a moral or immoral way. We created the characters and the stories to reflect "small-dose" actions in everyday life.

In one experiment, participants read about Barbara, who works in an office and behaves in a neutral manner—neither overly nice nor overly nasty. By the flip of a coin, some participants read that Barbara began engaging in small nasty behaviors, such as gossiping about others or cutting in line. Other participants read about a different Barbara, who began engaging in equivalently small, nice behaviors, such as holding the door for other people and giving compliments.

Participants could track Barbara for as long as they wanted, until they had "seen enough" to determine a meaningful change in her moral character. The results revealed an asymmetry in the point at which they tipped: people required about four unethical

actions to decide that Barbara had appreciably changed for the worse, but about six equivalently ethical actions to decide that Barbara appreciably changed for the better. This asymmetry proved consistent across a variety of situations, including generous and penny-pinching tipping in restaurants, and giving and taking money from strangers. In another experiment, participants punished a hypothetical high school student after relatively few instances of bad behavior, but required markedly more instances of good behavior to grant the student an equivalent reward.

Understanding how people perceive moral tipping points is important because it illuminates how we as a society create different thresholds for rewarding versus punishing others. If it takes more evidence to accept a change for the better in someone's character than it requires to believe someone has changed for the worse, then equivalent behaviors will warrant punishment while not qualifying for reward.

In everyday life, this stringent threshold can lead us to refuse to give other people a second chance after a negative first impression, and explains why a well-evidenced positive impression can so readily evaporate with a single stumble. It also explains why social stigmas are hard to shed. People who exhibit a few instances of socially unacceptable behavior are quickly labeled as deviant and have to commit disproportionately many more acceptable behaviors to restore their reputation.

As for Trump and Clinton, these findings might help explain their stubbornly high negative ratings. Clinton achieved top levels of public service as first lady, U.S. senator, and secretary of state. Trump supporters tout him as a modern business tycoon. But no matter how many personal selling points they may offer to their constituents, our findings (along with many others in psychological science) suggest that the human mind gives preferential weight to the bad things. After making comments insulting Muslims, Latinos and women, Trump has been unable to fend off charges of racism and sexism. Clinton is dogged by voter mistrust as the other side screams Benghazi and private email servers.

Of course, some of this judgment is fairer than others. But regardless, our findings suggest that both presidential candidates will suffer from their past bad acts no matter how much good they advertise in the present, and therefore face an uphill battle in trying to change their reputations with voters before November.

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