

The Emotional Citizen

September 26, 2012



When US citizens enter the voting booth on November 6 to cast their ballots for the next President of the United States, a complex nexus of factors is likely to impact who they vote for as well as how they arrive at their decision. Right at the top of this list is emotion. Early voting-behavior scholars viewed emotions as biasing factors that need to be eradicated because they lead voters astray from the issues and individuals of importance, but more recent work has steadily tipped the balance from emotions as irrational biases to emotions as fundamental determinants of political attitudes and actions (for reviews, see Brader, Marcus, & Miller, 2011; Groenendyk, 2011; Isbell, Ottati, & Burns, 2006). In fact, this year marks the 30th anniversary of the first publication to consider seriously the important role of affect in determining candidate evaluations (Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982). This work demonstrates that citizens' emotional experiences in response to candidates are a powerful and significant predictor of how they evaluate candidates, even after controlling for citizens' assessments of the candidates along numerous trait dimensions (e.g., honest, weak).

Many studies have since demonstrated that emotional reactions can have a direct impact on candidate evaluations. Negative emotions typically result in unfavorable evaluations and positive emotions typically result in favorable ones (see Brader et al., 2011, for a review). My colleagues and I have demonstrated that affective experiences that are unrelated to politics can impact our evaluations of

candidates even after controlling for powerful variables such as partisanship, ideology, and agreement with the candidate on specific policy issues (Isbell & Wyer, 1999; Ottati & Isbell, 1996). This research underscores the significant and direct impact that emotions experienced in response to political candidates and issues can have on citizens — especially the most partisan and committed citizens, who are most likely to respond affectively to political stimuli.

Emotions not only influence our candidate evaluations directly, they also influence our perceptions of risk and our responses to political policies, our attention to and learning of political information, and our political behavior. Within political science, the emotions most often targeted for study are those that are both high in political relevance and highly arousing, especially the negative experiences of fear/anxiety and anger. Attempts to arouse these emotions during political campaigns date back to the 1800 US presidential race between Jefferson and Adams, and, of course, continue in the present day. In fact, as I was writing the article, I received two emails from a major political party warning me of the impending disaster that awaits if the other party wins the upcoming election. Presumably, these were attempts to arouse fear and/or anger and motivate me to action. But do such attempts work? The answer to this question is not a straightforward one. We certainly know that politics is inherently affective, but the political consequences of emotion may be less well understood.



Perceptions of Risk and Policy Preferences

Citizens who feel angry are more likely to support risky and confrontational policies than those who feel anxious or fearful (Lerner et al., 2003; Nabi, 2003), and they are also less willing to compromise on policy issues (MacKuen et al., 2010). In the weeks following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Jennifer Lerner and her colleagues (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003) primed a nationally representative sample of participants with either anger or fear in response to the attacks. Those primed with anger perceived lower risks of future terrorism (e.g., being hurt in a terrorist attack) and other negative events (e.g., being a victim of a violent crime) than did those primed with fear. Anger-primed participants were also less likely to endorse precautionary actions (e.g., screening mail for suspicious materials) than were fear-primed participants. Likewise, Nabi (2003) found that individuals primed with anger in response to drunk driving were more likely to endorse retributive policies (e.g., institute harsher laws to punish drunk drivers), whereas those primed with fear were more likely to endorse precautionary

ones (e.g., government subsidized taxi service for intoxicated individuals). To the extent that our emotions influence our feelings and beliefs about specific policy issues, emotions will further impact our evaluations of candidates who take positions on such issues.

Political Attention, Learning, and Behavior

Emotions also serve to influence what information individuals attend to, acquire, and use as a basis for their candidate evaluations. For example, fear and anxiety serve to direct individuals' attention to threats and increase careful processing of information in an attempt to manage or resolve a threatening situation (see Brader et al., 2011). Contrary to a longstanding concern that arousing fear in citizens leads to political disengagement and ignorance, research demonstrates that fear and anxiety are associated with increased attention to political information and increased learning (see Brader et al., 2011). Citizens who feel anxious are less likely to rely on prior political convictions such as partisanship and are more likely to be influenced by newly acquired information. Thus, feelings of fear and anxiety tend to arouse the democratic ideal of the rational citizen who carefully considers issue positions and leadership qualities and who processes information in a thoughtful and relatively even-handed manner (MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010). As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that voters who feel anxious are more likely to defect from their political loyalties than are those who do not feel anxious.

Relative to fear, anger has the opposite effect on citizens. Anger tends to decrease attention to the political landscape and increase reliance on partisanship and other political "habits" (MacKuen et al., 2010). Given that anger is elicited in response to threats to one's goals and perceptions of unfairness, feelings of anger are associated with a tendency to be unreceptive to points of view that are inconsistent with one's own. Such a lack of receptivity is associated with a resounding tendency to stay closely aligned with one's political loyalties (MacKuen et al., 2010).

In a laboratory experiment directly comparing the impact of experimentally manipulated anger and fear on information seeking and voting behavior, Michael Parker and I (Parker & Isbell, 2010) found that fearful participants spent more time seeking out information about two hypothetical political candidates from a website than did angry participants. Importantly, fearful participants were more likely to vote for the candidate with whom they agreed with most on the political issues, suggesting that the fearful voter is in fact an informed one. In contrast, angry participants' vote choices were unrelated to their agreement with the candidates on important policies and were instead influenced by the amount of vague, general information (e.g., ideology) that they accessed about each candidate. These results, along with work by others (e.g., Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2008), suggest that it is the worried citizen who is a good citizen, whereas the angry citizen is a relatively ignorant one.

Of course, politics is not all negative, even though it may feel that way toward the end of a campaign. Positive emotions, such as enthusiasm, also play a significant role in many campaigns and can have powerful effects on citizens. Ronald Reagan's 1984 "Morning in America" advertising campaign is a good example. Reagan's ads engendered positive emotions by employing uplifting music accompanied by images of American flags, weddings, and happy families moving into new homes. Barack Obama's 2008 campaign also generated significant positive emotions, which led 61 percent of Democrats surveyed by Gallup in the summer of 2008 to report that they were "more enthusiastic about voting than usual" (Gallup, July 25, 2012). As with other emotional experiences, campaign-generated enthusiasm has political consequences. Enthusiasm, like anger, increases citizens' reliance on political "habits"

(e.g., partisanship) and decreases attention to the political environment (see Brader et al., 2011).

Political Participation

Although enthusiasm, anger, and fear all serve to motivate citizens to become engaged in politics, both enthusiasm and, to an even greater extent, anger are associated with consistently high levels of both “cheap” (i.e., talking to others about voting, wearing a political button) and costly political participation (i.e., attending a political rally, donating money), provided that citizens possess the necessary resources (e.g., skills, interest). Fear, in contrast, is associated with only cheap forms of participation (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011). Thus, while anxious citizens may spend much time gathering and considering information carefully, they are less likely to participate in what may be considered the most influential political acts than are citizens who feel either angry or enthusiastic.

Possible Implications

So what might this all mean for the 2012 election? Emotions seem to be running high this campaign season as the United States struggles with a sluggish economy, a high unemployment rate, concerns about health care, and many other charged issues. The emotions that Democratic and Republican citizens are experiencing are likely somewhat different, though a general sense of concern about the economy certainly seems to permeate many US citizens. To the extent that citizens are feeling anxious, we might expect a more informed electorate this year; however, this may be especially true among Democrats who are less enthusiastic about voting than they were in 2008. Indeed, Democrats may well be reflecting on the promises that Obama made but was unable to deliver, and we might expect more Democrats to defect from their party this year than in 2008, as a recent Gallup poll suggests (August 6, 2012). Republicans, in contrast, may be experiencing particularly heightened levels of anger in response to the current administration as well as a sense of enthusiasm that they have an opportunity to enact change this year. Indeed, Republicans are more enthusiastic about voting this year than they were in 2008, with levels of enthusiasm rising from 35% in 2008 to 51% this past summer (Gallup, July 25, 2012). The effects of enthusiasm and anger are generally similar — they lead citizens to adhere to their party loyalties and increase political participation. Thus, to the extent that Democrats are predominantly anxious and Republicans are predominantly angry or enthusiastic, this year could turn out to be a good one for Republicans. But as we have learned from past elections, it is simply too soon to tell. Indeed, much of the political action may lie with the behavior of independents.