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A Social Approach to Voter Vengeance

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We propose that, in electoral contexts, voters may experience a desire for vengeance, i.e., to “get even” with an entity, such as a political candidate, in response to a perceived wrongdoing. We draw on research from psychology and sociology to develop a theoretical framework for examining factors that may influence the extent to which voters exact revenge on political candidates with their voting behavior. Our experiments show that voters exact revenge on a perpetrator candidate. This process is mediated by damage to self-identity. We also show how making salient a shared affiliation with the perpetrator candidate can attenuate vengeful behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The desire for vengeance has been defined as “the intense, compelling wish or intention to get even, right a wrong, or avenge an injury” (Gabriel & Monaco, 1994). Anecdotal examples of vengeful behavior are abundant in the political arena. Voters may approach an election with vengeful feelings toward a candidate for a variety of reasons. In the current research, we explore how vengeance might prevail when, for example, voting processes consist of multiple rounds of elections. This situation occurs in presidential elections involving primaries, and in pre-screenings based on geographical or departmental criteria. Voters who are upset because of the defeat their favored candidate suffers in an early round might be driven by a desire to get even with the winning primary candidate running in a subsequent round. The purpose of the present research is to investigate the vengeance phenomenon in electoral contexts, and to develop a broadly applicable theoretical framework for understanding the conditions under which individuals seek revenge with their choices. Although we examine aspects of this theory in electoral contexts, the theory has potential applications across several other consumption domains.

What are the factors that lead to the desire for vengeance? Researchers in psychology, sociology, and philosophy converge in supporting damage to self-identity as the main cause of vengeance seeking behavior (Bies and Tripp 1996; Gould, 2000; McCullough et al., 2001; Waldmann, 2001). We draw on the social identity theory to argue that a primary motive for exacting revenge is to restore one’s self-identity. Social identity theory states that in addition to personal identity, the self-concept is also composed of a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). While personal identity consists of idiosyncratic characteristics, social identity consists of group classifications or memberships such as gender, race, political parties, and clubs. As a result of social identification, individuals perceive themselves as belonging to particular groups. A defeat suffered by a group with which one feels strongly affiliated, such as the defeat of one’s favorite sports team or political candidate, can be experienced as damage to one’s own self-identity (Aronson & Cope, 1968). If one’s affiliation with the defeated entity is sufficiently salient, then the damage to one’s self identity may result in a desire to seek revenge on the perpetrator inflicting the damage.

We propose that there are two forms of executing vengeance in an electoral context: (1) voting *against* a candidate, and (2) being delighted when the winning candidate (i.e., the perpetrator) makes serious errors of judgment as a person in power. We argue that in a second round of elections, for example, voters may vote for a less-qualified candidate in order to get even with a “perpetrator” candidate, that is, someone who defeated the favored candidate in a previous or preliminary round of elections. Acting suboptimally in order to get even is not uncommon and has been reported by researchers in organization behavior, behavioral economics and consumer research (see, e.g., Elster 1998; Folkes 1984; Lowenstein 2000; Nasr and Morrin (2003). This is mainly due to the fact that individuals are motivated to maintain preference consistency over time in order to reduce the experience of negative affect (Wells & Iyengar, 2005). Similarly, the main reason for the positive affect when the perpetrator candidate performs poorly while in office is the striving for cognitive consistency (Brehm & Cohen, 1962). Errors by the perpetrator tend to make voters feel that they did the

right thing by not voting for the perpetrator candidate and, hence, reduce their cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Hunt, 1970).

We also propose that the degree of salience of the voter’s affiliation with a perpetrator candidate can play a central role in attenuating vengeful behavior in voting contexts. There are several types of situations in which a person can feel a salient affiliation with the perpetrator. For instance, although George W. Bush had beaten John McCain in the Republican primaries for the 2000 presidency, it is unlikely that supporters of John McCain who strongly associated themselves with the Republican party voted for the opposing Democrat, Al Gore, for the sake of getting even with George W. Bush, even though they might have continued to harbor feelings of vengeance toward Bush. A salient affiliation with the Republican political party is expected in this case to override, in behavioral terms, the previously salient affiliations with individual candidates. We argue that for an affiliation to influence voting behavior, it needs to be salient. Otherwise, it will have little impact on one’s judgment and behavior (Reed, 2002).

Two studies are conducted to test the hypotheses. In both studies, we use hypothetical scenarios in which students are involved in an on-campus two-round voting procedure to elect one student to a university-wide committee. Findings of the first study confirm our expectations that voters can exhibit a desire for vengeance against a political candidate and that some of them, as a result, act vengefully by voting for a less qualified candidate in a second round of voting. Study 1 also shows how damage to self-identity mediates this process, and how vengeful voters feel delight when the elected perpetrator candidate later performs poorly while in office. Study 2 utilizes racial affiliations to show the moderating effect of the salience of affiliation with the perpetrator variable on vengeful voting behavior.

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