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The Emotional Underpinnings of Democracy –
The Impact of Positive and Negative Affect in a Political
Campaign in Switzerland

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The Emotional Underpinnings of Democracy – The Impact of Positive and Negative Affect in a Political Campaign in Switzerland

Abstract

The present study examines the impact of positive and negative emotions on campaign involvement, media use, political attitudes, and political participation. Drawing on results from a representative survey ($N = 500$) in Switzerland, this study was conducted in the beginning of the campaign on the tightening of the asylum law. The results demonstrate that when voters experience negative affect toward asylum seekers their campaign involvement and TV use increase. In contrast, positive affect is not related to campaign involvement or media use. However, positive and negative affects are significant predictors of voters' attitudes toward the asylum law. Finally, positive and negative affects as summary emotional experiences do not predict political participation, but specific negative emotions do. For instance, anger enhances political participation and fear weakens political participation.

In the traditional view of political decision making and judgment, emotions are considered erratic and sometimes even dangerous responses to political life (see for an overview, Marcus, 1991). However, in more than three decades, political scientists (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000), communication scholars (Kaid, 2004; Dillard, & Wilson, 1993), sociologists (Richards, 2004), and psychologists (Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Glaser & Salovey, 1998) have revived and rehabilitated the role of emotions for the study of political life.

More specifically, content-analytic studies show that political actors rely heavily on emotional appeals in campaigns (Kaid, 2004; Marmor-Lavie & Weimann, 2005). Additional research provides compelling evidence that emotional campaign material, such as advertising, TV news or newspaper articles affect voters emotionally (Brader, 2005; Cho, et al., 2003). In particular, recent studies have continuously demonstrated that emotional reactions are likely to influence campaign involvement and learning (Brader, 2005; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993), political concern (Takeshita, 2006), media use (Cho, et al., 2003), and political preferences (Isbell & Ottati, 2002; Ottati et al., 2002; Sotirovic, 2001) in meaningful ways.

Marcus and colleagues (1993; 2000) were among the first researchers who emphasized the guiding role of emotions for political behavior. These scholars argued that emotions have an important adaptive function. They distinguished between enthusiasm as a positive emotion and anxiety as a negative emotion. These emotions function as markers of interdependent emotion systems. Positive affect as a reaction of the disposition system indicates that the environment is safe and that the individual does not have to take any action. As a consequence, individuals rely on routines and learned behavior. Negative affect or anxiety as a reaction of the surveillance system however, indicates a possible threat in the environment. In this situation, negative affect shifts the attention of individuals to the threatening event and prepares subjects for possible action. These assumptions have been shown to hold true in political life as well. As several studies indicate, anxiety increases the involvement in political campaigns, thus enhancing political learning (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993). Conversely, enthusiasm as a positive affect does not produce heightened interest in political processes. Instead, enthusiasm makes voters rely on preformed judgments derived from ideology or party affiliation (i.e., political dispositions). Furthermore, enthusiasm but not anxiety influences political preferences directly. However, the latter results stand in contrast to the findings by other authors (e.g., Abelson et al., 1982).

In an independent sample, Abelson and colleagues (1982) investigated the impact of positive and negative affect on the preferences of different political candidates in presidential elections. Similar to the study by Marcus and MacKuen (1993), they measured voter's

preferences toward Carter, Reagan, and Bush. When measuring the emotions toward the candidates, Abelson et al. (1982) relied on some more emotion items. In accordance with the findings by Marcus and MacKuen (1993), their results indicated that positive affect exerts a stronger influence on candidate preferences than negative affect. But in contrast to the study by Marcus and MacKuen (1993), positive affect also had a significantly positive effect on candidate preferences. Given that both studies differ in methodology (e.g., assessment of emotions toward the candidates, differences in control variables, data basis, and data analytic procedures), it is difficult to judge which study can be trusted more. This gap in research prompted us to replicate these studies on the role of positive and negative emotions in political campaigns. Therefore, our first aim is to make a clarifying contribution to the impact of emotions in political campaigns.

The second aim is to extend previous research and to investigate the influence of emotions on the exposure to media information and on active participation. Abelson et al. (1982), as well as later studies have only examined the affective impact on voting preferences (see also Isbell & Ottati, 2002). Additionally, Marcus and MacKuen (1993) have provided compelling evidence that anxious people learn more in the course of the campaign (see also Boyle et al., 2004). But they did not examine on what sources they rely when monitoring their environment. One possible source of learning may be interpersonal communication. But even more important may be the reliance on mass media. In the realm of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Cho et al. (2003) have shown that particularly negative emotions predict news media use. They found that negative emotional reactions in the aftermath of 9/11 enhanced TV use, but not newspaper use. Positive emotions in turn were not related to media use. When affective reactions spur the interest and media use behavior in dramatic real-world events, it can be assumed that this should also apply to political campaigns in general. Therefore, an additional aim of our study is to investigate the impact of positive and negative affect on mass media use, i.e. TV and newspaper use.

Another extension of earlier research refers to the question whether emotions have an impact on political actions. When negative affect raises people's interest in political and social life, it is conceivable that it mobilizes and enhances participation. In contrast, when people experience positive affect, their campaign interest, media use, and participation remain constant. These assumptions have not been tested previously. Although recent studies have demonstrated an affective impact on campaign interest, media use, and attitudes, they did not investigate whether emotions change the participatory behavior. Therefore, apart from the

impact of positive and negative affect on campaign involvement, mass media use, and political attitudes, we will examine the affective influence on political participation.

Hypotheses

In line with previous research conducted by Marcus et al. (2000; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993), in a first hypothesis we assumed that negative affect has a mobilizing influence by enhancing campaign involvement. Conversely, positive affect informs individuals that the environment is safe, and nothing has to be done. Therefore, positive affect should not be related to campaign involvement. When negative affect triggers the surveillance system, consequently, citizens should also be more inclined to monitor the media environment for more information. Positive affect, however, indicates that the environment is safe and nothing has to be done. Therefore, negative affect should produce enhanced mass media use, but positive affect should not (Hypothesis 2).

How do emotions influence political attitudes? With respect to this question, findings from previous studies have produced mixed results. Some results suggest a direct impact of positive but not negative affect on political preferences. In contrast, results by Abelson et al. (1982) demonstrated that both positive and negative affect influence political preferences with the former having a somewhat greater impact. Given that both effects are likely, we refer to the relation between affect and political attitudes as a research question. In this research question, we investigate the impact of positive and negative affect on political attitudes in more detail. Additionally, we test the hypothesis by Marcus and MacKuen (1993) that citizens in a positive mood should rely on preformed ideological preferences when making a judgment on a specific issue. Therefore, in our third hypothesis we expect an interaction of positive affect and party identification. Such an effect should not be obtained for negative affect.

Research to date has not examined the impact of affect on political participation behavior. But given that negative affect increases people's attention and awareness for their political environment, it is also likely that they act accordingly. Emotion research has demonstrated that emotions have the function to prepare individuals for action (Frijda, 1986; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). Therefore, emotions that occur in the realm of a political campaign are likely to prepare voters for possible actions that must be taken. More specifically, we assume that negative affect not only heightens monitoring activity. To the extent that negative affect is mobilizing, political participation should also be strengthened. In contrast,

positive affect is unlikely to predict the level of participation, because for citizens experiencing positive affect, there is no specific need to engage in the political campaign (Hypothesis 4).

Method

Sample and Participants

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a representative survey (CATI) in June 2006. A random-quota sample of five hundred people was drawn in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Only German-speaking Swiss residents took part in the survey. Fifty-three percent were female, and the mean age was 49.25 ($SD = 17.13$). The sample was also representative in terms of the educational degrees of our respondents. The survey dealt with attitudes toward immigrants and a stricter asylum law. The survey was conducted three months before the referendum was held. In this referendum, voters had to decide whether the asylum law should be tightened or not.

Measurement

As independent variables, we assessed positive and negative emotions. Demographics, ideology, party identification, and general interest in politics were included as control variables. Specifically, we measured positive and negative affect similar to the procedures of previous studies (e.g., Abelson et al., 1982; Marcus, & MacKuen, 1993). For the measurement of positive affect, our respondents were asked to what extent they experienced “hope,” “pride,” and “joy” toward asylum seekers. Conversely, for the measurement of negative affect, the items “anger,” “fear,” and “anxiety” were included. Both scales are highly reliable (negative affect: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$; positive affect: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$). By convention, we measured demographics with single items. Political ideology was assessed by a standard single-item measure of left/right ideological self-placement (1 for “left” and 5 for “right”). The single-item measure of partisanship required subjects to indicate what specific party they felt closest to. Additionally, we controlled the general interest in politics of our respondents by asking them to what extent they were generally interested in politics (1 for “very low interest” to 5 for “very high interest”).

As the dependent variables, we assessed participants’ campaign involvement, media use, attitude toward the asylum law, and participation. More specifically, we measured campaign involvement relying on two items. We asked our respondents how important they felt the issue of

asylum law was for them personally and for the Swiss society as a whole. As the responses to both items were highly correlated ($r = .61$), we formed a mean index. Media use was operationalized as the importance (1 for “very low importance” to 5 for “very high importance”) and frequency (1 “very low frequency” to 5 for “very high frequency”) of TV and newspaper use. As frequency and importance of TV and newspaper use were highly correlated ($r = .60$ for TV use and $r = .59$ for newspaper use), we created a mean index for each of the media use variables. To assess respondents’ attitudes, we asked whether they are generally against or in favor of a tightened asylum law (1 for “strongly against” to 5 for “strongly in favor”). A participation index was created from the responses to three answers that asked how often the respondents had recently expressed their personal opinion among friends or in their family, how frequently they had participated in public discussions, and finally, how often they had recently participated in referenda (Cronbach’s alpha = .52). These items are based on standard measures of participation (Barnes, & Kaase, 1979).

Results

For all subsequent analyses, we run hierarchical regressions, entering control variables in the first step and the affect variables in the second step. In the first hypothesis, we assumed that negative affect heightens people’s involvement in the campaign. In contrast, positive affect should promote people to be more passive during the campaign. Table 1 illustrates the results from all regression analyses.

[Insert table 1 about here]

The results support our hypothesis: Negative affect significantly enhances the involvement in the political campaign beyond the effect of the variables that were controlled. In contrast, positive affect is not correlated with campaign-specific involvement. Thus, those people experiencing positive affect do not change their routines and do not pay more attention to political life than usual. This effect accounted for two percent of additional variance in the explanation of campaign involvement. Apart from the influence affect, the best predictor of campaign involvement is sex, education, and ideology: Men follow the political campaign to a higher extent than women do. Additionally, the better educated and the more conservative individuals, as well as those with a higher general interest in politics are more involved in the political campaign.

The second hypothesis refers to the specific campaign media use. We assumed that, in analogy to the first hypothesis, negative affect also results in higher media exposure. When individuals experience negative affect and are more interested in what is going on with respect to an issue, they should use mass media more frequently than individuals experiencing positive affect. This pattern of results is obtained precisely, but only when we look at television as an indicator of media use. As expected, negative affect predicts television use and positive affect does not. The impact of negative affect accounted for one percent in the variance of TV use. So far, our results are in line with our hypothesis. However, the results of newspaper use as a function of positive and negative affect are somewhat different. Contrary to our expectation, negative affect does not predict newspaper use. One explanation may be that newspaper use is more habitual than TV use. Thus, those individuals who routinely read the newspaper might not change their habit of reading, because an additional newspaper may be of little use. For those people who do not use the newspaper, the negative affect experienced during the campaign might not have been so obtrusive that they started reading one. Furthermore, the additional cost of newspaper reading is higher compared to the costs of increasing TV exposure.

As can also be seen in the table, positive affect is not related to both TV and newspaper use. As assumed in our second hypothesis, when people experience positive affect they do not change their media use habits. The same pattern of results has been shown in a study by Cho et al. (2003) in the context of 9/11 terrorist attacks. Negative affect enhances TV use, but not newspaper use. At the same time, positive affect turns out to be unrelated to media use. In sum, this corroborates our findings on the impact of positive and negative affect on media use. In addition to the influence of the emotional factors, we found that people with lower education, with a more conservative ideology, and with a higher general interest in politics show higher TV exposure. Newspaper audiences are somewhat different; older people especially, but also individuals with a higher general interest in politics use the newspaper more frequently.

The third hypothesis refers to the impact of positive and negative affect on the attitude toward the asylum law. According to the studies by Marcus and colleagues (1993), only positive affect should directly affect the attitude of voters, negative affect should not. The findings by Abelson et al. (1982) however, indicate that both positive and negative affect significantly influence political preferences. In order to clarify the relationships among these variables, we regressed the attitude toward the asylum law on positive and negative affect, and controlled the influence of the background variables. As the results show, positive affect significantly predicts the attitude toward the asylum law. Voters who experience positive affect toward asylum seekers

significantly are against tightening the asylum law. Negative affect also predicts the attitude toward the asylum law. Those people experiencing negative affect toward asylum seekers advocate strongly in favor of tightening the law. Thus, these results confirm the results by Abelson et al. (1982) and speak against the findings of Marcus and MacKuen (1993). Interestingly, after the impact of ideology, negative affect is the most important predictor of voters' attitudes toward the asylum law. Together, positive and negative affect accounted for ten percent of additional variance in the attitude toward the asylum law.

Inspired by the study of Marcus and MacKuen (1993), we predicted that positive affect enhances the reliance on party ID when expressing an attitude toward the asylum law. As expected, positive affect enhances the reliance on preformed judgments derived from party ID. In other words, when people experience positive affect, they derive their attitude toward an issue from the position of their preferred party. This effect does not occur for those who experience negative affect. This effect again conforms to our hypothesis.

In the last hypothesis, we assumed that negative affect is associated with heightened participation, but positive affect is not. However, the results disconfirmed our hypothesis. Positive and negative affect are both uncorrelated with participation. However, we found a weakly significant interaction effect of negative affect and party ID on participation. As this effect is a negative one, it suggests that negative affect weakens the impact of party ID on political participation. A similar effect occurred in the study by Marcus and MacKuen (1993), however, this concerned the candidate preference as the outcome. They demonstrated that anxiety weakens the effect of partisanship on candidate preferences. In other words, when experiencing negative affect, voters do not rely on habitual preferences as suggested by partisanship.

One might speculate as to why affect is not related to political participation, when emotions should prepare people for actions. The answer is simple: positive and negative affect are not predecessors of behavioral tendencies, yet specific emotions are. Thus, by aggregating different emotions to form a summary affect-index, we might have masked the impact of specific emotions on political participation. Findings from emotion research indicate that, for example, anger and fear produce completely different action tendencies (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994); while fear causes individuals to prepare for flight, anger in turn, is more engaging and causes people to prepare for attack. Needless to say, the individual must not necessarily perform these action tendencies. Nevertheless, it is likely that action tendencies of specific emotions are mirrored in the responses to our participation measure.

Therefore, when the same regression analysis is conducted relying on single emotional responses (i.e., anger, fear, anxiety, hope, pride, and joy) instead of positive and negative affect, we observe significant emotional influences. First of all, compared to analysis with positive and negative affect, demographic and disposition influences remained the same explaining about 32 percent of the variance. Second and even more important, fear is negatively related to participation ($\beta = -.12, p < .05$), whereas anger predicts participation positively ($\beta = .15, p < .01$). Anxiety was not included because it correlated too highly with fear. In this analysis, specific emotions add three percent ($p < .05$) of additional variance to the model (total $R^2 = .35$). Put differently, the regression model that includes specific emotions has a higher explanatory power than the regression model that contains emotion variables in the form of positive and negative affect. In addition, none of the positive emotions are significantly related to participatory behavior (all β s $< .04$ ns). We examined these influences very carefully by also considering the single emotions in separate analyses. The reason was that high correlations among the emotion variables could have caused multicollinearity. Multicollinearity among variables can produce serious problems in data analysis by biasing estimators. However, we found no indication of serious data analytic problems. All separate analyses substantiate the finding that fear impedes participation, anger enhances participation, and all positive emotions are unrelated to participation.

Thus, these results suggest that analyses with summarized emotion indexes can mask variance components that can otherwise significantly predict political participation. This effect could have occurred as well in the previous regression analyses. Therefore, we checked our results by running all regressions analyses, again substituting specific emotions for positive and negative affect. The results indicate that the affective impact on campaign involvement does not change; again, negative emotions predict campaign interest positively. Positive emotions are not related to campaign involvement. The same holds true for the impact of emotions on TV use. Similar to the first analysis, no specific emotion predicts newspaper use. It appears that the emotion-specific impact only emerges for behavioral outcomes. For the impact on attitudes, the regression model including the specific emotions explained less variance than the model including positive and negative affect. Thus, for the explanation of campaign involvement, media use, and attitudes, the impact of the valence aspect of emotions appears to account for the variance. As the prediction of political participation is concerned, the specific-emotions model performs better in terms of explained variance. In other words, specific emotions enable us to predict behavior better than positive and negative affect as summary emotions do.

Discussion

The present study emphasizes the role that emotions play in political campaigns beyond the influence of control variables. Specifically, we found that negative affect enhances campaign involvement in voters but positive affect does not. This effect is in accordance with previous findings (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993). Also consistent with recent research is the stimulating impact of negative affect on TV use, but not on newspaper exposure (Cho et al., 2003). When people experience negative affect in the course of a campaign, they heighten their TV exposure. TV exposure seems to be the easiest and cheapest way to get information on a political campaign. Additionally, people might think that in using TV they get the latest news. Furthermore, positive and negative affect significantly influences political attitudes in the context of the asylum law campaign. Positive affect produces attitudes that are against the asylum law, while negative affect produces attitudes that are in favor of it. This result might be somewhat contra-intuitive; however, the referendum campaign concerning the law was a movement against the tightening of the law. Consequently, positive emotions toward asylum seekers should be related with an attitude against a stricter law. Conversely, negative affect toward asylum seekers should produce attitudes favoring a stricter law. In sum, for all these outcomes the valence aspect of emotions (i.e. positive versus negative valence) is a sufficient explanatory variable.

Although this result confirms the findings by Abelson and colleagues (1982), it stands in contrast to the findings by Marcus and MacKuen (1993). We can only speculate as to why they did not find a direct impact of negative affect on political attitudes. One reason may be the transformation of their dependent variable, i.e. candidate preference. In contrast to Abelson et al. (1982), they did not investigate the impact of positive and negative affect for each candidate, but they combined preferences for different candidates in a single measure labeled comparative candidate judgments. However, we cannot be conclusive as to whether this transformation of the dependent variable might have caused results different from ours and those of Abelson and colleagues (1982).

The results concerning political participation are somewhat different. These findings suggest that specific emotions and not positive and negative affect are related to political participation. In particular, fear induced disengagement from political life, whereas anger promoted participation in the political process. This speaks to the importance of specific emotions in predicting political outcomes. This also raises the question to what extent previous studies that relied on measures of positive and negative affect, instead of distinct emotions, have underestimated the affective impact on political outcomes. Interestingly, in our study specific

emotions only improved the explanatory power of the regression model predicting political participation. For outcomes such as campaign involvement, media use, and attitudes, positive and negative affect were better predictors. However, given that we only rely on single-item measures of emotions, we should not draw premature conclusions. Future research should address this question in a more sophisticated fashion.

Although the present study provides valuable findings, some qualifications are in order. First of all, the explanatory power of the affect variables is low to moderate, ranging from an incremental R^2 of one percent to ten percent depending on the specific predicted outcome. Compared to previous studies however, this percentage seems to represent the range of the effects of emotions (see for example Boyle et al., 2004; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Ottati et al., 1992). The present study dealt with the impact of emotions as if it were uniform in the whole sample. This assumption may overstate the influence of emotions at least in the general public. Recent research has convincingly demonstrated that individual differences play a major role in susceptibility to emotional influence (see Gohm & Clore, 2000). Therefore, future research needs to specify the conditions on which the emotional impact may be contingent. We should then be able to demonstrate that the impact of emotions is stronger for people who are more prone to these effects due to their personality.

Another shortcoming refers to the issue of causality. We treated affective reactions as independent variables, whereas involvement, media use, attitudes, and participation were treated as dependent variables. But given our reliance on a cross-sectional design, we cannot be sure whether the causal direction is not reverse. For instance, media use might also produce emotional reactions in the audience (Cho et al., 2003). Here, the study by Cho and colleagues (2003) provides some important insights. On the basis of data from a panel study, they demonstrated that the influence is reciprocal. But their result is not conclusive on the relative strength of the effects. Therefore, we are in need of data from longitudinal designs to establish the causal order of effects and the relative strength of variables more consistently.

Caveats aside, the results of our study extend previous research in different ways. The present research continues a line of research that has made an important contribution to our understanding of the role of emotions in political life. In contrast to the prevailing notion that emotions are irrational, as they misguide people in their judgments, our results suggest the contrary: Emotions are useful guides that indicate what is important and what is not; they help voters to make up their minds. However, we are far from having a coherent framework explaining the impact of emotions in political life. To date, we do not really understand when

emotions are an aid and when they are a hindrance to enlightened political decisions or behavior. Also, we know little on the causes of emotional reactions toward attitudinal objects. We at least believe that emotions should not be treated as a distorting force that always biases political judgments that otherwise should be guided by rational principles. Instead, we advocate a unification of the rational and emotional aspects of political behavior in citizens. Consequently, in order to fully portray everyday political reasoning and decision making, both faculties should be given equal weight in upcoming studies.

Appendix

Table 1: *The Impact of Positive and Negative Affect on Campaign Interest, Media Use, Political Attitudes, and Participation*

	Campaign Interest	Media Use TV/ Newspaper	Political Attitude	Political Participation
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Sex	.20**	-.05/-.02	-.06	.01
Age	.09*	.05/.12**	.02	.12**
Education	-.07*	-.11*/.06	-.04	.05
Ideology	.10*	.14**/-.01	.35**	.04
General Political Interest	.11*	.16**/.29**	.02	.52**
Incremental R^2	.09**	.06**/.12**	.25**	.31**
<i>Emotion Variables</i>				
Negative Affect	.11**	.13**/-.04	.24**	.05
Positive Affect	.06	.04/.04	-.18**	.01
Pos. Affect x Party ID	--	--	-.09 ^a	.07
Neg. Affect x Party ID	--	--	.03	-.08*
Incremental R^2	.02*	.01*/.00	.10**	.02*
Total R^2	.11**	.07**/.12**	.35**	.33**

Notes: Entries are standardized regression weights, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

^a The interaction term alone (positive affect x ideology) adds .02* (incremental R^2) to the model. Interaction terms represent multiplicative interactions of variables.

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