

The Emotional Foundations of Democratic Citizenship

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In a democracy, the people rule. Citizens exercise power over government by choosing leaders in elections and, on some occasions, expressing their preferences on matters of policy directly. The quality of democracy therefore depends not only on how well leaders and political institutions respond to the needs and desires of the people, but also how effectively citizens participate in the process of self-government. A growing body of evidence testifies to the important role emotions play in shaping the ability and motivation of citizens to take part in politics. Fear, anger, enthusiasm, and other emotions affect public opinion by altering whether and how citizens pay attention, learn, think through their decisions, and act on their opinions. This chapter surveys this new evidence on the emotional foundations of democratic citizenship.

Emotions and the Performance of Democratic Citizenship

What does democracy require of citizens? The ideal citizen has been variously envisioned as some combination of vigilant, active, independent, open-minded, informed, thoughtful, tolerant, loyal, and courageous.¹ A substantial portion of public opinion scholarship over the past seventy years has focused, implicitly or explicitly, on how well citizens live up to these expectations. The conclusions have been decidedly mixed, with enough evidence to sustain the views of both optimists and pessimists. The tone on balance tips toward the negative, ranging from alarm and disappointment, on one side, to contentment (things are "good enough") on the other side.

We see these mixed results across many aspects of democratic citizenship. Americans pay only scattered attention to politics, though they occasionally become much more engaged for a limited time or on a particular issue. Their knowledge about public affairs is spotty at best, but many seem capable of learning what they need to know under the right conditions. Opinions on political candidates and policy matters typically exhibit an extraordinary—to some observers, a disturbing—level of loyalty to one's social group, nationality, and especially political party. Yet this loyalty is tempered by some measure

of responsiveness to changing circumstances, for example, when governance is lackluster or cherished policies are threatened. Where participation is concerned, some Americans are habitually active while others appear withdrawn from politics entirely, but these general tendencies obscure tremendous fluctuations in participation over time and across situations. All of these conclusions apply not just to Americans, but also to citizens of many democracies around the world.

Scholars, however, have not simply rested on the conclusion that the democratic glass is either half full or half empty. They instead have sought to identify features both of individuals and the political environment that help explain the best and worse in citizen performance. That said, we still know relatively little about the motivations that cause a person to react differently across situations or different people to respond differently to the same situation. Emotions turn out to be such key motivational forces, capable of shaping human decision making and behavior. Until recently, a long-running emphasis on "cognitive" processes in opinion formation meant that emotions received scant attention from public opinion scholars. But the past decade has witnessed a surge in research suggesting that emotions are indeed a potent force guiding both the formation of opinions and decisions to take political action. This chapter illustrates some of what we've learned about the role of emotions in recent years.

Emotional Foundations of Human Behavior

It may be helpful at the outset to define what is meant by "emotion." What we call emotions are, in fact, a complex set of interrelated reactions to our circumstances that can include electro-chemical processes in the brain, changes in autonomic and motor systems (e.g., breathing, heart rate, muscle tension), facial expressions, behavioral impulses, and conscious feelings. In our everyday lives, we often know emotions by our experience of the feeling states that accompany them. Therefore, an overly simplistic but sometimes helpful definition is that they are the processes that generate our feelings. However, it is important to recognize that people experience emotional responses all of the time without being aware of them, without *feeling* the emotional state. Scholars often use the term "affect" when discussing all emotional phenomena, including liking and disliking, pain and pleasure, moods, and emotions. For the remainder of this chapter, my discussion will focus primarily on discrete emotions such as anger, fear, hope, love, shame, sympathy, disgust, and so on. So what is the function of emotions? What purpose do they serve? Emotions are motivational impulses. Our brains monitor the world around us for changes that have relevance for our goals and well-being.² These changes in our environment become signals that trigger an emotional reaction, each of which causes a distinct pattern of changes in our thinking and behavior. Scholars believe emotions evolved as a way to allow reasonably efficient,

differentiated responses to the sorts of situations humans (and many other animals) tend to encounter repeatedly. Thus, emotions enable us to adapt our thinking and bodies rapidly to meet the needs of particular situations.

Consider examples for three emotions. When we make progress toward our goals, we feel enthusiastic and energized to keep doing what we've been doing. When something appears that threatens our well-being, we feel afraid, become more alert and focused on the danger, and shift from reliable habits to active reconsideration of our options. When someone puts obstacles between us and something we want (and feel entitled to), we feel angry and are emboldened to challenge and even punish those who stand in our way. Table 9.1 summarizes the circumstances that give rise to the emotions and their impact on thinking and behavior.

These three emotions, perhaps because they are such common parts of our experiences, have been studied the most, including by scholars of public opinion. The present chapter, therefore, also focuses most heavily on these emotions. These are not, however, the only emotions likely to hold relevance for public opinion, and other emotions have started to receive attention: sadness, shame, pride, and disgust. Sadness, for example, stems from our own failure to achieve goals and especially the loss of something (or someone) valued. It often causes us to withdraw and spend more time reflecting on the details of a situation. Disgust is a reaction to the presence of noxious conditions (e.g., rotting food, bodily excretions) and seems to have evolved to include both physical and moral impurities. It generates a strong desire to purge the offending substance and thereby purify one's environment. Pride and shame are social emotions that arise when we contemplate how others do or might judge us and how well we are living up to the standards of our community. Both emotions motivate us to conform better to the expectations of our group, though pride makes us want to put our behavior on display, while shame makes us want to hide ourselves away. Although these and other emotions have many potential implications for public opinion and political behavior, their political consequences have been the subject of very little research to date. The rest of the chapter thus considers primarily how enthusiasm, fear or anxiety (I will use those terms interchangeably in this chapter) and anger shape particular aspects of citizen performance.

Vigilance and (Selective) Learning about Politics

Emotions help explain why the public pays attention to some issues and events more than others. Because emotions arise from circumstances that are relevant to people, just about any emotion may predict *interest* in a subject. But we expect fear to trigger greater attentiveness beyond what routinely interests a person, because it signals the need to deal with a potential threat to the person's safety or well-being. Moreover, fear does not just make a person more attentive in general, but directs attention selectively toward the threat

Table 9.1 Some Causes and Consequences of Common Emotions

Emotion	Causes	Consequences
Enthusiasm	Progress toward desired goals Expectations for rewards met or exceeded	Motivated to continue pursuing goals Less likely to engage in effortful thinking
Fear/anxiety	Presence of threat to well-being Uncertainty about outcomes	Motivated to escape/remove danger Heightened alertness Attention focused on potential danger
Anger	Obstacles blocking path to goals Undeserved harm inflicted by others	More likely to engage in effortful thinking Open to persuasion Less willing to avoid risks
Sadness	Failure to achieve own goals Loss of something valued	Motivated to withdraw More likely to engage in effortful thinking
Disgust	Presence of noxious contaminants Presence of physical/moral impurity	Motivated to expel contaminant Motivated to avoid contact Inclined to harsh moral judgments
Pride	Recognition of achieving valued goal Recognition of meeting/exceeding standards	Motivated to be expressive Motivated to achieve/enforce standards
Shame	Recognition of failing to meet standards	Motivated to hide (the failure) Motivated to achieve/enforce standards

and ways of removing it. This heightened attention, in turn, creates conditions favorable for increased learning by citizens.

The Influence of Emotions on Political Attention and Engagement

Citizens pay more attention to politics during election campaigns, though their attention waxes and wanes from one election to the next and even over

the course of the term. The court's fluctuating term has been a source of research and interest in the news and emotions re-interventions in this case, while boosts in coverage, other positive seems to citizens participate in appeals in more effortful work and study conducted. The impact than the in a default election more likely political co-distinguishing anger, in the reported feeling in on hope is. Appraisal enthusiasm thing it shall. The emotion presumably are world, most made use of

the course of a single campaign. Emotions contribute to some of these short-term fluctuations. Drawing heavily on data from the American National Election Studies surveys, Marcus and colleagues have conducted extensive research into the impact of emotions on electoral behavior.³ Even when controlling for citizens' long-term levels of engagement with politics, enthusiasm and anxiety about the presidential candidates are both associated with greater interest in the campaign, caring about the election outcome, and attention to the news media.⁴ A more nuanced picture of the short-term effects of these emotions emerges, however, from "panel" surveys in which individuals are re-interviewed at multiple points during the campaign. Such surveys can help researchers isolate changes in emotions, opinions, and political behavior. In this case, Marcus and colleagues found that enthusiasm caused short-term boosts in citizens' expressed levels of interest in and caring about the election, while anxiety produced greater attention to all sources of campaign news coverage except television.⁵

Other survey studies also support the notion that negative emotions have a positive impact on interest and attention to politics. Anxiety, for example, seems to awaken greater interest in election campaigns particularly among citizens high in political efficacy—that is, those who feel competent to participate in politics.⁶ This mirrors decades of research on the effectiveness of fear appeals in public health and safety campaigns, showing that fear appeals are more effective when people perceive the recommended actions as likely to work and themselves as capable of carrying out the recommendations.⁷ In a study conducted during the build up to the 2003 Iraq War, Americans who felt anxiety and anger toward terrorists and Saddam Hussein spent more time thinking about the war, talking about the war, and consuming national news.⁸

The impact of anxiety on thinking and talking, however, was much larger than the impact of anger.

In a departure from the results discussed so far, a study of the 1996 presidential election found that citizens who felt hopeful about the candidates were more likely to watch television coverage of the fall campaign and the summer political conventions of the two major parties.⁹ The researchers in this study distinguished hopefulness from enthusiasm, as well as from anxiety and anger, in their analyses. Most researchers have found that individuals' self-reported feelings of hope and enthusiasm are so highly correlated as to be statistically indistinguishable. Nonetheless, just as colleagues' decision to focus on hope is consistent with appraisal theories of emotion from social psychology. Appraisal theories emphasize hope's conceptual distinctiveness from enthusiasm: hope is oriented toward future and uncertain outcomes, something it shares with the negative emotion of anxiety.¹⁰

The emotions driving interest and attention in the preceding studies presumably are responses to events, messages, and other features of the political world, most of which citizens encounter through mass media. Scholars have made use of experiments to learn more about how such mass-mediated

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communications trigger emotions and in turn influence public opinion. For example, in two companion experiments carried out during a Democratic gubernatorial primary election, I examined how political ads use imagery and music to trigger emotions and thereby influence viewers.¹¹ Ads eliciting enthusiasm stoked viewer interest in the campaign, increasing expressed levels of interest by over twelve percentage points after exposure to a single ad embedded in a news program.¹² Ads eliciting fear increased the inclination to contact campaigns for more information and to watch television news about politics. As Figure 9.1 shows, fear cues caused the percentage of Democrats wanting to contact campaigns for information to rise from 3 percent to 17 percent and the percentage wishing to watch more political news from 41 percent to 60 percent.¹³ Enthusiasm cues (not shown) did boost interest in the news, but had no effect on the desire to contact campaigns. Thus, the impact of emotional advertising appeals parallels the effects of feelings toward candidates as uncovered by Marcus and colleagues: enthusiasm boosts feelings of interest, while fear stimulates attention to sources of new information.¹⁴

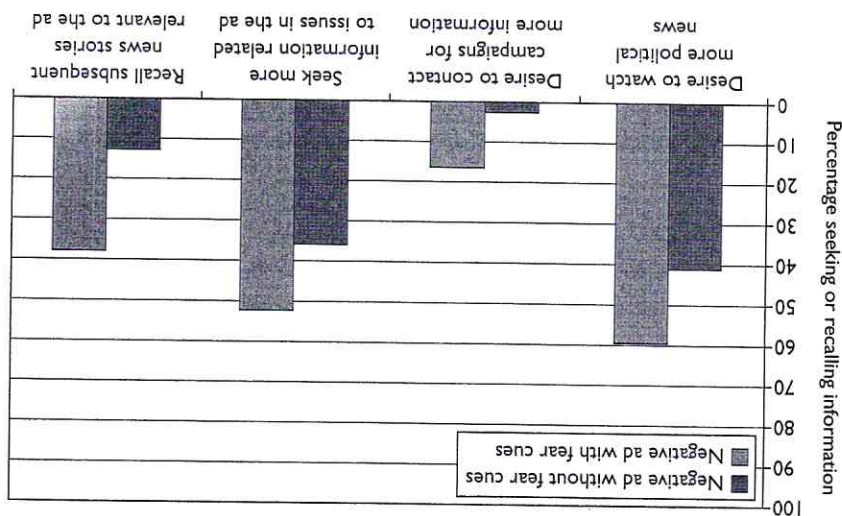


Figure 9.1 Fear Cues in Political Advertising Trigger Greater Attention and Information Seeking for Relevant Information.

Note
Data are drawn from experimental tests of the impact of emotional cues in political advertising during a Democratic gubernatorial primary campaign. Columns show the percentage of Democrats who, after seeing the ad, reported they were strongly ("quite," "very," or "completely") interested in watching more political news on television, listed one or more topics in the political ad as something they would like to hear more about (in response to an open question), and recalled one or more news stories relevant to topics in the political ad that appeared in the news broadcast immediately after the ad itself. All differences between experimental conditions are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

It is well documented that news coverage affects which social problems and policy issues the public sees as most important.¹⁵ The roots of this "agenda setting" effect are often thought to lie in the way news stories make some issues more cognitively accessible (i.e., more readily called to mind) than other issues.¹⁶ Although beliefs about issue importance are not precisely the same as *individual attentiveness*, they are about what issues should receive *public attention*. Recent research argues that emotions play a key part in the agenda setting effect. Specifically, exposure to news stories alters perceptions of issue importance by either arousing or diminishing negative emotions, depending on whether the issue is portrayed as getting worse or better, respectively.¹⁷ The experimental evidence confirms that, to change perceptions of importance, it is not enough for new stories to make the issue more accessible in minds of the audience, they must also influence emotions. Fear and sadness in particular—as opposed to anger or any of several positive emotions—mediate shifts in public priorities.

Seeking *The Influence of Emotions on Political Information*

Emotions influence not only citizens' attention and desire for information, but also their actual information seeking behavior. In the advertising study mentioned earlier, viewers exposed to fear-eliciting campaign ads more closely scrutinized and recalled information from subsequent news stories.¹⁸ After watching the news broadcast in which the ad appeared, subjects had an opportunity to list as many topics from the news program as they could recall. Fear cues seemed to improve subjects' recall specifically of topics that aired after the political ad and were related to the themes contained in the ad. This suggests that fear cues caused subjects to keep their eyes out for relevant information even after the ad was finished; indeed, as Figure 9.1 indicates, recall of subsequent relevant news stories jumped from 13 percent to 38 percent in the fear-evoking version of the ad. In contrast to this, enthusiasm cues (not shown) actually produced a fifteen percentage point drop in Democrats' recall of those same news stories.

In another experimental study, anxiety aroused by news stories about immigration causes citizens to request additional information from the government and advocacy groups.¹⁹ Researchers have turned recently to examining how people search for political information in an Internet environment. One such study finds that campaign related (and experimentally induced) anxiety consistently makes voters more inclined to pay attention to the candidates and debates, but that enthusiasm and anger also increase those inclinations at least some of the time.²⁰ When actual information seeking is monitored, however, anger causes voters to spend less time searching candidate websites and less time on each page clicked. In contrast to this, anxiety provoked by threatening election news stories causes

voters to seek out a broader range of information by visiting more unique web pages.

Fear or anxiety therefore seems to play a strong role in motivating citizens to actively seek out more information. This inquisitiveness appears to be both broad and yet still selective or targeted in particular ways. Studies have long argued that people have a tendency to engage in selective exposure to information that confirms their existing point of view and, while this tendency does not always prevail, partisans often exhibit this sort of biased information search.²¹ Studies of emotions and political information seeking, however, suggest that anxiety can disrupt this tendency while anger may reinforce it. Researchers compared the online behavior of individuals who got angry or anxious in response to threatening news stories about campus affirmative action policies.²² Anxious individuals sought out more information that was challenging to their own views, but those who were angry avoided web pages that challenged their position. Another study found that experimentally induced anxiety made citizens more likely to visit an opposing candidate's website and indeed to visit the sites of both candidates in an election.²³ Anxiety generated such balanced information seeking, however, only when people were aware the information would be useful in the future (e.g., because they were told they would have to defend their views).

While anxiety tends to broaden the focus of citizens' attention in terms of agreement with a person's political views, it also narrows the focus of their attention to information relevant to the potential threat. In my own experimental studies, fear ads prompted viewers to request more information about the campaign and about the threatening issues raised in the ad.²⁴ After viewing the news and ads, subjects were invited to list issues they would like to hear more about from journalists and politicians. When Democrats saw a fairly unemotional negative ad, nearly 36 percent of them listed issues taken up in the political ads (e.g., education, crime, or the campaign more generally). This number jumped to over 52 percent among those who saw the identical messages except with fearful imagery and music (see Figure 9.1). Enthusiasm cues (not shown) had no discernable impact on these topical "wish lists." Similarly, in this same study, fear appeals increased the desire for political news, as opposed to other news content, and focused viewers' attention on subsequent news stories that were relevant to the issues raised in the ad, but not on irrelevant news stories.²⁵ Fears about increasing immigration caused citizens to request additional information from government and anti-immigrant organizations, more so than pro-immigrant or academic sources.²⁶ In a separate study that experimentally induced anxieties over immigration, anxious citizens were more likely to read online news stories about immigration, particularly negative stories, than about other topics.²⁷ Anxiety also caused them to remember better threatening news stories and to agree more with the arguments in threatening stories.

The Influence of Emotions on Political Learning

Does all of this increased interest, attention, and information seeking affect what citizens learn about candidates and issues? Few studies to date examine the ultimate impact of emotions on political learning. Evidence from electoral studies suggests that fear can precipitate increases in citizen knowledge. Citizens who are anxious (but not those who are enthusiastic) about presidential candidates possess more information or thoughts about the candidates and know better the relative policy positions of the candidates.²⁸ Panel studies further reveal that, over the course of a campaign, anxious citizens' knowledge of candidate positions improve much faster than that of either enthusiastic or unemotional citizens.²⁹ The study of political advertising contained only limited evidence on learning, confined to name recognition of the gubernatorial candidates. Neither enthusiasm appeals nor fear appeals led to higher name recognition in general, but fear appeals targeted at a person's preferred candidate improved name recognition of both candidates.³⁰ When threatened (i.e., anger, enthusiasm, disgust), citizens not only read a broader array of candidate web pages, they also demonstrated greater learning of information from these stories on a follow-up quiz.³¹

Some studies, however, arrive at more mixed conclusions about the relationship between anxiety and learning. One such study tracks subjects through a simulated, interactive campaign on computers. Anxious voters better learned their preferred candidate's policy views under highly threatening conditions (when subjects encountered lots of unexpected information), but this learning did not extend to learning other candidates' positions.³² Feldman and Huddy also point to psychological studies suggesting that anxiety and stress can impair learning even as they cause people to devote more attention to what worries them.³³ Consistent with this, in surveys conducted between 2001 and 2003, they find that anxiety about terrorism, Saddam Hussein, and a possible war in Iraq led Americans to spend more time thinking about Iraq, yet worsened their knowledge of basic facts about the country.³⁴ These discrepancies suggest one should be cautious about assuming that fear-driven increases in attention and information seeking will lead automatically to gains in relevant public knowledge.

Emotions influence the political engagement and attentiveness of citizens. Fear or anxiety in particular powerfully shapes whether and when citizens adopt a more vigilant posture. Fear redirects the focus of citizens' own attention as well as their beliefs about which issues merit public attention more generally. Fear motivates citizens to seek out new information from a broader, more balanced array of political viewpoints, yet focused more narrowly on potential threats. This targeted vigilance can be beneficial, helping people to learn information that is useful in reassessing, reducing, or escaping a

potential threat. But it can also produce distortions in public attention and knowledge, to the extent citizens focus too much on threatening issues and neglect non-threatening information that might ease their anxieties. Similarly, fear-induced vigilance will not give rise to better informed citizens, if citizens are largely exposed to information that is unhelpful, error-filled, or misleading.

Rigidity Versus Responsiveness in Opinion Formation

Emotions affect the way people make decisions and form opinions. Moreover, they do so in at least two ways. They can directly influence citizens' evaluations, with positive feelings leading to more positive judgments and negative feelings to negative judgments. Emotions can also influence opinions in a second, more indirect manner, by changing the way that citizens arrive at their views. Because such indirect effects reach to the very manner in which opinions are formed and because the implications are less obvious than in the case of direct effects, scholars tend to find the indirect effect of emotions on opinion formation more interesting. In that spirit, I too will devote more attention to indirect effects below.

The Direct Influence of Emotions on Opinions

Let us begin however by considering the direct impact of emotions on public opinion. That emotions exert such influence is not surprising since opinions usually involve affect—that is, liking or disliking—and affect of this sort is an emotional phenomenon much the same as the discrete emotions we've been discussing. Certainly, if a person makes me feel angry, afraid, sad, or disgusted, I will be inclined not to like that person as much. If a group or a policy makes me feel proud, hopeful, and enthusiastic, then I am more apt to like it. Many studies, including some of the earliest research on emotions and public opinion, indeed find that emotions have a strong impact on evaluations of government and political leaders, over and above any influence of cognitive beliefs or judgments.³⁵ For example, feelings of enthusiasm about a presidential candidate or even about the policies he champions feeds directly into greater support and likelihood of voting for the candidate.³⁶ Citizens may also draw, consciously or not, on their emotions about the country when expressing opinions: people who experience positive feelings about the United States express more trust in others, more trust in the government, and more support for policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement.³⁷ Even when unrelated events put people in a good or bad mood (e.g., a pleasurable smell, a sunny day), these feelings can cause more positive or negative evaluations of candidates, as long as the individual does not reflect on the true source of her feelings.³⁸

The Influence of Emotions on Opinion Formation and Decision Making

Emotions also influence public opinion indirectly, altering the process by which citizens make decisions. People don't invest the same level of effort in making every decision. Sometimes they think through an issue carefully, taking the time and effort to sift through the available information and weigh arguments for or against each option. Other times they make a quick judgment based on simple cues or decision rules, such as a voter who decides just to mark the ballot for any candidates who are women or Republicans. The first mode of decision making is sometimes called "systematic," "central," or "effortful" processing, and the second is sometimes called "heuristic" or "peripheral" processing.³⁹ There is mounting evidence that a person's emotional state affects whether she engages in more or less effortful thinking and therefore what sorts of considerations play a role in decision making. Fear and sadness, for example, both appear to trigger more effortful thinking, while enthusiasm and anger encourage more peripheral or habitual thought processes.

Fear breaks citizens out of their habitual modes of thinking and gets them to reconsider their choices in light of the situation. As a result, it opens the door to persuasion. Fear does not guarantee a change of mind, but does prompt "second thoughts" about the decision. A number of studies find evidence consistent with these expectations. In elections over the past thirty years, voters anxious about presidential candidates have been less likely to rely on their partisan loyalties or ideological affinities, but more apt to make decisions on the basis of assessments of candidates' issue positions and leadership qualities.⁴⁰ Similarly, fear elicited by campaign ads causes voters to place greater weight on the advertising message; fearful ads are thus more persuasive.⁴¹ Fear also increases the weight voters place on comparative evaluations of the candidates and decreases the weight on their initial preferences. Voters fearful about the threat of terrorism also cast votes less according to partisanship and more according to evaluations of the leadership qualities of candidates.⁴²

Such findings are not confined to electoral settings, but rather extend to multiple domains of public opinion. For example, Americans anxious about the 1991 Gulf War were more likely to change their political judgments in light of their assessment of how well the war had gone.⁴³ Thus, to the extent they felt anxiety, Americans were more likely to set aside preconceptions and update their opinions about whether the United States did "the right thing" by going to war and to update their support for President George H.W. Bush more generally, based on the outcome of the war. Under more controlled experimental conditions, researchers found that anxious Republicans shed their party loyalties to express greater approval of the Democratic President Bill Clinton, even when the anxiety was induced subliminally with apolitical images (e.g., snakes, skulls).⁴⁴ In another study, anxiety influenced political

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tolerance judgments.⁴⁵ The judgments of anxious citizens were more responsive to persuasive arguments they had recently read that had been framed either in pro or anti free speech terms. These cases underscore anxiety's role in loosening the hold of predispositions, while facilitating the incorporation of new information and changes of opinion.

These sorts of indirect effects on opinion formation, however, are not confined to anxiety. A number of studies contrast the impact of two or more emotions. In the research on emotional advertising appeals, enthusiasm elicited by campaign ads, in contrast to fear, causes voters to place extra emphasis on their initial candidate preferences and to express greater certainty about their choice.⁴⁶ Figure 9.2 illustrates the contrasting ways that enthusiasm and fear affect the role of political predispositions in voter decision making.⁴⁷ In my experimental research on emotional advertising appeals, many subjects expressed a clear fondness for one candidate over the other when they began the study.⁴⁸ When asked near the end of the study which way they planned to vote, their original loyalties or "predispositions" predicted quite well their final voting decision. However, the strength of this relationship between predispositions and voting choice depends dramatically on which emotions, if any, had been elicited in the meantime by the political ad they saw. The correspondence between predispositions and voting decision is much

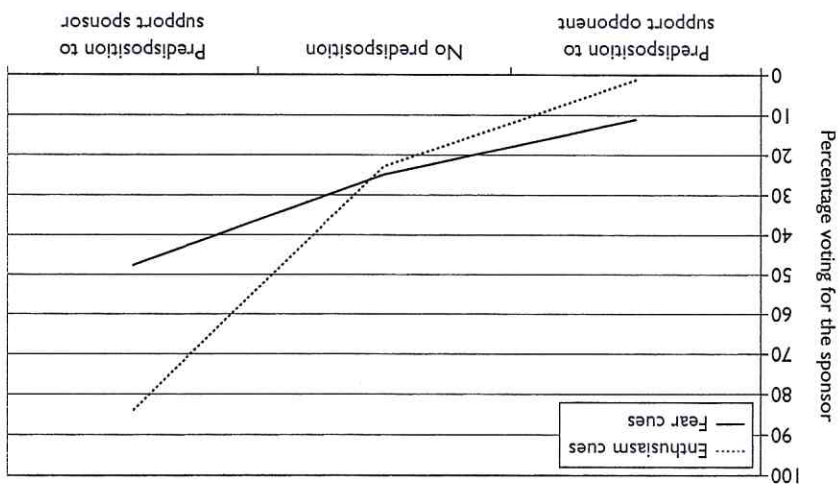


Figure 9.2 Fear Cues in Political Advertising Weaken the Impact of Predispositions on Voting Decisions, While Enthusiasm Cues Strengthen the Impact of Predispositions.

Note: Data are drawn from experimental tests of the impact of emotional cues in political advertising during a Democratic gubernatorial primary campaign. Results shown are averaged across experimental treatments that varied the sponsor and issue focus of the ad.

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We encounter a similar pattern, pertaining to three emotions, in a study of how the framing of policy options affects individuals' preferences for risky policies. It is well established that people are more willing to undertake risks when information is framed in terms of potential losses, while they prefer less risky options when information is framed in terms of gains.⁴⁹ But responsiveness to these frames turns out to depend on an individual's emotional state.⁵⁰ Whereas anxiety increases individuals' responsiveness of opinions to the framing of options, both enthusiasm and anger decrease responsiveness. Another study highlights the contrasting effects of anger and sadness on opinion formation.⁵¹ Sadness led citizens to engage in more effortful thinking when considering their preferences for providing public welfare assistance, while angry citizens did not engage in more effortful thinking. This resulted in divergent preferences, with sad citizens favoring more public assistance and angry citizens favoring less.

Emotions exert considerable influence over the opinions of citizens. In some cases, this impact is simple and direct. People who are in a bad mood or experiencing negative emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness, express more negative opinions (at times, regardless of whether their emotional state is substantively related to the opinion), and people experiencing positive emotions express more positive opinions. But the impact of emotions goes deeper to the very process of opinion formation. Some emotions, like fear and sadness, prompt citizens to reconsider their political predispositions, expend more effort thinking through the decision, and display greater responsiveness to new information and the details of the situation. Other emotions, like enthusiasm and anger, reinforce the automatic tendency of citizens to spend little time reflecting on their opinions and to stick more closely to their political habits and loyalties. Does this mean fear and sadness improve democratic citizenship, and anger and enthusiasm diminish it? Perhaps. Certainly many would consider it a good thing if public opinion were based on a more thoughtful review of the available information and arguments. But fear and sadness do not guarantee well-reasoned decisions or good outcomes. Indeed, as we have seen, the detachment from political habits and focus on present details can cause citizens to be more susceptible to persuasive advertising and training effects, thus making political manipulation easier. Emotions clearly affect how people perform their functions as democratic citizens, but the normative desirability of the outcomes depends on more than the emotion or the thought process it provokes.

Turning Opinions into Political Action

Emotions motivate action and push it in particular directions. This doesn't mean people reflexively act on the emotional impulse, merely that action is

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more likely because the impulse exists. Emotions often elevate levels of physiological arousal and thus physically prepare people to take action, though there are also emotional states that reduce arousal and the inclination to act (e.g., sadness, serenity). Emotions also motivate people to act in ways that are specific to a particular emotion, what psychologists call the "action tendencies" of the emotion in question.⁵² For example, anger creates an impulse to confront and fight, fear an impulse to escape, and disgust an impulse to avoid and purge.

In considering the political consequences of such heightened states of arousal and action tendencies, we must remember that democratic politics is primarily a realm of collective action. Citizens do not often take direct action to deal with social problems. They instead express preferences over (a) policy actions to be taken on their behalf by the government, (b) the selection of leaders entrusted to take these actions, and (c) policy actions determined directly from a collective voting process (e.g., ballot initiatives). Most forms of democratic political action thus occur through fairly institutionalized channels: voting, working on a campaign, donating money to a cause, contacting government officials. As a result, we expect emotions to affect overall levels of political participation, spurring citizens to greater political involvement or prompting them to withdraw from politics, commensurate with their level of physical arousal. However, direct personal action to satisfy more specific emotional impulses (to flee, fight, hide, help, etc.) is likely to be limited in the political realm by the lack of opportunities for meaningful actions of this sort. Nonetheless, these impulses may affect citizens' preferences for collective policy actions; the desire to fight, for example, may lead to greater support for aggressive policies. We therefore expect emotions to affect public opinion in distinct ways that reflect the action tendencies of the emotion in question.

The Influence of Emotions on Levels of Political Participation

The focus to date has been mostly on whether emotions trigger more or less action, and, not surprisingly, at that blunt level "high arousal" emotions tend to be associated with more political action. This general relationship between emotions and participation has illuminated both persistent differences among individuals and short-term reactions to specific situations. Recall that people respond emotionally when circumstances hold relevance for them or, in other words, when they care about what is happening. Some scholars, therefore, look to see if individuals report ever having emotional reactions—positive or negative—to a particular issue or cause and regard such emotions as indicators of those individuals' *conviction*.⁵³ The evidence shows that citizens who experience stronger feelings about policies indeed are more likely to take political action, above and beyond any intellectual investment reflected by their knowledge of the issue.

Other scholars are concerned with the participatory impact of short-term emotional reactions that can, from time to time, flare up and fade away for anyone regardless of the person's long-term interest in politics or policies. Citizens who both feel enthusiastic about presidential candidates and who feel anxious about the candidates are more likely to participate in election campaigns beyond simply voting.⁵⁴ Similarly, campaign ads that elicit enthusiasm and fear increase the desire to volunteer and vote during elections.⁵⁵ Similar effects occur outside of elections: for example, anxiety triggered by news stories on immigration provokes more citizens to contact their Members of Congress and express support for reducing the number of immigrants coming to the United States.⁵⁶ A recent study highlights the potential positive impact of three emotions—fear, anger, and enthusiasm—on political participation but notes important distinctions among them.⁵⁷ Fear has the most variable effects; in some cases it motivates voters, but other times has no effect or even suppresses their participation levels. Anger, in contrast, has an especially powerful impact of political mobilization, but its impact depends more heavily on the person possessing the sorts of resources (e.g., education, income, social ties, experience) that enable participation.⁵⁸ Absent such resources, citizens are less likely to act on their anger in politically consequential ways.

Data from the 2008 presidential election in the United States provide one example of the direct and distinctive impact of emotions on political participation. In a national survey, Nicholas Valentino and I asked Americans about their emotional reactions to the way things were going in the country. Given the unpopularity of the incumbent president and the onset of a global financial crisis, most Americans felt a good deal more fear and anger than enthusiasm in the fall of 2008. We also asked respondents during the campaign how likely they were to contact a government official and, right after the election, how often they had engaged in a range of different political activities. Table 9.2 shows how enthusiasm, fear, and anger about the way things are going in the country affected the propensity to participate in these various ways, controlling many of the social and political attributes known to predict participation.⁵⁹ Anger had the clearest, most consistent, and most powerful impact on political participation in 2008, exerting a strong positive effect for eight of the nine activities. In most cases, people who were extremely angry scored somewhere between ten and twenty-five percentage points higher on the frequency of participation scale. The impact of enthusiasm was considerably spottier: it appeared to exert a modest positive impact in several instances, though the “effects” fall shy of reaching conventional thresholds of statistical significance. The results for fear, in contrast, point rather consistently in a negative direction, though these too fall shy of significance in all but one case. While this general pattern is illustrative of the relative contributions of these emotions to political participation,⁶⁰ it is important to reiterate that other data have revealed some positive participatory effects of fear and especially enthusiasm.⁶¹

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Table 9.2 The Impact of Emotions on Political Participation in the 2008 Election (%)

Political participation		Emotional reactions to the way things are going in the country		
		Enthusiasm	Fear	Anger
Contact government officials	+1.8	-22.8**	+0.1	+24.3**
Discuss politics with friends and family	+10.6	+0.1	+17.4*	+22.1*
Argue about politics	-1.6	-4.4	-4.9	+7.0*
Take part in a protest	0.0	-4.9	-3.0	+0.1
Attend political events for a candidate	-6.5	-7.6	-3.0	+17.6*
Display a campaign sign	+10.9	-11.3	-11.3	+12.1*
Volunteer for a campaign	-5.5	-4.5	-4.5	+14.2*
Donate money to a candidate or party	+8.3	+10.2	-10.2	+16.1*
Sign a petition	+10.2			

Note
Table 9.2 shows the estimated effect of each emotion on political participation, expressed as a percentage point difference in the overall participation scale between those experiencing no emotion and those experiencing intense emotion (i.e., "not at all angry" vs. "extremely angry"). Participation questions asked respondents how likely they were to contact government officials or how often they had engaged in any of the other activities on a four, five, or eight point scale. Analyses are based on ordinary least squares regression and included statistical controls for gender, age, education, income, race, church attendance, general interest in politics, and political knowledge. Data are from a representative national survey carried out in the United States during the 2008 presidential election. Asterisks indicate levels of statistical significance: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Studies uncovering positive effects for fear and enthusiasm have tended to investigate emotions that are closely tied to specific candidates and issues, as opposed to the sort of broad emotions about the state of the country we solicited in the 2008 survey.⁶²

The Influence of Emotions on the Proclivity for Specific Types of Action

Emotions don't just impel us to do "more" or "less," they also trigger the desire to act in some fairly specific ways. When people are afraid, the impulse they feel is not to do just anything, but specifically to hide, flee, or otherwise protect themselves from harm. In contrast, angry people feel inclined to confront and punish. But, where politics is concerned, citizens typically act through a limited set of institutional channels to influence the direction of government, while government itself takes more direct action to address the problems of society and pursue other collective goals. Thus, the distinctive action tendencies of fear, anger, enthusiasm, and other emotions may not be visible in standard forms of political participation like voting as much as in

public preferences for what policies the government should pursue. Voting looks the same regardless of whether the voter is in the mood to protect, punish, help, or celebrate. However, those different motives may be readily distinguishable in the voter's policy priorities and positions, such as through preferences for heightened security, harsher criminal penalties, more aid to the poor, or simply maintaining the status quo.

Emotions indeed seem to influence the policy opinions of citizens in a way that parallels the immediate "action tendencies" generated by the emotional state. Most of the evidence to date comes from efforts to uncover the distinct effects of negative emotions. Anger and fear, for example, have opposite implications for risk taking. In the face of terrorism threats, fear decreases the willingness of citizens to engage in risky personal activities *and* the willingness to support policy actions that might put more Americans at risk.⁶³ Anger, meanwhile, increases support for taking both personal and policy risks. Faced with a potential public health threat, like the outbreak of a deadly disease, angry citizens prefer policy options that carry a risk of bigger losses or bigger gains over policy options with equivalent but more certain (known) outcomes.⁶⁴ But fearful citizens prefer certain results to actions that take a chance on bigger gains and bigger losses.

We can observe these distinct effects of fear and anger on risk preferences in the survey data from the 2008 election mentioned earlier. In light of the incipient economic meltdown and deep dissatisfaction about the direction of the country, we asked respondents their views on "the best way to deal with times of crisis and hardship": Do they prefer "taking bold action to solve a crisis more quickly, even if it comes with a risk of making our problems worse" or, instead, "acting with caution and avoiding big risks, even if it will likely take much longer to solve the crisis?" Figure 9.3 plots the relationship between preferences for bold, risky action and levels of fear and anger, controlling for other social and political attributes that may affect risk preferences. As fear became more intense, Americans shied away from a risky approach to crisis. Anger had the opposite effect, making Americans more likely to endorse risky action. Enthusiasm (not shown) had no effect on risk preferences.

Anger and fear also diverge by pushing citizens toward aggressive or defensive actions, respectively. This is again visible in responses to terrorism. When angry, Americans are more willing to expand U.S. military efforts in the war on terror within and beyond Afghanistan; when afraid, Americans more strongly prefer to deport Arab Americans, Muslims, or first-generation immigrants.⁶⁵ Similar tendencies appear for other issues. In the face of a potential viral pandemic threatening public health, anger increases the willingness of citizens to write letters urging prosecution of anyone found responsible, as well as support both for official investigations and for punishment of those at fault for the outbreak.⁶⁶ In this same situation, fear makes citizens more likely to undertake a variety of protective behaviors (e.g., learning more about the

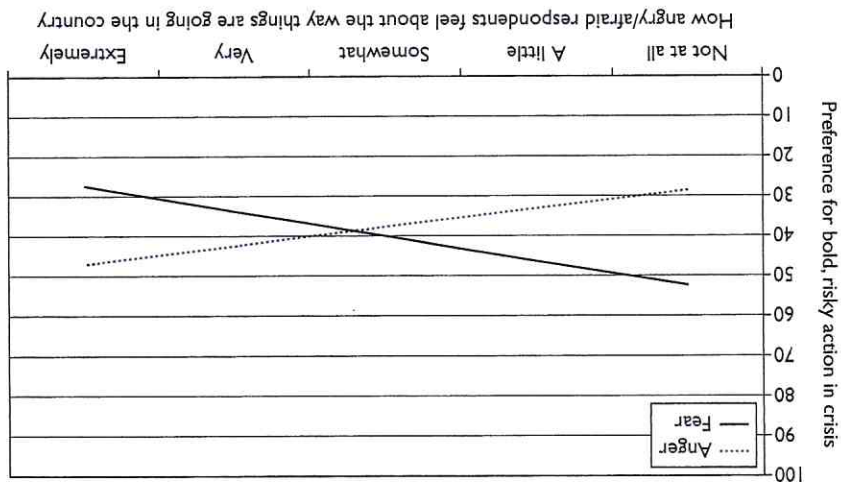


Figure 9.3 Anger Increases and Fear Decreases the Preference for Risky Action.

Note
The figure displays the expected preference for risky action at several levels of fear and anger, while holding all other factors, including emotions, constant at their mean levels. Higher values on the y-axis indicate a preference for "taking bold action to solve a crisis more quickly, even if it comes with a risk of making our problems worse," while lower values indicate a preference for "acting with caution and avoiding big risks, even if it will likely take much longer to solve the crisis." Fear and anger had statistically significant effects on preferences for risky action ($p < 0.01$), while enthusiasm (not shown) had no discernable relationship to these preferences. Analyses included statistical controls for gender, age, education, income, partisanship, unemployment status, and retirement status. Data are from a representative national survey carried out in the United States in the weeks prior to the 2008 presidential election.

Illness, telling friends and family about the danger, washing hands). Fear does not generate greater interest in prosecutions or punishments, but it does strengthen the preference for greater government oversight and regulation aimed at preventing future outbreaks. Finally, citizens anxious about affirmative action policies show greater willingness to consider compromises, while citizens angry about the policy are less willing to compromise.⁶⁷

Emotions prepare and push people to act. Many citizens hold opinions about political candidates and policy issues, but only sometimes do they act on these opinions. Emotional reactions often provide citizens with the motivation to turn opinions into political action. This is especially true for high arousal emotions like fear, anger, and enthusiasm; anger in particular is a powerful resource for political mobilization. Although more participation typically is regarded as desirable, the consequences of emotional arousal are not simply a matter of participating more or less. In addition to the implications for attention and

thoughtfulness already discussed, emotions have action tendencies that impel citizens in specific directions. These tendencies become manifest in both personal behavior and public opinion about collective policy actions. Fear triggers behavior and opinions aimed at reducing risks, protecting against harm, and accepting compromises. In contrast, anger gives rise to behavior and opinions that are risky, aggressive, punitive, and uncompromising.

Conclusion

In sum, emotions serve as guides that adapt thinking and behavior to meet certain situational needs. They direct attention and learning selectively. They modulate how actively and broadly citizens think through the matter at hand. They prepare and motivate citizens to take appropriate actions, including no action at all.

Researchers have learned a good deal so far about the political implications of three commonplace emotions: enthusiasm, fear, and anger. Enthusiasm arises when things are going well, when people are achieving or exceeding their goals. It causes citizens to take a greater interest in politics, adhere to partisan or other political loyalties, feel more confident in their views, and participate more in campaigns and elections. Because it encourages more participation that hews more closely to partisan lines, the feel-good emotion of enthusiasm can ironically be the source of more intense political polarization. Fear is a response to circumstances that are threatening or where the potential for danger is unknown. It causes citizens to pay greater attention to what is happening (especially as relates to possible danger), seek out more information, reconsider their options in light of available information, avoid risky courses of action, and prefer public policies focused on prevention and protection. As a result, fear may lead to an increase in learning, persuasion, and compromise.

Anger is triggered when someone intentionally threatens or stands in the way of a person's goals, especially if the situation is seen as unfair and controllable. It causes citizens to stick with their convictions, eschew compromise, spend less time thinking things through, embrace risks more readily, and prefer aggressive and punitive public policies. Anger is a consistently powerful source of political mobilization, motivating people to act on their opinions, particularly to the extent citizens feel they have the ability and resources to contribute effectively. There are many emotional states beyond these three best understood emotions. Scholars are just beginning to explore the implications of these other emotions for public opinion and politics. For example, sadness, not unlike fear, prompts people to expend more effort on thinking through decisions. When sadness is elicited, citizens therefore are more likely to pay attention to the details of a situation and, as a result, take account of those situational details in deciding whether the government should provide welfare assistance

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to individuals.⁶⁸ Disgust triggers an inclination to purify one's environment. Accordingly, it seems to give rise to harsher moral judgments and moral conservatism such as disapproval of gays.⁶⁹ Pride and shame are "social emotions" that people experience when they realize that others may judge them as exemplifying or falling short of, respectively, the standards and values expected by their community or group. As a result, both emotions motivate citizens to adopt or apply more faithfully the values of their group.⁷⁰ While shame prompts a desire to hide one's transgressions, pride triggers a desire to display one's behavior and group membership proudly.⁷¹

Emotions, specifically their role in opinion formation and political behavior, can help us to understand more fully the vicissitudes of democratic citizenship. But they typically can't tell us whether a person is a good or bad citizen, nor whether Americans on average are better or worse citizens than we expected. Emotions are neither good nor bad in themselves, but simply useful for human reasoning and action. Moreover, though they collectively and individually serve useful functions, this does not mean emotions improve decisions and actions in every instance. They can distract attention needlessly, disrupt learning, give rise to wrong or bad decisions, and motivate harmful behaviors. As public opinion scholars and political observers begin to appreciate more and more the critical role emotions play, it is important to become neither overly sanguine nor overly discouraging about their implications for democratic citizenship.

Notes

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2. For example, see Richard S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
3. George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
4. Ibid., 85-7.
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6. Thomas Rudolph, Amy Gangl, and Dan Stevens, "The Effects of Efficacy and Emotions on Campaign Involvement," *Journal of Politics* 62 (2000): 1189-97.
7. Kim Witte and Mike Allen, "A Meta-Analysis of Fear Appeals: Implications for Effective Public Health Campaigns," *Health Education Research* 27 (2000): 591-615.
8. Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, and Erin Cassese, "On the Distinct Political Effects of Anxiety and Anger," in *The Affect Effect*, eds. W. Russell Neuman, George Marcus, Ann Crigler, and Michael MacKuen (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 202-30.