

# First Draft - 8 Month Paper

## The Causes and Consequences of the Politics of Anger

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### **Abstract**

Scholars have increasingly focused on the role of emotions: Emotions influence both political attitudes and behaviors and emotionalized content spreads quickly in social networks. Particularly anger has received increased attention in recent years as it fuels political debates, but has also been argued for its potentially destructive effects. Pundits have argued that an increase in angry political speech drives polarization and makes compromise across partisan lines increasingly difficult. In the studies proposed below, I will outline how anger in political speech can transfer to voters in multiple ways. Drawing on the Appraisal Tendency Framework, I will theorize when political speech elicits anger, among whom and what consequences it has for the moralization of political issues and voters' willingness to compromise on these issues.

# 1 Introduction

Anger in politics appears to be flaring and observers over the past few years have become increasingly concerned about its divisive potential. Recent headlines have read: “In a Divided Era, One Thing Seems to Unite: Political Anger” (The New York Times, 2018), “How two angry protests sum up Europe’s politics” (The Washington Post, 2018), and “Why are France’s Yellow Jackets so Angry?” (Politico, 2018). The Economist, in light of the Brexit referendum, even claimed that the vote to leave the EU was driven by “Anger at immigration, globalisation, social liberalism and even feminism.” (The Economist 2016). Talk of an emotional turn towards a politics of anger seems omnipresent and observers apprehension is not at all unfounded. A recent study by the Pew Research Centre has shown that since the 2016 US elections, anger has overtaken all other emotions and has become the most frequent reaction to legislators’ Facebook posts (Pew Research Centre 2018). Particularly anger, as well as aggressive behaviors and closed-mindedness resulting from it have been argued to be counterproductive for functioning democracies, as they hinder political compromise and alienate political opponents from one another (Nussbaum, 2016). “Anger has a peculiar power in democracies.”, Joanne Freeman wrote recently, “Skillfully deployed before the right audience, it cuts straight to the heart of popular politics. It is attention-getting, drowning out the buzz of news cycles. It is inherently personal and thereby hard to refute with arguments of principle; it makes the political personal and the personal political. It feeds on raw emotions with a primal power: fear, pride, hate, humiliation. And it is contagious, investing the like-minded with a sense of holy cause.” (The Atlantic 2018).

These concerns have been corroborated by research which has increasingly focused on

the use of emotions in politics (e.g. Soroka et al. 2015; Brader 2011, 2005). Emotions have been shown to influence political behavior (Valentino et al., 2011; Brader, 2005) and attitude formation (e.g. Albertson and Gadarian 2015). Anger, in particular, decreases information-seeking and increases the reliance on heuristics, such as partisan identification (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Parker and Isbell, 2010). It also mobilizes voters (Valentino et al., 2011) and is related to support for risky policies, such as military action (Huddy et al., 2007) and populist attitudes (Rico et al., 2017). Much research on the roots of anger has focused on responsibility, or blame attribution (e.g. Wagner, 2014; Hameleers et al., 2017), particularly in populist rhetoric (e.g. Hameleers et al., 2017, 2018b) or in response to natural disasters, situations which are notably under little certainty or human control (e.g. Maestas et al., 2008). Finally, research has shown that angry rhetoric makes people engage more with online content (Ryan, 2012) and that emotionally and morally charged content spreads more quickly on social media (Brady et al., 2017). These findings provide compelling hints for a political relevance of anger which might even be amplified by the increasing use of social media as people's news source and by parties and politicians as an instrument for political campaigns. Next to its political relevance, Lerner and Tiedens (2006) argue that there are three reasons to pay closer attention to this particular emotion and its consequences: First, they argue, anger is among the most frequently experienced emotions on a daily basis and in response to political events, such as the 9/11 attacks (Lerner et al., 2003). Second, facial expressions of anger capture observers' attention more than other emotions. The so-called "Anger Superiority Effect" was first demonstrated by Hansen and Hansen (1988) and describes the tendency of people to pay particular attention to angry faces. Anger, they argue, is detected quickly and easily

distinguished from other emotions. Last, anger has a unique infusive potential. Its effects on judgment and decision-making easily carry over from the anger inducing to unrelated events. “Once activated, anger can color people’s perceptions, form their decisions, and guide their behavior, regardless of whether the decisions at hand have anything to do with the source of one’s anger.” (Tiedens and Lerner, 2006). Research has shown that angry citizens 1) are more optimistic in their assessment of risks (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Tiedens and Linton, 2001; Tiedens and Lerner, 2006), 2) rely more on heuristics when making decisions (Bodenhausen et al., 1994; Tiedens and Linton, 2001; Parker and Isbell, 2010), 3) seek out less new information (Huddy et al., 2007; Valentino et al., 2008; Parker and Isbell, 2010), 4) are more likely to be politically mobilized (Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2013), and 5) hold distinct political attitudes, related to blame attribution (Petersen, 2015; Wagner, 2014), risky actions (Huddy et al., 2007; Banks and Valentino, 2012), and 6) are more likely to support aggression against out-groups (Huddy et al., 2007; Mackie et al., 2000). Specifically, Huddy and colleagues (2007) find that those who experienced anger related to the Iraq war do not only evaluate the war as less risky but are also more supportive of the war than anxious citizens. Lerner and colleagues (2003) show a similar positive effect of anger on support for vengeful policies and the deportation of foreigners from the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks. Skitka and colleagues (2004) corroborate these findings and show the effects of anger, driven by moral outrage and outgroup derogation, are long-lasting. Anger following the 9/11 attacks leads to lower political tolerance of out-groups even 4 months later. This is in line with findings by Banks and Valentino (2012) who show that anger significantly boosts various forms of racial attitudes. These studies show that how we evaluate political events and how they

make us feel is related to distinct political attitudes and support for certain, particularly aggressive and risky policies, both in the short and long term.

These findings suggest that anger plays an important role in how citizens process political information and form opinions. This is not to say that political anger is a new phenomenon but social media has created an environment in which angry political speech can travel more directly from politicians to citizens and can spread faster than ever before. It is therefore necessary to better understand how and when political speech elicits anger and what downstream consequences anger has for political behavior. Studying how and in whom political speech elicits anger, however, is complex. Next to the emotional and non-emotional content of a speech, it is important to take into account its source, such as a politician or political activist, as well as the receiver spectator. Why anger is elicited depends, first, on whether the two are co-partisans, second, whether they agree on a given issue, and, third, on a number of individual characteristics of the viewer, such as their level of political sophistication, or the extent to which they are personally affected by a political issue. Section 2 concerns the former two, broadly asking: What is political anger and when does political speech prompt anger? First, which type of political speech elicits anger? Starting with the simplest case, in which party-identification plays no role, I will study which aspects of political speech - responsibility attribution, emphasis of human control, or simply emotionalized language - prompts an angry response. I will then proceed to adding party affiliation of speaker and viewer. Is anger elicited by its content or rather as a defensive response to political speech attacking one's in-group? In Section 3, I will discuss why not all people are equally prone to experience anger over politics. I will hypothesize that first, it might take being personally affected by an issue

to get angry over it, and, second, political sophisticates tend to respond emotionally to politics. Finally, in Section 4, I will discuss two potential outcomes of anger in politics: Moralization of issues and decreased willingness to compromise across party-lines. At large, I aim to answer three questions concerning political anger and its role:

- When and why does political speech elicit anger? (Study 1 2)
- Who gets angry over politics? (Study 3)
- What are the consequences of political anger? (Study 4)

In Section 5 I will describe how I plan to study the above. I will particularly focus on the research design of my first study which will look at when and why does political speech prompt anger.

## **2 What is (political) anger?**

A common approach to emotions in psychology is the Appraisal Tendency Framework (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). It holds that emotions come about through assessments people make of a situation. First, a person will evaluate a situation as positive or negative, i.e. as pleasant or unpleasant. Second, the situation will be assessed along five further cognitive dimensions: Certainty, Attentional Activity, Anticipated Effort, Control, and Responsibility (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). Each emotion is characterized by the appraisals on these five cognitive dimensions. Anger is first defined by unpleasantness, and second, by a sense of certainty about the cause of the event, a feeling that somebody else is responsible for the event and a sense that one has control over the situation. These

appraisal patterns, can come about in unconscious ways, such as bodily feedback loops or unconscious priming, or by means of cognition. Following a functional approach, Frijda (1986) defined emotions as action tendencies that quickly prepare us to deal with a situation through changes in physiology, behavior, experience and communication. Similarly, the ATF speaks of appraisal tendencies as “goal-directed processes through which emotions exert effects on judgment and choice until the emotion elicited problem is resolved” (Lerner and Keltner, 2000, p.477). Further, Lerner and Keltner (2000) have proposed an empirical strategy to study appraisal tendencies: studies, they argue, should compare emotions that differ on one or more of the five appraisal dimensions and their effects on judgement, choices or behaviors. For instance, one could compare shame (self-responsibility) to anger (other-responsibility), or anxiety (low certainty and situational control) to anger (high certainty, human control). The expected outcome of the experienced emotion depends on the appraisal by which the two emotions differ. For instance, anger has a different effect on risk perception and the use of heuristics in information-processing than anxiety (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Bodenhausen et al., 1994; Parker and Isbell, 2010). This is because the appraisal of new situations as uncertain and outside of human control produces fear. Anger, on the other hand, is defined by appraisals of certainty, unpleasantness and human control. Hence, the framework predicts that anger will lead to an evaluation of new situations as certain and under human control and angry people will perceive new situations as less risky (Lerner and Keltner 2000).

However, appraisals in the real world are less straight-forward due to the complexity inherent to political issues which is further complicated by party attachments of speaker and listener: First, political events are almost never mono-causal, often ambiguous and

even in situations outside of human control, people tend to seek somebody to blame (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006). Therefore, both responsibility and certainty over what happened, two of anger’s core appraisal themes are usually either unclear or politically contended. Second, political events are usually communicated by the media or, as in the present case, by politicians. This has two consequences for our appraisal of certainty and responsibility: No matter how certain the politician talking about an issue is about its causes and consequences, our appraisal of certainty depends on whether we believe them. Further, when speaking about anger in politics, the object of such anger varies: We can be angry over an issue, for instance, something we perceive as an injustice. If a politician speaks with anger about this issue, we will feel angry in agreement. If we disagree, however, we might get angry at the speaker. Both cause and object of our anger are fundamentally different in the latter case. As anger, by definition, is directed at someone or something, the political consequences of anger could vary depending on its cause and the target of one’s anger. Hence, disentangling the different causes of anger, its core appraisal themes, and objects of anger is a necessary task if we want to understand the causes and consequences of political anger better.

## **2.1 Anger as a Result of its Core Appraisal Themes**

The easiest way in which a political message can prompt an angry response from its viewer or reader is through its content when the viewer in principle agrees with the speaker’s stance on the issue and anger only adds an emotional layer. In this scenario, anger in politics can be elicited in accordance with its core appraisal themes: human control, certainty, and responsibility. According to the ATF, anger is elicited when events



are described as under human control, certain and responsibility is attributed to somebody other than oneself. Fear arises when situational control is high or responsibility is uncertain.

***H1: Respondents experience anger when all three of its appraisal themes (human control, certainty, and responsibility) are fulfilled.***

Alternatively, one might argue that not all dimensions of appraisal are of equal importance. While in original work on appraisal tendencies in non-political settings, certainty and controllability were considered central (e.g. Tiedens and Linton, 2001), work in political communication has mostly focused on blame and responsibility attribution (Hameleers et al., 2017, 2018a; Wagner, 2014; Petersen, 2010; Huddy et al., 2007). It is plausible that in the political realm, where events are usually highly complex and therefore judged as less certain and controllable, attribution of responsibility becomes the decisive factor for anger. Some research has substantiated this assumptions showing when human control is lacking entirely, as in the case of natural disasters, citizens seek for somebody to hold responsible (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006). Thus, alternatively to H1, Hypotheses 2, reads as follows:

***H2: Respondents experience anger when responsibility is attributed to a political actor, regardless of levels of certainty and human control.***

## **2.2 Anger in Motivated Reasoning and Defensive Anger**

In the scenarios described above, I assumed that issue positions expressed in a political message are congruent with those of its recipient. Moreover, I have not yet considered the role of partisanship. However, if we disagree, with the position expressed, we might

also get angry and we might do so particularly if a message's anger is directed at our in-group.

Recent research has suggested that anger is elicited in the process of biased information-processing, or motivated reasoning (Suhay and Erisen, 2018). Biased information-processing, in short, describes people's proneness to disregard information that contradicts their prior beliefs (Lodge et al., 2013; Redlawsk, 2002). People tend to evaluate information that is incongruent with their prior attitudes as less convincing and tend to generate more arguments against it. Information that is in line with their prior beliefs, however, is accepted much more easily and is actively sought out (Lodge et al., 2013). Recent research has suggested that anger plays a role in this process. Suhay and Erisen (2018) found that the process of biased processing of political information is mediated by feelings of anger. Information incongruence increased experienced anger, which in turn led to respondents rating the information as of lower quality and formulating more counterarguments. Hence, as much as anger-cues could elicit anger in respondents due to mirroring of emotions or sympathizing with the respective issue, anger could be elicited for the opposite reason, due to disagreement and anger at the information conveyed in political speech. I, therefore, hypothesize that regardless of the appraisal dimensions of a political message, anger will be elicited if the message is incongruent with respondents' prior beliefs (H3). Moreover, Gervais (2018), has shown that elite incivility, an extreme form of elite anger that breaks with political norms, elicits anger among voters only when it comes from an out-group, i.e. the opposing political side. I, therefore, expect that political messages will prompt particularly strong emotional responses when anger by an out-group is directed at its receiver's in-group (H4).

*H3: Anger is elicited in response to incongruence between party affiliations of source and receiver of a political message.*

*H4: Anger is elicited as a response to anger expressed by the political out-group if directed at the in-group.*

### **3 Who gets angry over politics?**

Above, I have outlined when political speech elicits anger and I have argued that there are two main paths in which political speech can prompt an angry response: by means of anger's core appraisal themes, if party affiliations are congruent, or as a result of disagreement if party affiliation of source and receiver of a political message are incongruent. I have further theorized that particularly appraisals of responsibility could be decisive, whether party affiliations are congruent or not. Here, I will discuss in more detail the individual differences that lead to a person experiencing anger in response to political speech. It should first be noted that individuals differ in their ability to make nuanced distinctions between similar emotion states, known as emotional granularity (Barrett, 2004). Emotional granularity not only influences if people can accurately describe their feelings (congruence between physiological responses and reported emotions) but high levels of emotional granularity are also related to better emotion regulation and less aggressive tendencies. Low levels of emotional granularity, on the other hand, are related with low self-esteem, depression and emotional instability (Smidt and Suvak, 2015). This will particularly become relevant in the discussion of different measures of emotions, unconscious, physiological measures, and conscious, self-reports. The correct measurement of the latter particularly, I assume, requires a certain level of emotional granularity for

people to accurately detect and report their affective state. In the following sections, I will outline two individual characteristics that likely influence whether people get angry over politics. First, I argue that to have an emotional response to politics, people have to be, or perceive themselves as, personally affected by an issue. Second, people differ in how engaged they are with politics, and ultimately, how much they care about politics, regardless of specific issues. Hence, I propose that political sophisticates have stronger emotional responses to political messages than non-sophisticates.

### **3.1 Personal Relevance**

Anger and anxieties', like that of all negatively valenced emotions, primary appraisal is that of unpleasantness, which distinguishes them from all positive emotions. The extent to which a political issue or situation is perceived as unpleasant is not necessarily universal. Although, to my knowledge, the link between personal relevance and emotional experience has not been directly tested yet, past research has provided evidence that both risk assessment and responsibility attribution are affected by issues are (perceived as) personally relevant to people. For instance, Cassese and Hannagan (Cassese and Hannagan, 2015) have shown that reactions to emotional frames of breast cancer among women depend on whether they perceive themselves as personally at risk. Similarly, in a study of responsibility attribution after a flood, Arceneaux and Stein (2006) have shown that those living in neighborhoods that was affected, were more likely to blame the government for insufficient preparations. In an earlier study, Arceneaux (2003) had shown that economic hardship leads to increased participation when blame is attributed to the government but depresses participation when it is not. Although not explicitly

tested, this suggests that anger might be a driver of political mobilization when personal hardship is blamed on the government. These findings were corroborated by Aytac et al. (2018) who find that among unemployed, but not among employed people, framing blame for unemployment on the government increases intentions to turn-out in the 2016 elections. They also find that the same blame frame among unemployed, but again not among employed, increases both anger and guilt. Research on the emotional substrates of right-wing populism has more explicitly tested the role of anger. Anger over the economic crisis support for populist parties (Rico et al., 2017; Magni, 2017) It has been theorized that anger emerges among populist voters as they are more likely to be affected by the crisis (Magni, 2017) and populists attribute blame effectively (Hameleers et al., 2017). Broadening up this argument to other groups than populist voters, I argue that people get angry over a political issue if they are personally affected by a it. Moreover, while it is possible to operationalize the degree to which some socioeconomic groups are affected by an economic crisis, this is harder for other political issues. I further propose that the decisive factor for many issues is not whether somebody is objectively affected but whether they perceive themselves to be affected.

*H5: Respondents get angry over a political issue if they are/perceive themselves as personally affected by it.*

## **3.2 Political Sophistication**

Lodge and Taber (2013) have theorized that political sophisticates are most likely to already have established affective links between different political objects and, thus, have stronger automatic affective responses to politics. Similarly, Miller (2017) argued that

high sophisticates are more likely to experience emotions in response to politics and their subsequent behavior is more likely to be affected by their emotional responses. The reason for this, he argues, is that political sophisticates have more associative networks related to political objects. They are better at quickly making connections between these objects and making appraisals of politics.

***H6: Political sophisticates get more angry than non-sophisticates.***

## **4 What are the consequences of anger in political speech?**

In the introductory section of this paper, I have outlined several political consequences of anger, such as increased mobilization (Valentino et al., 2008), support for military action (Huddy et al., 2007), or out-group hostility (Mackie et al., 2000). Much of pundits concern about the rise of angry politics concerns a feeling that it hinders dialogue and is ultimately harmful to democracies (e.g. Nussbaum, 2016). Alternatively, one might also argue that anger is productive, as it fosters engagement (Ryan, 2012) and is particularly critical for social movements (Jasper, 2014). In the following two sections, I will explore two possible consequences that, if true, would provide some evidence for the anger “counter-productivity thesis” (for a discussion and critique of this thesis see: Srinivasan, 2018).

### **4.1 Anger and the Moralization of Politics**

As a first potential consequence of angry rhetoric, I will look at the moralization of issues. People differ in their degree of *moral conviction* regarding political issues (Skitka, 2010)

and the moralization of issues has important political consequences (e.g. Ryan 2014). An issue is moralized for those people who see it as standards that others should share, as a motivation for behavior in and it is usually accompanied by strong emotions, such as indignation (anger) or disgust (Skitka et al., 2005). Hence, moral convictions are usually also strong attitudes but not all strong attitudes are also moralized. Respondents holding strong moral convictions on politics tend to have stronger partisan bias, express higher hostility and social distance to political opponents, irrespective of partisan strength (Garrett and Bankert, 2018) and tend to participate more in politics (Skitka and Bauman, 2008). Issues can move into the moral domain through the process of moralization, as, over time, they are linked to moral emotions in public discourse (Rozin, 1999). Smoking, for instance, Rozin (1999) argues, used to be perceived as a preference but has over time become moralized and cigarette smoke is seen as disgusting and irritable. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is increasingly de-moralized in the US. In a first study of the emotional antecedents of moralized issues, Wisneski and Skitka (2017) found that only integral disgust increased moralization. However, they used abortion, an already highly moralized issue in the United States and did not investigate the possible effects of other emotions. Next to disgust, anger and contempt have been argued to be one of three moral emotions (Rozin, 1999). And although incidental disgust, in particular, has been argued to form the base of moralized judgment (Wheatley and Haidt, 2005; Haidt and Keltner, 1999), Wisneski and Skitka (2017) found no effect of incidental disgust. Clifford (2018) found that both self-reported disgust and anger, elicited by emotional frames of a message regarding food purity, increased the moralization of that issue. It should be noted, that the line between disgust and anger is often blurry, both were evoked almost equally by

messages designed to only evoke either of the two. Others have additionally argued that disgust might merely be used as a metaphor for anger when we speak about moral issues (Royzman and Kurzban, 2011). Moreover, while for some political issues, such as abortion, disgust seems a logical emotional antecedent of moralization, particularly in discussions over fairness or in group-conflict, anger is a more likely predecessor.

*H7: Anger in political speech leads to a moralization of political issues.*

## 4.2 Anger and Willingness to Compromise

Voters' willingness to compromise on political issues, even when their values and goals differ, is essential to the functioning of liberal democracies. Political compromise is essential to accommodating different interests and ideals and to finding mutually acceptable solutions for political problems (Bellamy, 1999). Such compromise requires for citizens to acknowledge the plurality of political values and interests and a willingness to engage with them to find solutions: "Hearing the other side' within a pluralist polity implies respecting that people can be reasonably led to incommensurable and incompatible understandings of values and interests, and seeing the need to engage with them in terms they can accept." (Bellamy, 1999, p. 121) However, recently, this pluralism has come under attack as the electorate has become increasingly divided and affectively polarized (Iyengar et al., 2018; Mason, 2018). Particularly, anger is often considered counterproductive for functioning democracies, as it alienates potential allies and hinders political compromise (? , Nussbaum add citation) Despite a growing literature on the effects of emotions in politics, the link between elite's angry rhetoric and voters' willingness to engage in conversations, consider others' viewpoints and find compromise is still unclear.



Investigating this link, however, is essential if we want to understand the effects emotion-ized elite rhetoric has on voters and their tolerance of others' political values and views. Using the same treatments as above, I will assess whether anger expressed in political speech ultimately influences people's willingness to compromise. The three appraisal dimensions that define anger and two of its direct consequences could each contribute to a lack of willingness to compromise: First, as finding compromise always comes with a risk of this compromise failing and extreme positions will make it significantly harder to gather bi- or multi-partisan support. Hence, more optimistic risk-assessment resulting from anger could lead to people being less willing to inch from their political stance. Second, one of anger's appraisal tendencies is high certainty. This leads to angry people being more closed-minded, search for less information and rely on other heuristics, such as partisanship, instead. Again, closed-mindedness could hinder being able to see another viewpoint of an issue, which, together with an increased reliance on partisanship, could make compromise difficult. While the two first reasons pertain to behavior when in compromise, other-responsibility could lead to a complete withdrawal from the process. Since the appraisal of other-responsibility, which as argued above, is likely crucial to anger, is related to aggression towards out-groups (Desteno et al., 2011; Mackie et al., 2000; Skitka et al., 2004), angry people might either not engage in compromise or might actively hinder compromise. The first hypothesis concerning people's willingness to compromise as a result of their anger reads:

***H8: Anger decreases respondents' willingness to compromise on the issue their anger pertains to.***

Finally, the appraisal tendency framework holds that once anger is elicited, its effects

will carry over to other evaluations (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). I, therefore, further propose that anger prompted by one issue should also make compromise on other issues more difficult.

***H8: Anger decreases respondents' willingness to compromise on issues unrelated to its cause.***

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