The Effects of Politicians' Emotional Displays on Citizens

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Abstract

Politics is filled with emotions, coloring our political attitudes and behavior. Most research focuses on how political rhetoric elicits emotions. However, not much scientific work has payed attention to the role of nonverbal communication, while visual information is processed much faster and people don't always pay attention to the exact content politician's are communicating. Hence, the persuasive power of politicians' nonverbal communication is still rather unexplored. Do politicians' emotional expressions also trigger emotions in us? In the several studies proposed, I use the theoretical framework of emotional mimicry to examine (1) the extent to which politicians' emotional displays transfer to citizens, (2) how partisanship moderates this emotional contagion, (3) which emotions are most contagious, and (4) for who these emotional displays are most persuasive.

1 Introduction

During the 1984 US general election, CBS News reporter Lesley Stahl broadcasted a news report in which she sharply criticized Reagan's campaign strategy in the reports' voice-over. The accompanied video track contained close-ups of Reagan smiling, awarding medals to athletes, cutting a ribbon of a nursing home, and waving to a cheering crowd of supporters. Expecting a bombardment of angry responses from Reagan supporters after her critical news report aired, Stahl instead received praise and congratulations for her 'great piece' about Reagan. To Stahls' surprise, most people only looked at the positive footage of Reagan smiling, while paying no attention to Stahl's criticism (Stahl, 1999 in Grabe and Bucy, 2009, p.55).

As this example illustrates, when forming impressions and opinion of others, people tend to rely heavily on visual information. Political elites also use their nonverbal communication strategically to win over votes. For example, former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama describes in her autobiography how a couple of political strategists showed her videos of her public performances (of her promoting her husband) while muting the sound, to recommend her to express more emotions, especially positive ones (Obama, 2018). Showing such appropriate emotions is of importance since people pay close attention to politicians' nonverbal communication, especially since politics has become more personalized (Garzia, 2013). Politicians are often praised for showing the right emotional expressions and using the appropriate tone of voice, but are also criticized numerous of times for being 'too emotional' or 'too cold'.

Taken together, these examples show that nonverbal communication plays an important role in politics is. However, research has mostly focused on the persuasive power of verbal and textual political communication (Grabe and Bucy, 2009), while nowadays video's and pictures of politicians are ubiquitous, especially on social media and online news platforms. For example, tweets are retweeted more often when accompanied by an image, especially when these images are perceived emotional (Casas and Webb Williams, 2018). Moreover, television broadcasting is more likely to cover politicians through visual

depictions (i.e. image bites, showing politicians with no sound) compared to broadcasting their verbal statements (i.e. sound bites; Bucy and Grabe, 2007).

Next to the increased attention and availability of politicians emotional expressions, several scholars also point to the importance of visual communication for two reasons. First of all, they posit that visual information is processed faster than text. For example, Graber (1996) argues *"human brains extract valuable information from audiovisuals more quickly and more easily than from purely verbal information"*. In addition, a specialized part in our brain (the visual cortex) is responsible for processing visual information, while no such area exist for textual input (making processing text a more consuming task) (Grabe and Bucy, 2009). Second, as Casas and Webb Williams (2018) argue: *"One of the main reasons why images are such powerful form of communication is because they trigger stronger emotional reactions than their potential textual counterfactual"* (Casas and Webb Williams, 2018, p.4).

The latter reason is of special importance, since a growing body of literature demonstrates that emotions have a profound impact on a range of political attitudes and behaviors. For example, research has shown that citizens' emotions influence political engagement (Brader, 2005; Huddy et al., 2007), political participation both online and offline (Jones et al., 2012; Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2012), information seeking (Valentino et al., 2008; Huddy et al., 2007), and voting behavior (Brader, 2005). Since emotions are so politically relevant, the present research aims to better understand *when* and *how* nonverbal communication of politicians trigger emotional reactions in citizens. The first proposed studies will examine whether politicians' emotional facial expressions can trigger congruent and incongruent emotions in citizens (Study 1 and 2). Theories from psychology will be used to study the mechanism in which emotions can transfer from one person to the next, namely through the process of emotional contagion and mimicry. However, politicians are different than the random faces used in psychological research, in the sense that people already have existing beliefs and attitudes regrading these politicians. I argue that these emotional attachments with politicians can enhance emotional contagion when emotions are displayed by a politician you support (Study 1) but can cause a reactive,

defensive emotional response when displayed by a politician you oppose (Study 2). Both studies will furthermore research whether it matters which emotion is expressed and how this interacts with partisanship. Do we all get excited from happy politicians? Or is enthusiasm only triggered by the politician we identify with? Finally, the first two studies will examine whether individual differences moderate citizens' reaction in response to emotional displays of politicians. To sum up, the following questions are addressed in the first two studies of the present research project:

- Do the emotional expressions of politicians elicit emotions in citizens?

- Does identification with a politician increase emotional contagion?

- Does negative partisanship inhibit affect emotional contagion?

- Does it matter which emotion is expressed?

- For who is the emotional expression of a politician most persuasive?

Since these questions concern facial expressions, study 3 will investigate the role of politician's body posture and gestures. Examining this type of nonverbal communication allows us to study other relevant emotions that are hard to recognize from just the face (e.g. pride). Furthermore, the fourth study will focus on the consequences of these emotional displays on identification. Do these emotions triggered by politicians' nonverbal communication unify us? And is this intensified when other people are present? The remaining of this paper will focus on the first two studies of this research project. First, the theoretical framework of emotional contagion and the existing literature regarding emotional displays of politicians will be discussed. Second, the hypotheses of study 1 and 2 are proposed and finally, the paper will end with the research design of study 1.

2 Emotions, mimicry, and contagion

During social interactions, people have a tendency to 'catch' the other persons' emotions, i.e. displaying and experiencing the same emotions as they observe in their interaction

partner. To explain this phenomena, psychologists have proposed the theory of *Emotional Contagion*, suggesting that *"when people perceive an emotion in others, they automatically mimic this emotion, and the bodily feedback derived from this mimicry also leads them to feel that emotion"* (Hatfield et al., 1993). Emotions are considered of consisting of two components, an unconscious physiological reaction and a conscious subjective emotional experience (LeDoux and Pine, 2016; Russell and Feldman Barrett, 1999)). According the emotional contagion theory, people automatically mimic the emotions (e.g. facial expressions, postures, vocalizations, and movements) observed in others during social interactions. Second, this mimicry induces a physiological response, that then lastly, induces the emotional experience in the observer, reaching the full circle of emotional contagion.

Traditionally, mimicry is seen as a form of behavioral or motor mimicry, which is based on the *perception-behavior link* (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999). Chartrand and Bargh (1999) theorize that perception and action share common representational systems. Therefore, the perception of another's behavior (e.g. a facial expression, body posture, mannerism) increases the likelihood for the perceiver to behave in a similar way, also called the chameleon-effect (Lakin et al., 2003) or the *Matched Motor Hypothesis* (Hess and Fischer, 2013). This notion is consistent with recent neuroscience research showing that the same neurons (mirror neurons) are activated when an action is performed and when the same action is observed (Hess and Fischer, 2013). According to this line of research, the primary function of this imitation is to enhance affiliation and promote social bonding. Lakin et al. (2003) refer to mimicry as 'social glue', binding individuals together. Furthermore, this process is seen as an unconscious phenomenon that does not depend on the observers' or expressers' interpersonal goals (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999). According to Dimberg et al. (2002), mimicry is an unconscious and automatic process that is difficult if not impossible to suppress (Dimberg et al., 2002).

Many studies provided empirical evidence for the Matched Motor Hypothesis perspective. However, some scholars find that mimicry only occurs under certain social circumstances, which is in contrast with the Matched Motor Hypothesis' assumption

that emotional mimicry is independent of interpersonal goals. Several studies demonstrate that having a positive attitude towards the expresser is necessary for mimicry to take place (Hess and Fischer, 2013). Due to these findings, other theories have been formulated that take into account the social context. For example, Wang and Hamilton (2012) claim that mimicry is a 'strategy for social advantage'. This theory posits that people show more mimicry towards those who are important for their social welfare. For example, participants are more likely to mimic people in powerful or high status positions, ingroup members, and attractive people (Wang and Hamilton, 2012). According to this theory, mimicry is an unconscious top-down process, meaning that the automatic mimicking behavior is subtly controlled by a person's social goals and the social context. Hence the name of the theory is STORM: Social Top-down Response Modulation (Wang and Hamilton, 2012).

2.1 The Emotional Mimicry in Social Context Model

Another theory also perceives mimicry as a top down process, but specifically focuses on *emotional mimicry*, also called the *'Emotional Mimicry in Social Context'* model (Bourgeois and Hess, 2008; Hess and Fischer, 2013). They argue that emotional mimicry is different from non-emotional mimicry, in that emotions carry meaning and are ways of communication, whereas imitating behaviors such as foot tapping (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999) are not (unless they can be interpreted as emotional signals such as nervousness). The theory has two key assumptions. The first assumption implies that people only mimic emotions if there is a minimal form of affiliation between the expresser and observer. Second, mimicry is not a response to specific facial expressions per se, but rather a response to the interpretation of that emotional signal.

The first assumption has already been posited by Lakin et al. (2003). They argued that the function of facial mimicry has evolved from a form of communication, to a mechanism of signaling affiliation to enhance social coordination between interaction partners and thereby improving survival chances. Emotions with a more affiliative character (such as happiness and sadness and fear to a lesser extent) are therefore more likely to be

mimicked, compared to low affiliative emotions (such as anger and disgust) (Hess and Fischer, 2013). Bourgeois and Hess (2008) furthermore argue that displays of affiliation should preferentially only be shown to ingroup members or others with whom one wants to cooperate. They especially argue that mimicking outgroup behaviors would be costly, since it may allow competitors or outgroup members to access resources that one does not want to share. Based on this line of reasoning, Hess and Fischer (2013) propose the 'Emotional Mimicry in Social Context model'. They distinguish between two types of reactions to facial displays: a mimicry response (in situations of affiliation) and a reactive response (e.g. smiling when you see an outgroup member in pain; when no form of affiliation between interaction partners exist; Preston & de Waal, 2003).

The second assumption of this model presumes that mimicry is not just a 'motor reaction', but rather an appraisal of the social context. For example, showing a neutral face with no emotional expressions, can still elicit mimicry if the perceiver receives information about the emotional state of that person. Moreover, listening to an audio of emotional language can also lead to mimicry, because the perceiver interprets the target's emotional state. Hess and Fischer (2013) therefore assume (same as the STORM theory) that emotional mimicry is a top-down process. Emotional expressions are thus interpreted and paired with other relevant social cues to derive affiliative intent, which consequently influences the level of mimicry (Fischer and Hess, 2017).

A considerable amount of experimental studies have examined the role of affiliation, as proposed by the STROM and Emotional Mimicry in Social Context model. Although some results are inconsistent, most of these studies indeed confirm that mimicry varies as a function of the social context (Wang and Hamilton, 2012; Hess and Fischer, 2013; van der Schalk et al., 2011). For example, in one of the only studies using politicians as social context, Bourgeois and Hess (2008) showed displays of two Quebecan political leaders (Bouchard and Charest of the 1998 election) considered equally charismatic and good communicators. The presented stimuli consisted of short videos of happy and angry expressions taken from a pre-electoral debate. The results showed that participants only mimicked the angry expressions of the ingroup politician. Furthermore, participants

smiled equally in response to both politicians' happiness displays.

3   Politicians' Facial Displays

Only a few political scientist have looked at the effect of politicians' emotional displays. Pioneering research on this particular subject comes from (as referred to in the literature as) "the Dartmouth Group" (Stewart and Ford Dowe, 2013). This group of scholars (from Dartmouth College) have conducted several studies examining how facial displays of political leaders affect citizen's emotions and political beliefs. Their studies consist of short videos (around 30 – 70 seconds) of television coverage of well-known politicians, each displaying a different emotion or a neutral expression, and physiological and self-report measures of emotional reaction. The Dartmouth group scholars have identified three types of emotional displays in politicians: happiness/reassurance (HR), anger/threat (AT), and fear/evasion (FE; e.g. Sullivan and Masters (1998). The categories are composite terms reflecting the emotion that is being expressed and the social signal that is communicated (Bucy and Grabe, 2008). These three categories are based on primate and human ethology research, which suggests that different displays are associated with distinct roles in social hierarchy. More specifically, leaders need to signal both dominance to maintain the social order (anger and fear), and affiliation to strengthen their alliances (happiness Stewart et al., 2009; Bucy and Grabe, 2008). Later scholars have elaborated the emotion categories by adding a fourth, sadness/appeasement Stewart et al. (2009). However, some argue that displays of sadness are incompatible with leadership, since it signals submission. Only in cases of showing empathy (e.g. as response to a natural disaster or terrorist attack), sadness is deemed appropriate (Price and Sloman, 1987).

The Dartmouth scholars rely on the perspective of psychologist Paul Ekman, assuming that people are able to show distinct emotional expressions that can be easily recognized by the recipient. Indeed, in their experiments, participants accurately recognized the three types of expressive displays (happiness/reassurance, anger/threat, fear/evasion). More importantly, the three types of displays evoked distinct emotional reactions in par-

ticipants, both self-reported and physiological responses (EMG and SCR) (Lanzetta et al., 1985; McHugo et al., 1985; Mchugo et al., 1991). With these findings, the Dartmouth group were one of the first to demonstrate that politicians' emotional expressions can trigger emotions in citizens.

The Dartmouth group furthermore examined the moderating role of citizens' prior attitudes (composed of political ideology, party identification, and candidate evaluations). In two studies, participants watched several displays of president Reagan (Lanzetta et al., 1985; McHugo et al., 1985)). Supporters of Reagan reported stronger emotional responses, while Reagan's opponents reported more counter-empathy (e.g. negative response to positive display). Interestingly, the physiological responses were congruent with the displays and not affected by participants' prior attitudes. The scholars suggest that people cognitively adjust their self-reported response to fit their prior beliefs, while the physiological response is probably a more direct motor reaction. However, in contrast to their earlier findings, in a later study Mchugo et al. (1991) find that prior attitudes significantly affects both participants' physiological and self-report emotional responses. Supporters of Reagan had more positive and less negative emotional reactions when watching Reagan's happiness display, compared to Reagan's opponents. For the anger displays, supporters reported higher anxiety than opponents did (no effects on facial muscle activity was found). A later study of Sullivan (1996) replicated these results in both the US and France, showing that supporters in general report more positive emotions to positive displays, and more negative emotions to negative displays (no physiological data). However, some other studies do not corroborate these results and find no or only small effects of party identification (Sullivan and Masters, 1998; Gabriel and Masch, 2017).

The Dartmouth group has furthermore examined whether politicians' emotional displays affect the evaluations of the political candidates presented. Sullivan and Masters (1998) show that viewers' emotional response to positive facial displays of politicians increased post exposure attitude ratings of the political candidates. This effect was only found for the happiness/reassurance displays. Other scholars partly replicate this finding in Germany. Gabriel and Masch (2017) show that the effect of the emotional display

depends on the political leader. Participants' ratings of Merkel increased after positive displays and decreased after negative displays, whereas ratings of Gysi increased after all displays (negative, positive and neutral). However, it should be noted that in general, Gabriel and Masch find that most participants were mostly unaffected or had very small reactions to the emotional displays.

Besides candidate evaluations, several scholars have looked at different political outcomes than previous studies. For example, Slepian and Carr (2019) demonstrates how the variability of emotions displayed (i.e. showing less or more different emotions) leads people to believe that a person is more authentic (genuinely displaying true emotions), happy, trustworthy, and has more leadership potential (this study was not in political context). Furthermore, looking at the effects of nonverbal communication on social media usage, Shah and colleagues (2016) show that the presence of facial expressions, physical gestures and blink rate of politicians during a debate, predict the volume and (to a lesser extent) the valence of viewers' reactions on twitter. Despite these recent findings, overall the effect of nonverbal displays on political outcomes are still rather unexplored.

4 Study 1: does emotional attachment with a politician enhance emotional contagion?

The Dartmouth group and later scholars have demonstrated that in some cases, politicians' emotional displays elicit emotional responses in citizens and alter their attitudes. However, we do not know *how* and *when* these emotional expressions of politicians elicit the associated emotion in citizens. I turn to theories from psychology to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying processes of this affect transfer, i.e. emotional contagion. Hence, the first study investigates the process of emotional contagion in the effect of politicians' emotional displays and more specifically, the mimicry response. Do citizens mimic the emotional expressions of politicians? And do they then also feel the emotion displayed by a politician? Especially when it concerns the politician they support and identify with? Or are politicians too far out of reach, too elite, for citizens to empathize

with? I argue that the emotional displays of politicians are different from emotional displays of non-politicians because of citizens' emotional attachment with a politician (especially the one they support). People might be more likely to be affected by a politicians' emotional expression, not just because a politician is of high status and important for our well-being (motivating high affiliation tendencies, which I will discuss in more depth later), but more importantly, because we identify with them.

4.1 Mimicry: automatic response or context dependent?

Before turning to this proposition of identification, a few steps have to be taken first. In order to investigate how the political context influences affect transfer of emotional expressions, we first need to establish whether social context actually influences mimicry, or whether mimicry is an automatic process, independent of one's affiliation intentions. As mentioned above, traditionally scholars perceived mimicry as an unconscious automatic process, independent of the social context and based on the close link between perception and behavior (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999). However, this *Matched Motor Hypothesis* has recently become subject of more scrutiny (Hess and Fischer, 2013). Several scholars demonstrate that mimicry only occurs under certain circumstances, i.e. when a motivation to affiliate is present (as described in the *Emotional Mimicry in Social Context model* of Hess and Fischer, 2013). These affiliation intentions arise for example when someone is perceived as attractive, a member of our in-group, or of high social status (Van Leeuwen et al., 2009; Bourgeois and Hess, 2008; Cheng and Chartrand, 2003). Hence, study 1 starts with a conceptual replication of previous research and tests whether mimicry is automatic (hypothesis 1a: *Matched Motor Hypothesis)* or dependent on the social context (hypothesis 1b: *Emotional Mimicry in Social Context model*). The social context will be operationalized by looking at the difference in mimicry response to an emotional display of a person with a low versus a high social status [1].

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[1] Displays of politicians are not included here, since I will argue later that politicians are not only of high status but also confounded with citizens' emotional attachment

Hypothesis 1a: All emotional displays elicit mimicry

Hypothesis 1b: The emotional displays of people with high status elicit more mimicry compared to the emotional displays of those with low status

4.2 Citizens' Emotional Attachment with Politicians

Although the body of literature concerning mimicry of ordinary faces has been quite established, the mimicry effect might differ in the political realm. Politicians are well-known figures, who are associated with a range of political issues, beliefs, and events, that alone could already provoke an emotional reaction. How people evaluate and feel towards political elites is a debated issue in political science. Two school of thoughts exist, one (the 'revisionists') arguing that the nature of partisanship is a (dispassionate) process of an ongoing evaluation of party performance and issue position (e.g. Garzia, 2013). The other school of thought, starting with *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), suggests that partisanship is an affective bond, developed through socialization in childhood and resulting in a sense of belonging, in which the party's identity is incorporated into one's self-concept. More contemporary scholars extend this work by using the psychological framework of *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2018). According to this work, identification with a certain party involves an affective dimension, such as feelings of belonging, commitment, and attachment to the political party. The scholars find evidence for this, so called *expressive partisanship*, in both the US and Europe (Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2018).

Building on this expressive partisanship approach, one could expect exposure to politicians to evoke some emotional reactions in itself (without showing any emotional expressions on their face). According to the a number of scholars – building on Abelson's (1963) '*hot cognition hypothesis*' – political concepts such as political issues, parties, and leaders, are stored in our memory with affective tags. Whenever such a concept becomes consciously accessible, the related affective tags are automatically retrieved, coloring subsequent cognitive processing (Lodge and Taber, 2005, 2013; Redlawsk, 2006).

More specifically, Cassino and Lodge (2007) find that exposure to political candidates automatically activates these affective tags, without any 'cognitive mediation'. Following this line of reasoning, people with high partisanship have stored more positive affective tags associated with their in-party politician in their memory, activating more emotional reactions when exposed to that politician, compared to people with low partisanship. Furthermore, since this emotional attachment is especially prominent for the party or politician one supports, and out-party politicians might provoke different emotional reactions (Hess and Fischer, 2013, I will return to this issue in the second study), this study will only use displays of in-party politicians. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 2: Displays of politicians trigger more emotional reaction than displays of non-politicians [2]

Following this line of reasoning, being exposed to a politician already elicits affective responses. However, is this affective response mimicry or an activation of emotional attachment to the politician? In the latter case, people show an emotional response to both neutral faces and expressive faces of politicians. This makes it almost impossible to conclude whether the emotional displays triggered emotional contagion or emotional attachment. To control for this, the difference between the emotional response to neutral displays compared to emotional displays of politicians will be tested as well.

4.3   Status or Identification?

Another reason why people mimic politicians is because of their high status in society. Mimicry research shows that high status might also increase one's affiliation intentions, and thereby increases mimicry. For example, Wang and Hamilton (2012) theorize that one's affiliation intentions can be driven by the motivation to enhance one's own social standing. Moreover, mimicry is more likely to occur when the social consequences of the

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[2]When I mention 'emotional reaction' in a hypothesis, this includes both physiological responses (mimicry and skin conductance) and self-reported emotions

enhanced liking (due to mimicking the other person) are more beneficial, for example when affiliating with someone with high status (e.g. you want your boss to like you more than just any other colleague). A couple of experimental studies indeed demonstrate this. In the study by Carr et al. (2014) participants showed more facial mimicry in response to emotional displays of people with a high status job (e.g. physician, senior executive) compared to people with a low status profession (e.g. grocery store stocker, fast food worker), especially in reaction to anger displays. Two other studies measuring behavioral mimicry also found stronger levels of mimicking of high status people (Cheng and Chartrand, 2003; Ashton-James and Levordashka, 2013).

Applying this to the political realm, one might be more likely to mimic a politician because of their elite position, representing citizen's needs in society. However, one might also argue that this elite position of politicians could elicit the opposite, a lower mimicry response. Some citizens experience high apathy towards politics and might therefore have lower affiliation intentions (and thus lower levels of mimicry) toward politicians, compared to people of a more similar background. For example, when given the choice, people often choose to opt out of political broadcasting and rather switch to something more entertaining (Arceneaux et al., 2013). However, since this line of reasoning is more speculative, the following hypothesis is formulated based on the mimicry literature, suggesting higher levels of mimicry in response to high status individuals' expressions:

Hypothesis 3: People show more mimicry in response to emotional displays of people who are of high status (including politicians), compared to people with a low status

For some people, politicians are not just people with a high status, but rather represent a cause that people identify with. This identification, as mentioned in the previous section, can lead people to feel emotionally attached to a certain party or politician (Huddy et al., 2018). Research shows that this high partisan identification can lead to a range of biased processing and decision making in politics (e.g. Taber and Lodge, 2006). Moreover, citizens are more likely to be persuaded by the politician they identify with.

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Hence, one could expect those with high partisan identification to show higher levels of mimicry in response to their in-party politicians' emotional expressions, i.e. being more likely to be emotionally 'contaged' by their politicians' displayed emotions:

> *Hypothesis 4: For those with high partisan identification, emotional displays of the politician will elicit more mimicry compared to the emotional displays of high and low status individuals*

4.4   What is the effect of the distinct emotions displayed?

Due to the lower prevalence of emotional expressions of fear and sadness in politicians, Study 1 will focus on displays of happiness and anger. As the Dartmouth group studies suggested, politicians' emotional expressions communicate a certain signal. Happiness displays signal reassurance and social bonding, whereas anger communicates signs of dominance (Stewart et al., 2009). Hess and Fischer (2013) furthermore suggest that happiness (and to a lesser extent fear and sadness) is an emotional expression signaling affiliative intentions, whereas anger signals the opposite. They argue that mimicking happiness displays is of low 'social costs', since it only signals friendly intentions. Anger, in contrast, communicates signs of dominance, which could turn out costly when targeted at a high status individual, who could perceive this expression as a threat to their status (Tiedens and Fragale, 2003). Bourgeois and Hess (2008) show that these 'low cost' emotions are more likely to be mimicked compared to other emotions. Following these lines of research, one could expect mimicry levels to vary depending on the emotion expressed, leading to the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 5: Happiness displays are mimicked more than anger displays.*

4.5   Who is triggered by politicians' emotional displays?

Besides the impact of social context, mimicry levels can also be moderated by individual differences. Hence, one of the overarching questions of this research project is for *who* these emotional displays of politicians are most emotionally provocative. In study 1, I

focus on two individual differences; emotional empathy and political ideology. According to the mimicry literature, mimicry levels vary as a function of several individual differences. One of these proposed moderators is emotional empathy. Emotional empathy is generally defined as: *"An emotional response that stems from another's emotional state or condition, and involves at least a minimal degree of differentiation between self and other"* (Eisenberg Fabes, 1990, p. 132). Several studies indicate a positive relationship between emotional trait empathy and mimicry (Sonnby-Borgström et al., 2003; Drimalla et al., 2019), leading to the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 6: Individuals with high emotional trait empathy show a stronger mimicry response to politicians' emotional displays, compared to individuals with low emotional trait empathy*

In the psychological literature, one line of research has theorized that liberals and conservatives differ in the way they perceive and recognize facial expressions. This framework, also called the 'socio-relational perspective of political ideology', assumes that expressive behaviors communicate two kinds of signals, *capacity* or *trustworthiness* cues. Capacity cues involve expressions of competence and confidence and are more likely to be displayed when attracting new relationships and while maintaining larger social networks. Trustworthiness cues express vulnerability and are used in more intimate social network situations (Vigil & Strenth,2014). Vigil (2010) argues that self-identified Democrats and Republicans are biased in their judgment of these capacity and trustworthiness cues. When asked to interpret facial expressions in two of their experimental studies, Republicans reported more capacity emotions (joy and anger), while Democrats reported viewing more trustworthiness emotions (sadness and fear) (Vigil, 2010) (Vigil Strenth, 2014). Applying this research to the present study, conservative participants might be more likely to recognize politicians' facial expressions as displays of happiness and anger, consequently evoking more mimicry in response to happy and angry displays, compared to liberal participants. Hence, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

> *Hypothesis 7: Conservatives have stronger emotional reactions in response to*

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5 Study 2: Tempted by the enemies' smile? Mimicry response to emotional displays of out-party politicians.

The aim of study 1 is to examine whether politicians' emotional displays can trigger emotional responses in citizens, especially when we highly identify with them. However, what happens when an opposing politician displays an emotion? Are we tempted by their smile? Or do our negative feelings towards the out-party politician prevent emotional contagion? Recently, several political scientist have started to focus on 'negative partisanship' (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018; Medeiros and Noël, 2014). They argue that besides having a positive emotional attachment, people can also experience strong negative emotions regarding certain political elites. This negative partisanship is a significant predictor of vote choice (Medeiros and Noël, 2014) and also strongly affects polarization Iyengar et al. (2012).

When relating this research to emotional contagion processes, one can expect negative partisanship to impede mimicry in response to an out-party politicians' emotional display. According to the Emotional Mimicry as Social Context model (Hess and Fischer, 2013), a minimal form of positive affiliation is necessary to induce mimicry. However, when there is no form of affiliation between the observer and the expresser, Hess and Fischer (2013) posit that congruent mimicry will not occur and the observer will instead be more likely to experience a reactive emotional response (e.g. getting angry while seeing your out-party politician laugh). To test whether negative partisanship indeed inhibits mimicry, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 8: Emotional displays of an out-party politician evoke less mimicry compared to emotional displays of in-party politicians

Similar to study 1, this study will examine the different effect of the distinct emotions

displayed. As mentioned in section 4 of study 1, anger and happiness expressions differ in the way they communicate affiliative intentions. Bourgeois and Hess (2008) find that regardless of group membership, people mimic happiness displays. However, in their study, anger displays were only mimicked if expressed by an in-group member. The authors argue that happiness is 'low cost' and an affiliative emotion, which is less risky to display compared to anger. Based on this research, the following can be expected:

Hypothesis 9: Out-party politicians' happiness displays elicit mimicry, whereas anger displays elicit a reactive emotional reaction

This reactive response does not necessarily imply that people experience an emotion that is different from the one that is displayed. The difference in reactive emotional response versus emotional contagion is that the former involves experiencing an emotion *towards* someone, while the latter concerns the experience of an emotion *with* someone. For example, seeing an out-party politician show anger can make you angry as well. This angry reaction can be caused by emotional contagion, but can also be triggered by one's negative attitudes and feelings towards the politician (i.e. negative partisanship).

Finally, Study 2 will furthermore examine the moderating role of individual differences, by including a measure of emotional empathy and political ideology, similar to study 1.

6 Research Design Study 1

Design & Procedure

Study 1 has a 3 (type of display: neutral, happy and angry) by 3 (source: low status, high status, and in-party politician) within subject design, leading to a total of 9 displays. Before the experiment starts, participants are asked to answer a pretest to determine the participants' political in-party and to measure demographics and the moderator variables (party identification, political ideology, and emotional empathy). After this, EMG and

SCR electrodes are placed on the participants' face and hands (see measurement). Participants are then randomly presented with three blocks, one for each source (i.e. low or high status or politician). For each block, the three types of displays will be presented. Between blocks, participants are given a bogus task (TBD, e.g. cognitive reflection task) to ensure engagement during each of the blocks.

Each display will be preceded by a blank screen with a fixation cross. The fixation screen will be presented for [TBD] ms, followed by the display, presented for [TBD] ms. After each display, participants are asked to report to what extent they experience certain discrete emotions (see measurement).

Stimuli

TBD. Status will be manipulated by altering the appearance of the people in the low versus high status displays. Since a majority of the biggest parties in the Netherlands have male leaders, and because of the perceived differences and stereotypes regarding emotional expressions between men and women (Adams et al., 2015), for simplicity this study will only use male targets as stimuli. Furthermore, another confounding factor is facial appearance. Research has found that attractiveness, competence and trustworthiness are predictors of success in politicians. In a pilot study, the stimuli will be pretested to ensure equal levels of factors such as attractiveness across stimuli.

Measurement

Electromyography. To measure mimicry response, electromyography (EMG) will be used, measuring the zygomaticus ('smiling' response) and corrugator muscle ('frowning' response). [NOTE: I'll add here why using EMG is a good measure for mimicry and some more details about EMG].

Skin Conductance Response. To assess whether participants also subconsciously experience the emotions expressed in the displays (as the emotional contagion theory would suggest), electrodermal activity is measured. [NOTE: I will do a bit more research on this, to determine whether I want to measure skin conductance response or level.]

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Self-reported Emotions. TBD. After the presentation of each display, participants' experience of several discrete emotions are measured (TBD: anger, happiness, sadness, fear). For each emotion category, two to three items are used (e.g. 'happy', 'cheerful', 'amused' for happiness), according to Izard, Dougherty, Bloxom, Kotsch, 1974. Participants are asked to indicate to which extent they felt each of these emotions on a scale from 1 ("not at all") to 5("very intense"). Other contender is a similar measure of Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2015.

Propensity to vote. To determine participants' in-party, participants indicate their propensity to vote for each party in parliament on a slider ranging from 1 ('I will certainly never vote for his party') to 10 ('I will certainly vote for this party at some time') (following van der Eijk et al., 2006).

Partisan identification. To assess how much people identity with a certain party, the Partisan Identity Scale of Bankert et al. (2017) is used, consisting of 8 items with a 5 point Likert scale (ranging from 1 "totally disagree" to 5 "totally agree"). Example items are *"When I meet someone who supports this party, I feel connected"* and *"When I speak about this party, I refer to them as "my party""*.

Emotional empathy. Emotional empahty will be meausred with the 'Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), a 16-item self-report questionnaire assessing different dimensions of empathy. I will use the subscale 'Empathic Concern' to measure emotional empathy, with items such as *"I would descrie myself as a warm-hearted person"*.

Political Ideology. TBD.

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