Politics and Emotions Investigated Comparatively

Reporting

Project Information

POLEMIC

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Many claim that politicians make more, and more extreme, emotional appeals than ever before, because these appeals win over the emotional citizen. With highly emotive language people like Donald Trump, Geert Wilders or Marine Le Pen are pounding on the portals to power. Do such emotional appeals affect citizens’ political choices? Yes, they can. But, citizens’ existing emotional attachments to parties, leaders or issues moderate the success of emotional appeals. POLEMIC will extend existing theory and use novel methods to explain when (types of) emotional appeals are persuasive, and when emotional attachments prevent persuasion.

Do politicians actually make more emotional appeals than in the past? And if so why are they doing it? We lack historical data of emotional appeals so we cannot answer these questions. POLEMIC will provide unique, historical data (1945-now, Estonia, Czechia, Portugal, Poland, Germany, Denmark, Greece, UK, Austria, Italy, France, Norway, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden) of emotional appeals by politicians in their speeches. I develop and test 3 alternative theories from different intellectual traditions that explain why politicians make emotional appeals: is it either (1) a vote-maximizing strategy, (2) a product of the personality of a politician or (3) just fashionable?

POLEMIC analyses emotional appeals of politicians and the emotional responses of citizens to these appeals. Emotional appeals are texts, and emotions are experiences by the brain. To measure them POLEMIC will use innovative methods in political science: automated text analysis to extract emotion from appeals; physiological measurement to measure emotions.

POLEMIC offers a ground-breaking combination of a macro-perspective (what politicians say) and a micro-perspective (how citizens respond) and forms a bridge between party politics and political psychology. The project’s output will indicate the importance of emotion in the decision-making of citizens, and the level of rationality that is behind politicians’ decision to make emotional appeals.
We have been mostly busy with setting up the research designs for various studies and collecting data. Regarding results, we can offer the following conclusions based on the work that has been published so far.

First, we find that people have physiological responses to rhetoric about political issues. These physiological responses are the consequences of emotional brain states. We are the first to identify physiological responses to political issues (instead of political identities). The fact that people have physiological responses suggests that the role of emotions in politics is much deeper and fundamental, than is suggested by research that looks at emotional self-reports. Also, we find that physiological responses independently affect attitude change, regardless of the emotion that is self-reported.

Second, we find that people have physiological responses to outparty politicians. Specifically, facial muscles that respond to disgusting images are involved in responses to outparty politicians. Put differently, we find that people physiological responses to outparty politicians are similar to physiological responses to pictures of people vomiting. This again suggest a deep emotional connection between people and the politicians they identify with or dislike.

Third, we demonstrate that left-wing and right-wing people have similar physiological responses to threat. It has long been suggested that right-wing people have stronger responses to fear. In a large-scale replication study we show the contrary.

Progress beyond the state of the art and expected potential impact (including the socio-economic impact and the wider societal implications of the project so far)

Sub project 1&2:
Paper 1: methods paper aimed at estimating sentiment and topic simultaneously. Possible outlet: Political Analysis
Paper 2: analysis of the level of arousal and valence in speeches in 7 different countries. Bottom-line: there is not a single clear, structural explanatory factor of the use of emotion in speech. It rather depends more on the individual agency of politicians than hitherto expected. Possible outlet: Comparative Political Studies.
Paper 3: Estimating personality from speech, and establishing the relationship between personality and the use of emotion in political speech.

Possibly sub project 1&2 delivers more papers depending on the intermediary results.

Sub project 3:
Paper 2: secondary test of emotion frames to establish which appraisal is the most important and
whether there is a selection effect.

Paper 3: investigating the effects of emotion frames on information search and attitude formation.

Possibly sub project 3 delivers more papers depending on the intermediary results.

Sub project 4:

Paper 1: physiological lab study that shows that people do not mimic politicians, rather they have reactive responses particularly to emotional faces of outparty politicians. Soon to be submitted to the American Journal of Political Science.

Paper 2: testing whether people perceive emotions in the face differently for politicians. Particularly, female politicians seem to be evaluated dramatically different.

Paper 3: are mirror neurons at all activated when people see emotional expressions of politicians.

Possibly sub project 4 delivers more papers depending on the intermediary results.

In addition to the sub projects, there are two more ongoing projects.

Paper 1: using emotion frames to develop positive emotions.

Paper 2: using videos of politicians to analyze their emotional expressions.

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