

Emotions and Cue-Taking in Foreign Policy Opinion: The Differential Effects of Anger versus Fear on Opinion Formation

Introduction and Theory

How do members of the public develop opinions about politics? Conventional models of public opinion formation assume the primacy of political elites in this process; according to these models, members of the public primarily follow cues from trusted elites about what to believe and how to think. This is especially true in the realm of American foreign policy, where members of the public tend to know relatively little (Baum and Groeling 2009). Given the public's ignorance, most scholars assume that citizens rely heavily on top-down cues from elites, especially preferred party leaders, to inform their foreign policy attitudes (Berinsky 2007, 2009). As such, when elites come to a consensus regarding a foreign policy issue, public opinion should likewise converge, and when elites divide along party lines, the public will as well. Consequently, these *macro-level theories* of foreign policy opinion predict a strong correspondence between elite and mass opinion.

However, mass opinion often diverges sharply from elite opinion. In fact, members of the public tend to report fundamentally different foreign policy preferences from elites (Page and Bouton 2006). In addition, the public regularly disagrees with elites on specific foreign policy debates; public opinion on foreign policy issues frequently splits along partisan lines even in the absence of polarized elite rhetoric (Hayes and Guardino 2011; Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017). These empirical anomalies have raised important questions about the viability of macro-level theories of foreign policy opinion; if members of the public do not consistently adopt elite cues, what sources of information do they use to formulate their opinions? Recent works highlight two potential alternatives to elite cues. First, *mezzo-level theories* suggest that foreign policy cues from social peers are at least as persuasive as those from elites (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017).

Second, *micro-level theories* emphasize the importance of personal values in shaping foreign policy opinion (Goren et al. 2016; Rathbun et al. 2016).

Macro-, mezzo-, and micro-level theories all offer different predictions about which cues will exert the most influence over foreign policy opinion. Still, they are not entirely incompatible with one another. Indeed, if anything, the contrasting results of previous empirical studies indicate that all three of these factors, at least to some extent, have the potential to impact opinion formation. What is missing, however, is a unifying theory that explicates the conditions under which each of these cues is most persuasive. I propose one possible intervening variable in this process: *emotions*. In particular, I posit that the effect of macro-, mezzo-, and micro-level variables on foreign policy opinion will reflect the emotions that a foreign policy issue or event evokes. In this paper, I contrast the effects of two discrete emotions – anger and fear – on the opinion formation process. To do so, I use Zaller (1992)’s highly influential “Receive-Accept-Sample” (RAS) model of public opinion as a guide. This model subdivides the opinion formation process into three stages. First, *reception*: whether an individual is exposed to and understands the content of a political cue. Second, *acceptance*: whether an individual accepts that cue as true. Third, *sampling*: whether an individual recalls that cue later on when asked to state their opinion. I argue below that anger and fear may exert diametrically opposite effects on individual behavior at each of these three stages.

Receive-Accept-Sample Model

In order to evaluate the role of emotions in opinion formation, I draw on a widely used model of public opinion: Zaller (1992)’s “Receive-Accept-Sample,” or RAS, model. This model treats public opinion as the product of three complementary processes. First, individuals must

“*receive*” a political cue.¹ In order to devise an opinion about a topic, individuals need to possess at least some information about that topic. Second, individuals must “*accept*” that political cue as true. If a cue is deemed inaccurate or irrelevant, it will have little bearing on individuals’ subsequent opinions. Third, individuals must “*sample*” from available political cues – namely, recall them later when considering their opinion on a topic. Given the well-documented effects of emotions on information processing (see Lerner et al. 2015 for a review), it seems plausible that emotions could alter the outcomes of each of these three processes. In particular, I focus on the differential effects of *anger* versus *fear* at each stage of the RAS model. The application of these emotions to the foreign policy realm has empirical precedent; previous work on foreign policy opinion (e.g., Lerner et al. 2003) finds that anger and fear are both common responses to foreign policy events but are associated with opposing policy preferences. In this exploratory work, I seek to expand on these earlier studies by digging deeper into the mechanisms by which these two emotions shape responsiveness to political cues.

Reception Stage

The first stage of the RAS model pertains to “reception,” or an individual’s likelihood of being exposed to a political cue. Fear and anger should evince contrasting effects on behavior in this area. Importantly, anger and fear correspond to different cognitive appraisals of certainty; anger is associated with a high degree of certainty, whereas fear involves low levels of certainty (Lerner and Keltner 2001). In order to mitigate the discomfort that results from uncertainty,

¹ Of note, I define cues somewhat differently from Zaller. In particular, Zaller differentiates between persuasive and cueing messages. First, persuasive messages are “arguments or images providing a reason for taking a position or point of view” (Zaller 1992: 41). Second, cueing messages reflect “‘contextual information’ about the ideological or partisan implications of a persuasive message” (42) and enable citizens to draw connections between persuasive messages and their personal political predispositions. In this paper, however, I use the term “cue” more generically to refer to any political message that may influence an individual’s overarching attitudes or beliefs.

feelings of fear motivate a search for new information. Indeed, fear is associated with increased attention to and interest in politics (Gadarian and Albertson 2014; Marcus and MacKuen 1993). In short, when people feel fear, they are driven to learn more about the target of their fear. Through this learning process, individuals will likely be exposed to a greater assortment of information. Thus, if a foreign policy issue provokes fear, individuals will pay closer attention to and gather more information about that issue. In contrast, as a high certainty emotion, anger will not engender these same information-seeking impulses. As such, when experiencing anger, individuals will stick to their usual patterns of political engagement. All else equal, feelings of fear should thus cause increased exposure to political cues, relative to feelings of anger.

Furthermore, fear and anger may be associated with exposure to different *types* of political cues. Since anger wedds individuals to their previous stereotypes and habits, feelings of anger should translate to continued reliance on one's usual cue-givers. In contrast, since fear leads individuals to seek out new information, feelings of fear should expand the sources of information to which these individuals attend.² In the realm of foreign policy, political elites constitute the default cue-giver for the public (Berinsky 2007, 2009). Consequently, if angry people encounter political information, this information is likely to come exclusively from elites. In contrast, when fearful people receive political cues, these cues may originate from a number of sources – both elite and otherwise.

The reception stage of the RAS model focuses on a person's likely exposure to political cues. I expect that emotions exert substantial influence on this first step in opinion formation. Overall, I predict that, given their distinct action tendencies (Frijda and Mesquita 2000), anger

² For instance, fear is associated with rapid social diffusion of information (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). When people are anxious, they naturally turn to friends and family for support. A likely consequence of this consultation process is that fearful individuals will discover the political positions of others within their social networks – in other words, they will be more likely to receive social cues.

and fear will correspond to different levels of exposure to political cues. First, relative to anger, fear should *increase* exposure to political cues. Moreover, fear should increase exposure to a *diverse* array of political cues (beyond just elites). Taken together, these preliminary predictions indicate the likely importance of emotions to cue-taking models of foreign policy opinion.

Acceptance Stage

The second stage of the RAS model relates to “acceptance” of cues that have been received. To this end, I predict that anger and fear will influence the persuasiveness of different cues. In particular, these two emotions may shape the perceived cogency of cues via manipulating a person’s depth of thought (Lerner et al. 2015). “Mood-as-information” models of emotions (see Clore and Gasper 2000) suggest that emotions serve an adaptive function by signaling when a situation or topic merits further attention. In uncertain situations, emotions should thus prompt individuals to engage in more effortful, systematic processing of information, whereas in certain situations, emotions instead trigger automatic, heuristic processing (Lerner and Tiedens 2006). As described above, anger and fear correspond to opposite appraisals of certainty, with anger constituting a high-certainty emotion and fear a low-certainty emotion (Lerner and Keltner 2001). I thus expect that these two emotions will correspond to differing judgments regarding the relevance and veracity of political cues.

One example of this disconnect relates to the impact of *source expertise* on acceptance of political cues. When individuals engage in heuristic processing, they tend to fixate on a message’s source, rather than its content (Lerner et al. 2015; Tiedens and Linton 2001). When feeling angry, individuals will thus be primarily attentive to the source of a political cue, leading to greater acceptance of cues whose sources are deemed credible or trustworthy (e.g., co-partisans). This fixation on source expertise may reinforce the outsized importance of elite cues

in the context of anger; when angry, individuals will primarily receive cues from trusted elites and will be more likely to accept these cues indiscriminately. In contrast, when fearful, individuals will pay greater attention to the quality of available information and thus be more likely to accept cues from unlikely sources (e.g., opposing partisans) or reject cues from trusted elites.

The acceptance stage of the RAS model emphasizes the importance of prior attitudes on responses to political cues; people are generally more likely to accept cues that are congruent with their political predispositions and reject cues that run counter to their pre-existing beliefs (the so-called “Resistance Axiom,” Zaller 1992: 44). Emotions may either magnify or offset these baseline tendencies. On one hand, anger may exacerbate the acceptance of attitude-consistent cues, especially when cues come from political elites. On the other hand, fear may lead individuals to internalize cues from atypical sources, thereby increasing their probability of accepting attitude-inconsistent cues.

Sampling Stage

Finally, the third stage of the RAS model focuses on the measurement of public opinion via survey responses. In particular, Zaller posits that a person’s stated opinion will reflect the mix of “considerations,” or arguments for or against a certain policy position, in their head at the time of measurement. As such, those cues that are easier to recall will be more influential in later inference. Emotions may affect a person’s ability to remember certain cues. In particular, studies of mood-congruent processing (Lerner and Tiedens 2006) find that individuals can more readily recall information that aligns with their current affective state. Therefore, if people are feeling angry or fearful, they will conjure those cues that are most consistent with these emotions. It remains unclear, however, what *a priori* predictions can be drawn about the differential effects of

anger and fear at this stage of opinion formation. Although it seems likely that fearful individuals would recall different cues from angry individuals, the current readings offer limited insight into how these differences might map onto the macro-, mezzo-, and micro-level theories described above. Moving forward, I will thus dig deeper into this subset of the emotions literature to identify how, if at all, emotions shape which types of cues linger most in memory.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In this paper, I offer a preliminary description of the contrasting effects of anger versus fear on foreign policy opinion. Using the “Receive-Accept-Sample” model as a starting point, I attempt to demonstrate the unique behavioral correlates of anger and fear at each stage of the opinion formation process. The results of this exercise indicate that these two emotions may exert substantial influence on the reception and acceptance stages of opinion formation but less on the sampling stage. Specifically, I expect that feelings of anger will heighten individuals’ susceptibility to elite cues, whereas feelings of anxiety will increase individuals’ responsiveness to a greater variety of cues. As such, macro-level theories of foreign policy opinion may be more likely to hold when foreign policy issues provoke anger, whereas micro- and mezzo-level theories may be more relevant when foreign policy issues arouse anxiety. However, more work is necessarily to substantiate this claim. Looking ahead, I will continue to refine my theoretical expectations about the likely effects of emotions on cue-taking models of public opinion.

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