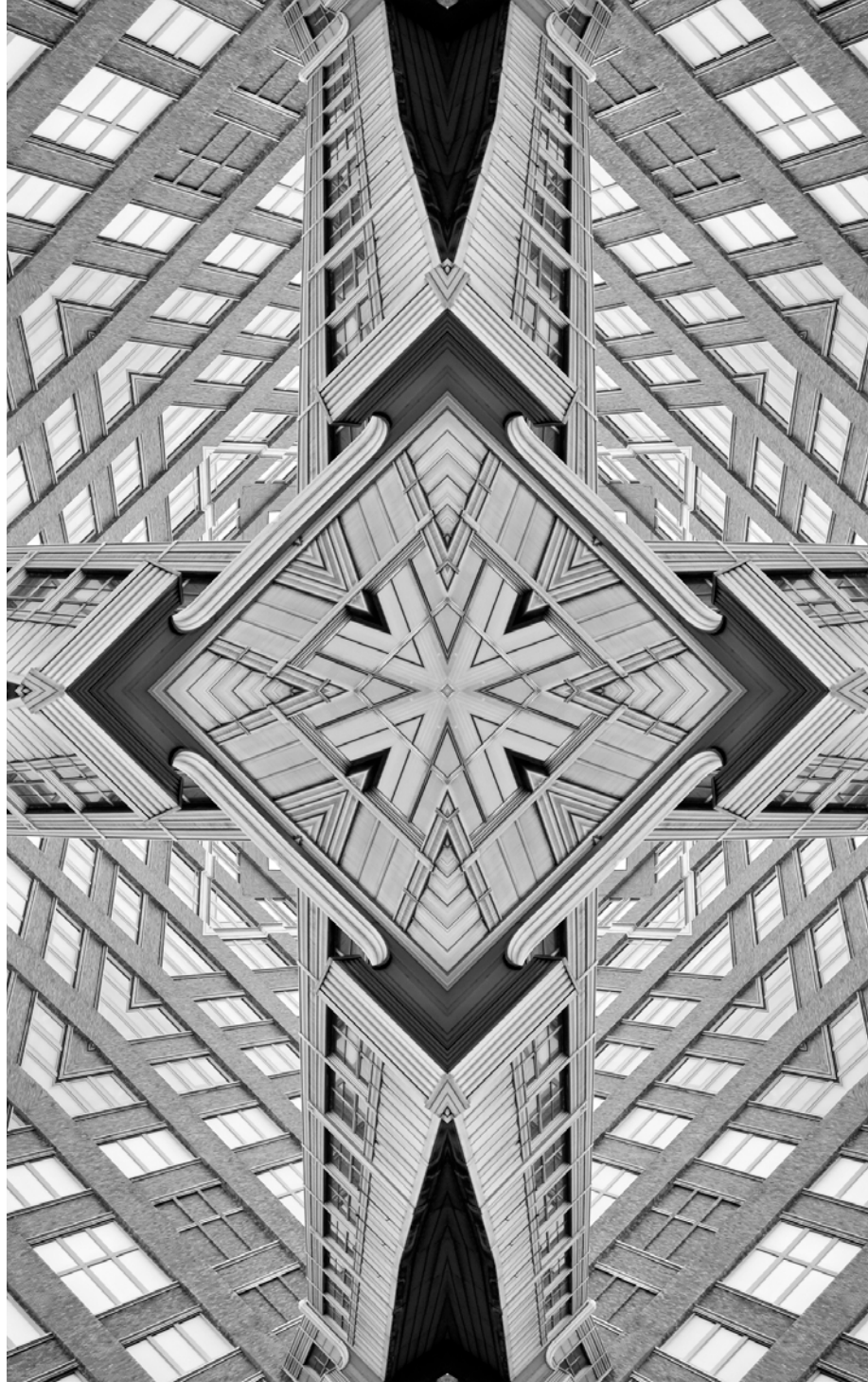


Issue

Brief

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Emotions and Vote Choice: Perspectives from the US and India

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Abstract

While the idea that emotional appeal is central to political persuasion may serve common intuition, the dynamics underscoring how and why this is so, remain underexplored. This primer collates insights from neuroscience and political psychology to show why emotions are essential to vote choice. It explores the effects of emotional appeals on voter perceptions using examples from campaign advertisements in US elections. The analysis finds that political campaigns recognise the centrality of emotions in shaping voter perceptions and strategically leverage voters' emotional vulnerabilities to fulfill electoral goals. The brief then applies the theoretical and empirical insights gained from the US context to understand the role of emotions in shaping the electoral salience of the Balakot airstrike. The analysis suggests that the centrality of emotions in vote choice discussed in this primer cuts across geographies.

In the study of political persuasion and its impact on voters, the role of emotions remains underexplored. Popular discourse and common-sense wisdom have often acknowledged the primacy of emotions in shaping voter choice. This is not a novel idea, in fact: the fourth president of the United States James Madison had warned against letting the “passions” of the citizenry “infiltrate” the political arena.¹ In India too, the role of emotions in shaping electoral outcomes may seem intuitive; yet apart from a few isolated studies, the scholarship on this relationship has been limited. One such study found that in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination, the Indian National Congress gained 25 seats in the ensuing 1984 Lok Sabha election owing to “assassination-induced sympathy.”² Such studies serve the common understanding that voters do not always abide by the “rational choice models” and can be swayed by emotional messaging.

To be sure, there is no dearth of research in political psychology that validates common intuition about the importance of emotions in shaping voter choice.³ Indeed, it is not only vote choice that is influenced by emotions, but also political participation, candidate perceptions, and attitudes towards policy.⁴ Since politics at its most fundamental level is about the power to persuade voters into believing that proposed policy agendas are in their interest, logic dictates that emotions help shape political calculus and voter choice. Despite the apparent obviousness of this claim, there has been little systematic analysis from a policy perspective on this subject, and less so in the Indian context. This brief offers a primer that will illustrate why emotions constitute an important part of political participation and vote choice. Subsequently, by using examples from campaign advertisements in US elections, the brief discusses specific effects of emotional appeals on voter perceptions.

“Common-sense wisdom acknowledges the primacy of emotions in shaping voter choice.”

The analysis then applies the theoretical and empirical insights gained by examining the US context, to one case study in India: the Balakot air strike that took place in February 2019, and how the emotions it triggered may have shaped the fortunes of the BJP before the 2019 general elections. Using media sources and examining campaign speeches, the brief dissects the largely uninvestigated role of emotions in shaping vote choice in India. The aim is to help readers understand the affective roots of political decision-making and reiterate the limits of relying on rational choice explanations for how voters make decisions.

Why Emotions Matter

The field of neuroscience has greatly accelerated the interest in emotions as a driver of political decision-making, providing a compelling and scientifically robust explanation for why it is a mistake to ignore the affective roots of public opinion formation. Psychologist Drew Westen from Emory University in 2006 examined the neurological roots of confirmation bias—the tendency to find evidence that support an individual’s pre-existing beliefs and discount everything that contradicts it. The study found that people’s predisposition towards this bias has neurological roots, seemingly hardwired into the processing of new information.⁵ The research paradigm was simple: it asked 15 strong Democrats and 15 strong Republicans to assess statements by presidential candidates John Kerry and George W. Bush where they clearly contradicted themselves. Despite contradictory claims by both parties, subjects criticised candidates based only on their partisan preferences and appeared to engage in confirmation bias.⁶

Furthermore, the study found that during candidate assessments, the part of the brain associated with rational reasoning—the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—was inactive. The fMRI brain scans revealed high activation in the orbitofrontal cortex, which is key to emotion processing; the anterior cingulate—a brain area associated with conflict resolution; and the posterior cingulate, responsible for moral accountability.⁷ Thus, it seems that the tendency for voters to think as partisans even in the face of contradictory evidence has strong neural underpinnings.

If parts of the brain responsible for cognitive processing are inactive and those responsible for morality and emotions are active, it makes a strong case for not looking at voter choice as merely a cognitive phenomenon. The study also found that when subjects reached emotionally comfortable conclusions about candidate preference, the ventral striatum—the brain area associated with reward and pleasure—was activated.⁸ If humans indeed are reward-maximising species, the finding that political choice which comforts our emotional predispositions activates brain areas responsible for pleasure, is an important one. The researcher for this study notes, “It seems that partisans twirl their cognitive kaleidoscope until they get the conclusions they want.”⁹ This neuroscientific support for humans’ predisposition to engage in confirmation bias is powerful evidence for why emotional messaging is key to political campaigns and voter choice.

Real-world research has validated what neuroscientific evidence suggests about the emotional basis of confirmation bias in political choice. Specifically, the idea that voters purely rely on cognition, making logical cost-benefit calculations about their political preferences has been strongly refuted. Research on how citizens process political information has revealed that when voters come across information contradicting their beliefs about their preferred candidate, they take longer to process this information and often fail to adjust their beliefs

Why Emotions Matter

accordingly.¹⁰ This predisposition towards confirmation bias is especially heightened for polarising political issues like, in the US for instance, gun control and affirmative action—issues that inspire strong emotional reactions. To illustrate this, researchers asked subjects for their opinions on gun control and affirmative action following which they gave the participants pro and con arguments used by professional lobbyists to shape policy on these issues. The subjects were tasked with rating each argument—for and against, using pure logic and cognitive reasoning. As hypothesised, this was not possible.¹¹ Despite being told to only rely on cognition, the participants were highly biased, giving higher ratings to arguments aligning with their sentiments about gun control and affirmative action.¹²

One does not have to only rely on laboratory experiments to see this tendency for confirmation bias play out in popular discourse. Emotional ties with political candidates can often cloud a person’s judgement about their policy level effectiveness. For example, former US President Barack Obama positioned himself as a working-class family man, frequently appearing on late night talk shows at his articulate best.¹³ Obama’s strategy of situating himself within popular culture trends surely made him more affable and helped viewers form emotion-based impressions of the man they normally only saw in the political realm.¹⁴ These positive emotional associations about Obama have led many to overlook his chequered record on human rights violations and blunders in his administration’s Middle East policy.^a As noted by Cornel West of *The Guardian*, “The mainstream media and academia failed to highlight these painful truths linked to Obama. Instead, most well-paid pundits on TV and radio celebrated the Obama brand.”¹⁵ This “Obama brand” also tinged the way a layperson viewed Obama’s legacy, often clouding their judgement about his policy blunders.

Thus, it is clear that human beings are predisposed to filter information in a way that aligns to their preferences. This section has argued that such preferences are deeply embedded in one’s emotional and moral sentiments, as indicated in the strong neural basis for these findings. Nonetheless, it seems that such biases may be operating at a sub-conscious level, compelling us to ask an important question: Why are emotional biases so pervasive in political reasoning?

a Even though Obama took office with the promise of stopping the torture techniques of interrogation by the CIA, and closing the military prisons in the Guantanamo Bay, his efforts were considered half-hearted. He has also been criticised for stepping up the use of aerial drones without sufficient clarity about the legal framework that dictates their actions especially in volatile regions such as Yemen and Somalia where the United States’ did not have a heightened stake. His administration’s reluctance to address the destruction caused by the Assad regime, and instead focusing on ISIS was also considered a blunder. Some accusations of hypocrisy over Obama’s Middle East policy were also prevalent. Namely, providing aid to Egypt after the coup despite the government engaging in mass killings and a generous aid package to Israel despite the killings in Gaza.

How Emotions Shape Voter Choice: System 1 Processing

Daniel Kahneman, in his seminal book *“Thinking Fast and Slow”* has shown how humans interpret information through two systems: he named them System 1 and System 2.¹⁶ Put simply, System 1 refers to the automatic processing that is driven by instinct and prior experience; System 2 is more deliberative, requiring conscious reasoning. Thus System 1 is “fast” and easy whereas System 2 processing is “slow” and requires more effort.¹⁷ Those who believe political choice is bound by rationality assume that voters are only utilising System 2 processing in making decisions, but recent research indicates otherwise.

Since System 1 processing requires little effort, if at all, some researchers have argued that vote choice cannot be fully understood without accounting for System 1 processing. With advances in experimental design and ability to prime subjects with emotional cues before gauging vote choice, the importance of emotion-led information processing has come to the fore. This was evident during the 2000 US presidential campaign, in an advertisement focused on candidate Al Gore’s prescription drug plan for seniors.¹⁸ The word “RATS” was used as a priming agent to meet political ends. Research found that those exposed to this prime were less likely to trust Democrats to protect Medicare, and thus less likely to support Al Gore.¹⁹ Even experiments testing the effects of disgust primes have shown them to temporarily increase the likelihood of opposing support for policies advocating LGBTQ rights.²⁰ Thus, it is evident that System 1 processing which is automatic and emotion-led can shape political preferences.

It is important to note that advocating for the importance of System 1 processing in shaping vote choice does not mean that cognition and deliberative reasoning does not take place. Much to the contrary, this paper posits that emotions precede conscious deliberation. This is known as the “primacy of affect” theory.²¹ Put simply, proponents of this ideology believe that emotional states are the first filter that sifts through information about who and what to vote for. Thus, emotions shape the capacity for deliberation and often lead people to different conclusions about political preferences. For instance, research has shown that anxious voters are more likely to carefully consider all information at hand before making a choice while angry voters tend to make more instinctual decisions.²² Emotions act as a catalyst for political learning, with emotional states shaping the nature of information-processing.²³

How Emotions Shape Voter Choice: System 1 Processing

To properly understand why and how emotions precede conscious deliberation about political choice, it is crucial to understand that information with an emotional quotient is more easily recalled²⁴ and since political campaigns require recall value, emotions become central to their strategy for gaining electoral salience. This “primacy of affect” is thus a product of thoughts, images and arguments “called into one’s conscious mind” following a rapid emotional reaction.²⁵ Memory functions as a network of nodes and linkages that get activated to form associations.²⁶ For example, if one recalls the name “Narendra Modi”, nodes associated with this subject are activated from long-term memory. These nodes could be “RSS”, “leader”, “CAA”, and so on. It is the emotional predisposition towards a candidate that determines what kind of associations are formed in one’s long-term memory. Thus, for those who have a positive view of a candidate, the associations made would reflect that positivity and in turn determine what information about the candidate the conscious mind must work with. Especially in a post-truth world^b where people seem entitled to “their own facts”, the idea that emotions and partisan affiliation may decide which information people choose to engage with is an important insight that may help explain hyperpolarisation about political choice in the 21st century.

One may be quick to assume that the “primacy of affect” is only applicable to less educated voters who lack an interest or insights into the political process. However, research studying the relationship between emotions and political sophistication has a whole different story to tell.²⁷ In their research on anger’s role in voter choice, Brader et. al found that campaign advertisements that appeal to anxiety and enthusiasm are more likely to influence people with high

levels of political sophistication—the uninvolved voter rarely responded to these emotional cues.²⁸ Other research in the American context has also shown that subjects who reported higher levels of political engagement also reported feeling more emotions in response to political candidates. Thus, the notion that more education or awareness about politics prevents emotions from playing a role in shaping decisions is erroneous and reiterates the universality of emotions as an important variable in voter choice.²⁹

“Emotions act as a catalyst for political learning, with emotional states shaping the nature of information-processing.”

^b A world wherein objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

How Emotions Shape Voter Choice: System 1 Processing

A reason why political choice may be motivated by emotional reactions has to do with the role of partisan identity to the self. For those involved with politics, partisanship and political preferences can become integral to one's self concept.³⁰ This phenomenon has been compared to the tendency for people with high religiosity to tie their religious affiliation to their self-concept. Because identifiers like political partisanship, religion and gender are often core to the "self", these group affiliations protect and nurture the essential process of socialisation, thereby fulfilling an innate human need for belongingness and group think. Thus, topics of politics can be subject to motivated reasoning wherein emotional biases may precede rational choice deliberation.³¹ Behavioural scientist, Patrick Miller also provided this rationale when he posited that high political engagement does not prevent emotions from playing a role in vote choice. He argued that the more one is engaged with politics, the more politics shapes the core of one's "self" and makes political sophistication an accelerator rather than deterrent of emotion-based political choice.³²

This primer has offered an understanding of the universality of emotions factoring into vote choice. In the subsequent section, it shall focus on how the three primary emotions of anger, fear and hope are leveraged for electoral gains, reaffirming the importance of emotions to campaign messaging and voter choice.

“It is an erroneous notion that more education or political awareness prevents emotions from playing a role in shaping decisions.”

Leveraging Voters Emotions: An Examination of Campaign Advertisements

Harriet Levin Balkind—the founder of Honest Ads, a non-profit dedicated to educating the public about political advertising—aptly said that rational arguments for or against policies are rarely central to ads, because “who votes based on reason?”³³ Examining how emotions like anger, fear or hope are leveraged for electoral gains through political ads provides a compelling portrait of how the theories advocating for the primacy of emotions in shaping vote choice discussed earlier, translates into campaign strategy. It is important to note that emotions co-occur. This means that people may feel both angry and fearful, or happy and enthusiastic, when thinking about political preferences. To account for this, researchers suggest conceptualising emotions on a two-dimension model that accounts for distinctions between negative and positive emotions. Thus, emotions like fear and anger that have a negative valence, or on the other end of the spectrum, hope and enthusiasm that have a positive valence, can be studied in tandem and for isolated effects, respectively. This will give a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. In the subsequent analysis, this primer examines the individual effects of hope, fear and anger on voters as gauged through specific political advertisements that leveraged each emotion in a hope to mobilise votes.

Anger

Anger is considered a powerful emotion that mobilises voters, and campaign strategists have effectively leveraged this emotion for their agenda. Laboratory experiments have presented powerful evidence in support of anger’s ability to mobilise voters. Research looking at the emotional basis of political participation in the context of US presidential elections was indicative of anger’s mobilising capacity. One study presented participants with two advertisements that had the same policy information about violent crime but one of them had anger cues while the other did not. Those exposed to the ad with anger cues showed a significantly higher interest to vote in the upcoming election than those exposed to the ad without any anger cues.³⁴

This efficacy of anger ads has been acknowledged by political campaigns. Most notably, the 2004 Bush campaign³⁵ issued a web ad that sought to sow anger against Democrat candidate John Kerry. They did so by intercutting images of Adolf Hitler to demonise the Democrats. This ad was emailed to six million supporters³⁶ before they cast their ballot and the visual of Hitler and the emotional repugnance it triggered was deemed key in shaping voter perceptions.

Leveraging Voters Emotions: An Examination of Campaign Advertisements

Anger is often triggered by “conflict over familiar disliked groups” and this undermines new information seeking.³⁷ Thus, the use of Hitler’s universally disliked image and its association with a political adversary through the advertisement reinforces a strong aversion towards the adversary and undermines information-seeking that may favour the opposition. Anger also triggers increased political participation because it makes voters feel they have more control and leads to an augmented belief that their political choice has consequence. This pervasiveness of anger in forging electoral salience may explain why the outcome of the 2004 US election was construed to be a question of whether Democrats would be “angry enough to out mobilise Republicans.”³⁸ In response, the Republican strategy was to divert anti-incumbent anger by focusing on emotionally charged issues like gay marriage to dilute the anger of the public towards the protracted US wars in the Middle East.

The importance of invoking anger in voters was also evident in the 2008 US election wherein research found that anger dramatically boosted voter participation.³⁹ This electoral salience of anger carried forward to subsequent elections, especially shaping Obama’s successful campaign against Mitt Romney in 2012. The Obama campaign⁴⁰ spent most of its advertising money trying to portray Romney as a “callous multi-millionaire” working at the behest of the elites. This was a departure from Obama’s previous campaign that sought to present him as the agent of change, focusing less on his opponent’s deficiencies and more on his positive attributes.⁴¹ These examples reiterate the fact that anger against opposition boosts political participation and is more persuasive in solidifying support than merely relying on policy-level advantages of the candidate in question.

“Emotions co-occur: people may feel both angry and fearful or happy and enthusiastic, when thinking about political preferences.”

Leveraging Voters Emotions: An Examination of Campaign Advertisements

Fear

Much like anger, fear too, is a negative emotion that if triggered against a political opposition, can have a profound impact on voter perceptions. The most famous example of using fear for electoral gains is the “daisy girl” advertisement created by the Lyndon Johnson campaign against Barry Goldwater.⁴² This famous attack ad presented a young girl picking petals of a daisy while counting each one. This image was intercut with the countdown of a nuclear explosion narrated by Lyndon Johnson, and as the countdown continues the camera zooms in to the right pupil of the young girl which cuts to a mushroom cloud depicting a nuclear explosion. The ad sought to instill public fear that if Lyndon Johnson is not elected, Goldwater would start a nuclear war.⁴³ The use of an innocent girl as the protagonist in the advertisement served the purpose of scaring the public about nuclear war and making them aware of the dire consequences of such wars. Tony Schwartz—the creator of the infamous ad called it the “first Rorschach test of the American public.”⁴⁴ Although the Democrats opposed this attack ad and it was eventually taken down, it became instantly famous and was also featured on TIME magazine. The advertisement was considered crucial in ensuring Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory in the 1964 US election and paved the way for many such advertisements focused on instilling fear of the opposition to solidify electoral supremacy.⁴⁵ This only reiterates how embedded fear appeals can be in public consciousness and how it may sway electoral outcomes.

More recently, Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign⁴⁶ reiterated the power of fear appeals. One of his most persuasive campaign advertisements showed a US war hero standing in a cemetery with the tagline, “My friends did not make it. They did their part, do yours. STOP. HILLARY. NOW.”⁴⁷ These advertisements embody what late journalist Joe McGinnis observed about politics, he said, “voting is the psychological purchase of a candidate.”⁴⁸ For voters to purchase these candidates, emotions and not facts are key.

The role of fear in increasing voter participation has also been disputed. Some argue that fear in turn leads to voters feeling more helpless about politics, causing them to withdraw and become more passive. Researcher Christopher Weber argues that while both anger and fear affect voters, the former mobilises voters while the latter makes them withdraw.⁴⁹ However, this ability for fear to make people withdraw is also beneficial to political campaigns, especially in

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the goal of encouraging voter absenteeism.⁵⁰ This is because often, electoral salience is not only a product of getting partisans to vote for you but also entails encouraging non-partisans to withdraw.

Enthusiasm

As iterated earlier, research has found invoking anger to be a powerful vote mobiliser while related emotions on the spectrum, like sadness, have proven to trigger helplessness and withdrawal from the political process.⁵¹ For better electoral prospects, it is not enough to merely antagonise the opposition but a simultaneous invocation of enthusiasm for the preferred candidate is needed. The famous Trump campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” is an example of invoking pride in voters.

To dampen the vicious nature of attack ads, campaigns have frequently put forth “softer” portrayals of their leader to garner positive emotions of hope and enthusiasm. For instance, Richard Nixon’s campaign⁵² released ads in a documentary style, giving people a glimpse of life behind the curtains. These ads attempted to humanise Nixon who at the time, was often perceived to be “cold and humorless”.⁵³ By capturing him playing piano for Duke Ellington or trading laughs with Chinese translators, these ads sought to counteract the toxicity of his attack ads against Mcgovern and inspire enthusiasm for Nixon as a political figure.

Even in the aftermath of the Vietnam war which called for solidarity and reduced factional infighting to promote a united front, Gerald Ford’s campaign pushed ads with an overarching positive message to inspire hope for the future.⁵⁴ To calm anxieties of American people fearing post-war inflation, the campaign released an ad with a montage of happy Americans accompanied by an upbeat song with the lyrics, “I am feeling good about America. I am feeling good about me.”⁵⁵

In the case of Nixon or even Donald Trump, stroking sentiments of hope and pride occurred in tandem with the ad’s triggering anger and fear of the adversary. Thus, despite analysing these emotions in different categories, campaigns tend to use positive and negative emotion appeals, depending on

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external circumstances. With Nixon, enthusiasm ads were used to counter his “cold” public image whereas with Gerald Ford, it was to calm post-Vietnam war anxieties. While the aforementioned emotions have individual effects on voters, they often have an interactive influence as emotions are subjective experiences that may be interpreted differently. Thus, studying how more than one emotion may be invoked through advertisements and how those effects differ from single emotional appeals is an important undertaking.

It is also evident that campaign strategists have a logic behind which emotional appeals are used when, reiterating the strategic value of emotion-driven political persuasion. Research on the association between emotional appeal in ads and when it is used in the weeks preceding voting day found that anger appeals were more common at the start of the campaign trail, owing to its mobilising capacity.⁵⁶ Fear-based advertisements were common closer to voting day, reasons for which may be due to the ability for fear laden associations to be stronger in one's long-term memory.⁵⁷ On the other hand, hope and enthusiasm appeals were found to be high at the beginning of the campaign to garner excitement, but eventually declined. Thus, a tried and tested strategy of appealing to particular emotions at specific times in the campaign process to maximise voter participation is pervasive, further reiterating the strategy and forethought that guides the interplay of emotions in politics.

A Puzzle from India: The Balakot Air Strike

This brief posits that certain insights gained from analysing the US context can help shed light on the centrality of emotions in campaign rhetoric and its dovetailing with domestic voter perceptions in India. For instance, longitudinal analysis of campaign ads in the US pointed to the role of “incumbency effect” in determining which emotions are invoked by a campaign. Anti-incumbent campaigns were found to rely more heavily on garnering hope and enthusiasm while incumbent campaigns focused more on anger and aversion. This role of “incumbency effect” can be used to view the difference between Narendra Modi’s campaign message in 2014 vis-a-vis 2019. From positioning his campaign on the slogan “*Acche din aaenge* (better days will come)” that primarily invoked hope for the future, to a 2019 campaign that ran on muscular nationalism focusing on national security grievances and anger over the cross-border terror threat, a case for the shift in affective emphasis from hope to invoking anger could be made.

Opinion poll data in India has indicated that Indian citizens were deeply affected by the Pulwama attack and construed the retaliatory airstrike to be a major foreign policy victory for the Modi government, evidenced in a boost in Modi’s approval ratings in the aftermath of the strike.⁵⁸ However, the role of emotional reactions to the airstrike and its impact on voter perceptions has been ignored. Little empirical research has been done on this front and the subsequent analysis is not definitive but exploratory.

According to an RSS insider who wished to remain anonymous, “Modi has always believed that you need an emotional factor in elections.”⁵⁹ Many have argued that the Balakot airstrike provided the BJP campaign with that strong affective component. This was clear in the stark differences in Modi’s speeches before and after the airstrike. A content analysis of Modi’s speeches conducted by *ThePrint* provides a compelling picture for how the airstrikes shaped BJP’s campaign rhetoric.⁶⁰

Before the strike, words associated with welfare schemes like “*yojana*” was used very often (168 times) while after the

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airstrike, the word was only uttered 47 times. On the other hand, post-Balakot, the words “Pakistan” and “security” saw a massive upsurge.⁶¹

Research in the US has found that foreign security threats may invoke anxiety or anger among the electorate.⁶² Which of the two emotions characterises the polity depends on how the events are framed by the government and the notion of the perpetrator held by the electorate. Modi’s positioning of the Pulwama attack emphasised how angry India was and that the perpetrators will have to pay for their actions. This framing of the attack as a cause for rage, coupled with the fact that Pakistan is a familiar adversary with a long history of conflict with India, played a role in making the Pulwama attack an anger-invoking event, seen in the outrage⁶³ expressed by a section of Indians on twitter and through anti-Pakistan demonstrations in pockets of the nation.⁶⁴ Thus, the retaliatory airstrike gained electoral significance as it communicated to the Indian people that Modi would acknowledge and address the public mood of anger by holding miscreants to account and safeguard India’s security from foreign threats.

In relation to US elections, anger was found to be a persuasive emotion that helps mobilise a voter base and increase political participation, making it a lucrative emotion to leverage in campaign rallies.⁶⁵ Moreover, anger also undermines information-seeking that may support one’s political opponent while also compelling a shift in priorities of the electorate. This tendency for anger to alter priorities was studied in in the US in relation to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.⁶⁶ Following 9/11, anger over the terrorist attack altered the public and government’s response.

The US government allowed for a one trillion-dollar expansion to the Homeland Security department.⁶⁷ In hindsight, many have argued that this was a case of misappropriated government funds and indicated a case for emotional upheaval altering priorities. Even the American people seemed supportive of giving counterterrorism efforts an exceedingly high priority despite the “vanishingly small” probability of being a victim to it and expressed willingness in deprioritising their commitment to human rights in lieu of combating terrorism.⁶⁸

“In the US, anger was found to be a persuasive emotion that helps mobilise a voter base and increase political participation.”

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This tendency for anger over security threats clouding the electorate's judgement about other pressing issues and compelling the government to often deprioritise other policy imperatives—at least on a rhetoric level, was also seen in the Indian context. The employment crisis, concerns over the handling of the economy, and opposition claims about a seemingly dubious Rafaele deal were overshadowed by the overarching national security threat.⁶⁹ The reduced utterances on these topics by Modi in speeches after the Pulwama attack is reflective of this.


One may wonder what the value of understanding the role of emotions in shaping voter perceptions in India is if it has not been empirically studied thus far. This paper argues that especially in a country like India with multiple intersecting group identities, leveraging emotions is a valuable tool for governance. Emotions reorient group affiliations and many often view this only in the context of dividing groups and forging conflict. However, as demonstrated by research on anger and enthusiasm on voter perceptions, emotions can also be a great unifier. Tying a nation together under a common cause is rooted in affect and not rational cost-benefit calculus. Emotive issues like the Balakot airstrike cut across the identity fissures in India and invoke the larger identifier of nationalism as on questions of national pride, sub-group identities and their divergences take a back seat. This ability for emotional appeals to both divide and unify for electoral dividends makes it an important variable in shaping campaign rhetoric and voter perceptions in India. It warrants further empirical investigation.

“In a country like India with multiple intersecting group identities, leveraging emotions is a valuable tool for governance.”

Conclusion

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This brief has attempted to provide an overview of why emotions are important to vote choice. The point was illustrated by examining campaign ads in US elections to show how appeals to anger, fear and enthusiasm are strategically employed for electoral gains. Applying these insights to the Indian context through the Balakot airstrike indicates that patterns in how emotions are leveraged cuts across geographies.

However, for definite inferences, empirical and data-driven research on the role of emotions in shaping vote choice in India must be undertaken. Future research should also look at the other mediating factors that shape the emotions-vote choice relationship: group identification, perceived competitiveness of the election, and how much voters believe they can shape election outcomes. More research in this topic will help educate voters about the ways in which their emotional predispositions may be leveraged by politicians—it becomes especially important in India’s pursuit of forging an electorate who are aware and conscious of their emotional vulnerabilities to persuasion in the realm of political decision-making. 

“Future research should look at the other factors that shape the emotions-vote choice relationship.”

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