



# Online emotional appeals and political participation: The effect of candidate affect on mass behavior

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## Abstract

The role that emotions play in shaping mass political behavior is increasingly well researched. This study refocuses the debate to explore the effect that the emotions expressed by candidates (target affect) through new media have on participation, rather than the effect of emotions felt by voters (observer affect). A unique experiment embedded in a nationally representative online survey demonstrates that appeals invoking target affect can strongly increase citizens' political participation both online and offline. Contrary to fears that the use of emotions by political elites will agitate the least knowledgeable citizens, however, the results demonstrate that it is the *most* politically-engaged citizens who are mobilized by such appeals. These findings have significant implications for our understanding of the participatory consequences of emotional political messages on the Internet.

## Keywords

Emotional appeals, Internet, political participation, target affect

How do voters respond to appeals for support from emotional candidates? In recent years, the media have been quick to declare that emotional politicians have profound effects on citizens' support. After then-Senator Hillary Clinton cried during a primary campaign event in New Hampshire, the media rushed to analyze how her support among voters would be impacted (Friedman, 2008). On the Republican side, pundits worried

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that John McCain's "angry old man" persona would end up turning off voters (Hillyer, 2008). As The Washington Post put it in the final month of the campaign, 'it's never good this close to the election to show anger or even flashes of a temper' (Cillizza, 2008). And the conventional wisdom immediately after the election was that a surge in participation could be directly linked to Barack Obama's message of "hope" about the future (Bohan, 2008). In this popular view, campaign appeals from emotional candidates can have direct consequences for electoral participation. And, given the increasing use of narrowly targeted and technologically advanced online appeals, exploring the impact these emotional appeals can have is of increasing relevance to modern politics (Vaccari, 2008).

The academic literature on the role of emotions in mass behavior has, however, focused almost exclusively on how citizens' *own* emotional states guide their participation (see, e.g., Marcus (2000) and Glaser and Salovey (1998) for comprehensive reviews of the literature). From these studies, we know that experiencing different emotional states can have a wide range of effects on voters. For example, research has shown that feelings of anger prompt citizens to engage in greater electoral participation (Valentino et al., 2011), while feelings of anxiety lead to an increased interest in politics in general (Huddy et al., 2007), and positive feelings such as hope or enthusiasm increase awareness of one's environment and confidence that preferred outcomes will occur (Brader and Valentino, 2007; Just et al., 2007).

However, we know surprisingly little about how mass behavior is affected when candidates, not voters, are the ones who express emotion. In this study, we join the debate about the role of affect in mass behavior by exploring the effects of what Glaser and Salovey (1998) call the "overlooked" and "neglect[ed]" study of target affect. Rather than asking how emotional *voters* participate in politics, we ask how voters participate in politics on behalf of emotional appeals from *candidates*. We focus in particular on which citizens are most likely to be mobilized in this way, illuminating when and how different voters are affected by emotional messages from candidates.

Using a randomized experiment embedded in a nationally-representative online survey, we demonstrate that candidates who appeal to voters through the use of emotions are rewarded with increased support across a range of different types of participation. The effect is not equal across all citizens, however: rather, the effect of these emotional appeals varies systematically with voters' prior exposure to elite appeals via news media. Contrary to fears that the disengaged masses might be most susceptible to emotional appeals, we show that it is in fact the most, not least, engaged citizens who are most affected.

## Emotional citizens and political participation

Understanding how emotions affect political behavior is critical to our normative and empirical understandings of democratic decision-making and political participation. Although traditionally seen as in conflict with rational models of voter behavior, contemporary research views emotion as complementary to, not in competition with, reason (Nabi, 1999). As such, concerns that emotions might lead voters to ignore their own interests and behave irrationally have been replaced by a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which emotions shape citizen participation (Marcus, 2000).

Drawing on neuroscientific research, Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT) shows that emotions have a preconscious effect on political behavior through the activation of different human biological systems (MacKuen et al., 2007; Marcus et al., 2000). Positive emotions such as enthusiasm, pride, or hope signal that the dispositional system is active, prompting individuals to rely on heuristics and make routine decisions as they navigate a familiar world. Feelings of anxiety, on the other hand, signal that the surveillance system is active, prompting greater awareness of an unfamiliar environment and a reduced reliance on habit (MacKuen et al., 2010; Marcus, 2002; Redlawsk et al., 2007).

Activating these different systems has wide-ranging effects on when and how citizens engage with politics. Affective states predict candidate evaluations (Capelos, 2010) and political participation (Isbell et al., 2006; Valentino et al., 2011); greater information seeking (Huddy et al., 2007); feelings of political efficacy (Valentino et al., 2009; Weber, 2007); interest in politics (Marcus et al., 2006); and contemplative and consistent political reasoning (Berenbaum et al., 1995). In the realm of specific participatory acts, Valentino et al. (2011) use various observational and experimental datasets to show the distinctive effects of discrete emotions. Anger, they find, has a consistently positive effect on participation, while anxiety and enthusiasm have at times positive, negative, and null effects across campaign settings.

It would be misguided to conceptualize affect as entirely distinct from rational cognition (Nabi, 1999). Affective states may be sources of information to individuals in and of themselves (Lerner and Keltner, 2000, 2001). Schwarz and colleagues label this conceptualization as ‘feelings as information,’ and show that individuals may use their feelings as cognitive evidence on which to base their decisions (Schwarz, 2002; Schwarz and Clore, 1983). Importantly, some individuals are more likely than others to draw on their affective state as a cognitive resource. Schwarz (2002) suggests that this process is most likely when “the feelings seem highly relevant to the judgment at hand . . . when little other information is available, for example, because the target is unfamiliar . . . and with increasing task demands and decreasing cognitive resources” (p. 539; see also Isbell et al., 2006; Ottati et al., 1997). This leaves open the possibility that different individuals will respond to similar emotional states in different ways, depending on their prior cognitive processing skills and habits.

## Emotional candidates and campaign appeals

These studies of the impact of emotion on political behavior all examine *observer* affect – how the emotional state of the voter affects their participation. Research on the effects of *target* affect – how the emotional state of the person making an appeal for support affects voter participation – is much less common in the literature (Glaser and Salovey, 1998). This neglect is surprising, for several reasons. As noted in the introduction, the media are quick to claim that displays of emotion by candidates influence voters’ decisions. For example, in 2010, journalists and pundits declared the Republicans’ and the Tea Party’s message of anger at rising government debt regulation to be crucial in increasing participation amongst conservative voters and winning control of the House (Dunham and Ratcliffe, 2010; Fox News, 2010). Likewise, we know that campaigns frequently use emotional messages in their appeals for support.

Research on television advertising has documented the extent to which campaigns make emotional appeals and the conditions under which they do so (Kaid and Johnston, 2001; Kern, 1989; Rahn and Hirshorn, 1999; Ridout and Searles, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Persuasion scholars have tended to study how emotions shape behaviors by focusing on the message or stimulus. Rooted in the early work of Hovland et al. (1953) and later extended by Leventhal (1970) and Rogers (1975), this paradigm initially focused on how fear appeals affected persuasion. According to Hovland's drive-reduction model, individuals are motivated to reduce their levels of fear. Any action taken that alleviates fear, and then reinforces that behavior in response to future fear, appeals. If, however, the recommended action fails to reduce fear (or heightens it), individuals will not engage in that behavior when exposed to future fear appeals. Extensions of the model document a curvilinear relationship between fear appeals and persuasion, as the most frightening appeals short-circuit the system, resulting in inattention or defensive avoidance. This research led to Rogers' (1975) proposition that persuasion through fear appeals depends on three factors: (1) the message recipient's perception of the severity of the threat, (2) the message recipient's perception of his or her vulnerability to said threat, and finally, (3) that individual's perception that heeding the recommendations offered by the message will actually help to remedy the fear. In this way, the emotion – in this case, fear – is used instrumentally as an indicator of possible threat, and is responded to accordingly.

Those studies that have investigated the political impact of target affect (emotional displays by politicians within a political message) suggest that expressions of emotion can strongly influence responses to politicians. In a series of experiments, Sullivan and Masters presented study participants with images of political leaders displaying various emotions commonly used in the AIT inventory, including anger/threat, happiness/reassurance, and fear/aversion (Masters and Sullivan, 1989; Sullivan and Masters, 1988). Responses to the leaders varied depending on the emotions they were shown expressing. After viewing a happy politician, respondents were more likely to report feeling happier and more warmly evaluated that figure (Masters and Sullivan, 1989; Sullivan and Masters, 1988) although those responses were moderated by cultural factors and prior attitudes towards the politician (McHugo et al., 1985; Way and Masters, 1996). Together, these studies suggest that voters' attitudes towards politicians can be powerfully affected by the emotions they display.

In short, we know a great deal about how observer affect influences political participation, and we have some evidence on how target affect influences political attitudes. What is missing is an exploration of how target affect may influence political participation: this study bridges the literatures on observer and target affect, and presents a broader understanding of how emotions influence mass politics.

## **Hypotheses and research questions**

Based on the idea that affect can be treated as information, we are inclined to believe that voters exposed to a display of emotion by candidates are likely to use that information to infer a greater importance to the appeal. Accordingly, we expect that seeing an emotional candidate increases voters' propensity to participate on his behalf:

H1: Voters will be more willing to participate on behalf of a candidate who expresses emotion when appealing for their support.

As noted earlier, the literature on observer affect has uncovered significant differences in the participatory consequences of different emotions. It seems plausible that there would also be distinct effects of different emotions as displayed by candidates. If target affect influences participation in the same ways as observer affect does, then voters exposed to an angry candidate would participate more (in the same way that angry voters have been shown to; Valentino et al., 2011). Alternatively, voters exposed to an anxious candidate may engage in information searches and cooperative deliberation (in the same way that anxious voters have been shown to; MacKuen et al., 2010).

However, there is a lack of evidence on whether a particular target affect has an identical effect on political behavior as the equivalent observer affect. Indeed, the psychological literature stresses the *differences* between such emotional effects more than their similarities (Glaser and Salovey, 1998). Rather than adopting specific hypotheses about the impacts of different target affect, we therefore propose a research question that allows us to explore potential differences between different types of emotion as expressed by the candidate (rather than as experienced by the message receiver):

RQ1: Are some types of target affect more likely to increase voter participation than others?

Voters may use all types of target affect as equivalent information, in which case we would see no differences between those exposed to, for example, an angry or enthusiastic candidate, or they may differentiate between emotional states and regard, for example, anger as more of a 'call to action' than enthusiasm. By framing this research question in broad terms, we are able to explore these possibilities in more detail.

In addition to the overall effects of target affect, we also examine *which* voters are most likely to be mobilized by such emotional appeals. As a specific type of elite informational cue, we expect that citizens will vary in their receptiveness to such appeals, depending on their prior levels of engagement or sophistication (Zaller, 1992). We are not the first to explore heterogeneity amongst the electorate in their responses to emotional appeals. The existing literature, however, offers divergent expectations about how political engagement might influence the effectiveness of emotional appeals.

On the one hand, several studies suggest that emotional appeals are most likely to sway those who are least engaged or informed. Rooted in the tenets of dual-processing models of attitude formation (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981), emotions are often conceptualized as heuristic or peripheral cues on which audiences rely when processing messages less critically. As such, we would expect those who are less engaged to be most likely to rely on the cue of a candidate's affect (Ottati et al., 1997). As summarized by Levine (2003), "less-educated people are generally more susceptible to emotional appeals; better-educated audiences are more responsive to rational appeals" (p. 2).

On the other hand, research indicates that elite emotional cues might be most effective among the *most* politically-engaged or informed. For example, Miller (2011)

shows that politically sophisticated individuals are more likely to be influenced by their emotions since they have a greater understanding of political affairs and a greater motivation to act upon their feelings. Similarly, Rudolph et al. (2000) show that highly-*efficacious* individuals are most responsive to emotional stimuli since they believe their participation is likely to be consequential. The act of following an elite emotional cue requires both political understanding and a motivation to use the cue in a way that shapes behaviors.

These moderators have distinctive underlying mechanisms. Political attention or interest alters message-processing through an increased motivation to process elite messages; political knowledge or understanding alters depth of message processing through an increased ability to comprehend the messages themselves. As a result, research has focused on different operationalizations of the general concept of “political engagement.” In political communication research, in particular, there has been an attempt to conceptually untangle the effects of media use and attention from other measures of “engagement” in an effort to better understand the underlying cognitive mechanism responsible for the moderating effects. These operationalizations have included news consumption (e.g., Adler and Goggin, 2005; Zukin et al., 2006), attention paid to political information in the news (e.g., Chaffee and Schleuder, 1986), political interest (e.g., Zukin et al., 2006), and the frequency and quality of political discussion (e.g., Kwak et al., 2005).

This project considers one particular dimension of engagement that we believe is indicative of a familiarity with the language, imagery and appeals of political communication: news media use. Consumption of news captures both an individual’s motivation to seek out political information and a fluency in the vernacular of post-modern political information – a vernacular that is rife with persuasive appeals, both textual and visual, rational and emotional. Such “operative knowledge” enables citizens to translate thoughts, feelings, and values into political goals, goals into political actions, and actions into political results (Johnson, 2009). This taps into Graber’s (2001) discussion of online processing models in the context of political opinion formation, as citizens who frequently tune into political media are the most likely to experience frequent activation of – and hence resonance with – emotional political appeals. Hence, those most “fluent” in the language of news media ought to be the best able to translate their thoughts, feelings, and values into goals and actions:

H2: The effect of emotional appeals will be greatest amongst those with the highest levels of news media consumption.

## Survey data and experimental design

The data for the present research come from a specially commissioned survey of American adults, selected from Knowledge Networks’ online panel. 1,006 US adults were randomly sampled in late July and early August of 2010. In order to reach the goal of at least 1,000 interviews, 1,783 cases were fielded, resulting in a completion rate of 56%. To adjust for non-response and non-coverage bias in the overall panel, the data are weighted on the basis of several post-stratification demographic variables



(gender, age, race, education, region of country, metropolitan area, and prior internet access).

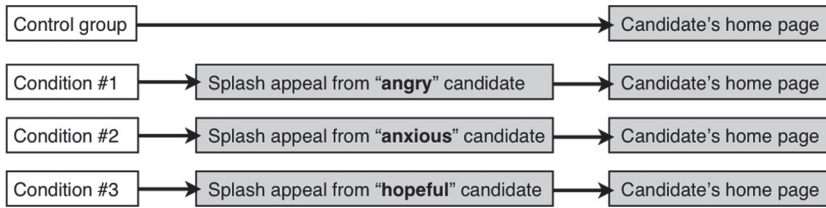
The survey included a large battery of questions about the respondents' news consumption in the previous week. Respondents were asked for the number of days in the past week that they had (1) watched national television news on broadcast networks; (2) watched local television news program on broadcast networks; (3) watched television news on cable networks; (4) read a print newspaper; (5) read news on a news organization's site; and (6) read news on a blog or personal site. For each respondent, we calculated the average number of days they received news from all of these different sources. This measure thus theoretically ranges from 0 (a respondent who didn't get news from any of these sources on any day in the previous week) to 7 (a respondent who got news from every one of these sources on every day in the previous week). The mean of this news consumption score is 1.67, with a standard deviation of 1.43. To aid in the presentation of results, we often split respondents into three groups: 'low' news consumers are the lower third of the distribution (with a score of 1 or less); 'high' news consumers in the upper third (with a score of 2.34 or more); and the rest in a 'moderate' consumption category.

Towards the end of the survey, respondents were shown screenshots of a website for a candidate they were told was running for political office. We randomly selected a first and last name from a FEC list of declared congressional candidates as of summer 2010. The resulting name, 'Robert Carlson' was not an existing politician or celebrity, ensuring respondents would have no information about him other than that we provided. Carlson's site (shown in the Online Appendix) was closely modeled on actual candidate sites: a pre-test among a sample of 72 college students showed that the site reflected their expectations of candidate sites.<sup>2</sup>

Mimicking actual sites, Carlson's did not display his partisan affiliation, and focused on his plan to fix the economy. We chose the valence issue of the economy (rather than a positional issue such as tax cuts or abortion) because it did not invoke a particular partisan or ideological slant and was the subject of most campaign appeals in 2010. We deliberately included no other policy issues on the site, so that voters would not be presented with candidates pushing different policy agendas.

All of our respondents were shown Carlson's homepage. Some, however, were randomly selected to first see a 'splash' page that featured a direct appeal from Carlson to join his campaign. Respondents were shown "A message from Robert" that read: "I'm [angry/anxious/hopeful] about where the economy is headed – and I know you are too. Join me today, and together, we can make America strong again." The emotion Carlson expressed in words was accompanied by an image of the candidate with a clear facial display of the same emotion (actually taken from a stock photo catalog). Figure 1 makes clear the experimental design of the study: groups 1–3 were shown an emotional appeal followed by the main site. The fourth, control, group saw only the main site with no emotional appeal.<sup>3</sup>

Respondents were then asked a battery of questions about their likelihood of participating in various ways on Carlson's behalf. We chose a wide range of ways that citizens could participate, both traditional and – since the survey was conducted online and the stimulus shown a website – new, online, modes of participation. Respondents were asked,



**Figure 1.** Experimental design. The control group were shown just the candidate's home page, with no splash appeal to participate. The other three groups were each shown a splash appeal from the candidate before seeing the main site. See the Online Appendix for full images.

on a 1 to 7 scale that ranged from 'Extremely unlikely' to 'Extremely likely,' whether they would consider participating on his behalf. Three of the modes were conventional, offline forms of participation: voting for Carlson; putting up a Carlson yard sign or bumper sticker, or wearing a button or shirt; and working for Carlson's campaign.

We also asked about seven online forms of participation: contributing money online to his campaign; starting or joining a political group supporting Carlson online, including on a social networking site; adding Carlson as a friend, becoming a fan, or 'liking' Carlson on a social networking site; posting comments, questions, or information about Carlson on a website; signing up for online updates from news organizations, candidates, campaigns, or parties about Carlson; going online to communicate with others about Carlson using email, instant messaging, or a social networking site; and signing an online petition on Carlson's website.

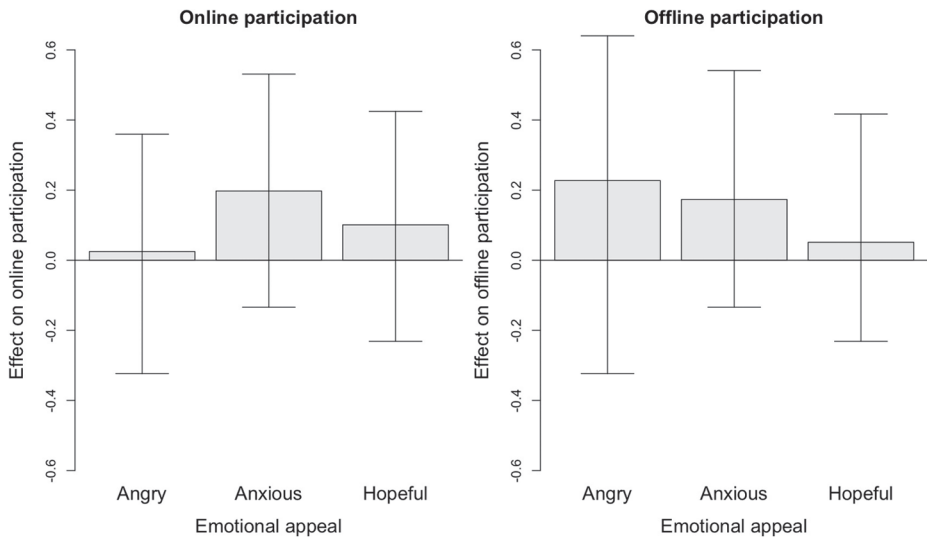
Two scales of likely participation are created from these measures. Online participation is the mean of each respondent's response to the online forms of participation. Offline participation is the same, for the three forms of traditional participation. Both range from 0 (extremely unlikely to do any of the acts) to 7 (extremely likely to do all of the acts). We separated these two forms of participation out to explore whether online emotional appeals have different effects on online behavior compared to 'conventional' modes of participation, which may take on different forms (see Hoffman, 2012).<sup>4</sup> After answering these questions, respondents were debriefed and informed that Carlson was not a candidate actually seeking political office.

## Results

We first examine whether mean levels of likely participation vary with the emotion expressed by our candidate. Figure 2 presents the difference in likely participation between each experimental condition and the control group. The brackets around each bar represent 95% confidence intervals. As a quick glance of the Figure reveals, none of the means were significantly different from the control group mean. Being exposed to an emotional appeal had no discernible effect on a respondent's propensity to participate on the candidate's behalf.

In the full sample, then, there is little evidence to suggest that emotional appeals influence citizens' participatory decisions. These means ignore potential heterogeneity amongst



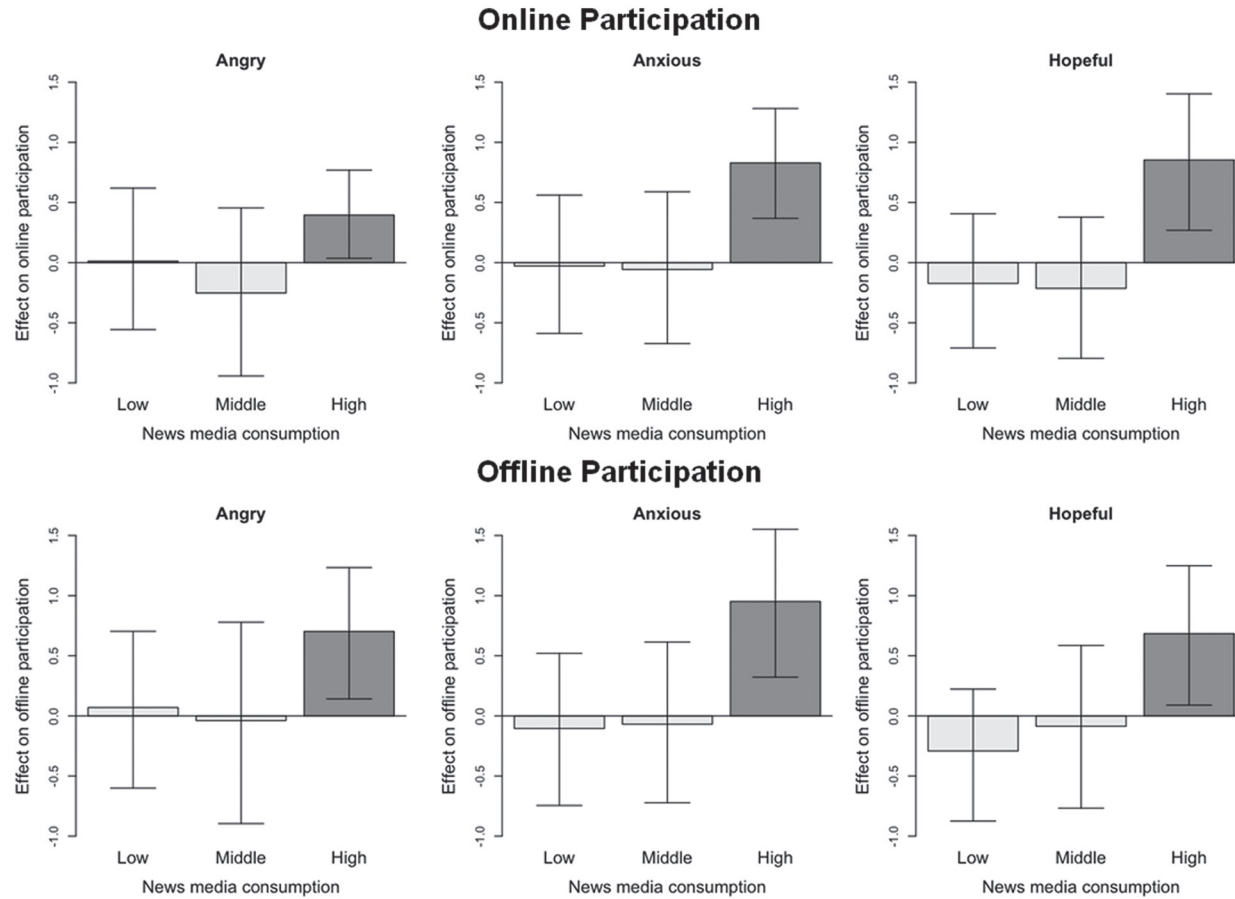


**Figure 2.** Difference in means from control group for emotional appeals, for online participation (left) and offline participation (right). 95% confidence intervals shown as brackets around the estimates.

respondents, however. To explore the evidence for H2, Figure 3 shows the effect of each emotional appeal on participation, by the respondent's reported news media use. The average treatment effects are again shown as bars, with 95% confidence intervals shown as brackets. Effects that are not statistically significant are again shown in light gray; effects that *are* significant are shown in dark gray.

The results are strikingly consistent across all three emotions used in the appeals and for both traditional and online modes of participation: only those respondents who reported consuming a relatively high amount of news media were influenced by the emotional appeals. Those who consumed low or moderate levels of news media were entirely unaffected by the emotional appeals (the largest treatment effect is for the 'hopeful' message on low media consumers' propensity to participate offline, but even this fails to reach standard levels of significance). Consistent with H2, only the most engaged respondents were likely to consider participating on behalf of an emotional candidate. It is those who are most fluent in the language of news media that are most capable of translating exposure to target affect into participation.

To subject this initial finding to a more rigorous test, we turn to multivariate regression analysis and control for potentially confounding factors. Using the Verba et al. (1995) 'Civic Voluntarism Model' (CVM) as a guide, we estimate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models predicting the likelihood of participation on Carlson's behalf. In addition to an interaction between the experimental condition and news consumption, we include several control variables. As politically relevant resources, we include a measure of the respondent's highest level of education (coded as a categorical variable, with those not graduating from high school as the excluded



**Figure 3.** Difference in means from control group in likelihood of participating online (top row) and offline (bottom row), by news media consumption. 95% confidence intervals shown as brackets around the estimates. Light gray bars indicate a difference that is not statistically significant, dark gray bars one that is significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

**Table 1.** OLS regressions predicting respondent's likelihood of participating on candidate's behalf online (left) and offline (right)

	Online participation		Offline participation	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Intercept	1.06	(0.29)***	0.87	(0.31)**
Emotional appeal				
Angry	0.07	(0.31)	0.17	(0.36)
Anxious	-0.09	(0.26)	-0.17	(0.32)
Hopeful	-0.17	(0.23)	-0.12	(0.26)
News consumption	-0.05	(0.05)	-0.03	(0.07)
News × emotional appeal				
Angry	0.03	(0.10)	0.07	(0.13)
Anxious	0.20	(0.11)·	0.26	(0.14)·
Hopeful	0.22	(0.10)*	0.15	(0.11)
Attention to politics	0.03	(0.08)	0.08	(0.08)
Strength of partisanship	0.14	(0.08)·	0.13	(0.08)
Efficacy	0.31	(0.09)***	0.32	(0.11)**
Education:				
High school	-0.18	(0.24)	0.22	(0.22)
Some college	-0.23	(0.26)	0.21	(0.25)
BA or higher	-0.55	(0.25)*	-0.15	(0.24)
Income	0.00	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)
N		526		525

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; ·  $p < .1$ .

level and high school graduates, those who attended some college, and those with a BA degree or higher as the other levels) and income (included on a numerical scale indicating imputed categories). As measures of political engagement, we include the respondent's level of efficacy and their strength of partisan identity. Efficacy is measured as the average agree or disagree response to three statements: (1) "People like me have no say over what the government does"; (2) "Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on"; and (3) "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics" (reverse coded). Responses to the first two statements were coded from 0 to 3 with higher values indicating a greater level of efficacy. Efficacy is the average of these responses, which also ranges from 0 to 3. The respondent's strength of partisanship is coded on a 0–3 scale ('Independent' = 0; 'Lean partisan' = 1; 'Weak partisan' = 2; 'Strong partisan' = 3).

The third 'pillar' of the CVM – whether respondents mobilized – is, of course, captured by our experimental manipulation that exhorts respondents to join the campaign. Controlling for these strong predictors of participation presents a tough test for the effect of emotions, essentially asking whether emotions affect mass behavior over and above the forces of the CVM (see Valentino et al., 2011 for a similar strategy). Critically,

all of these control variables were measured prior to the experimental manipulation, allowing us to continue using a causal framework in discussing the results.

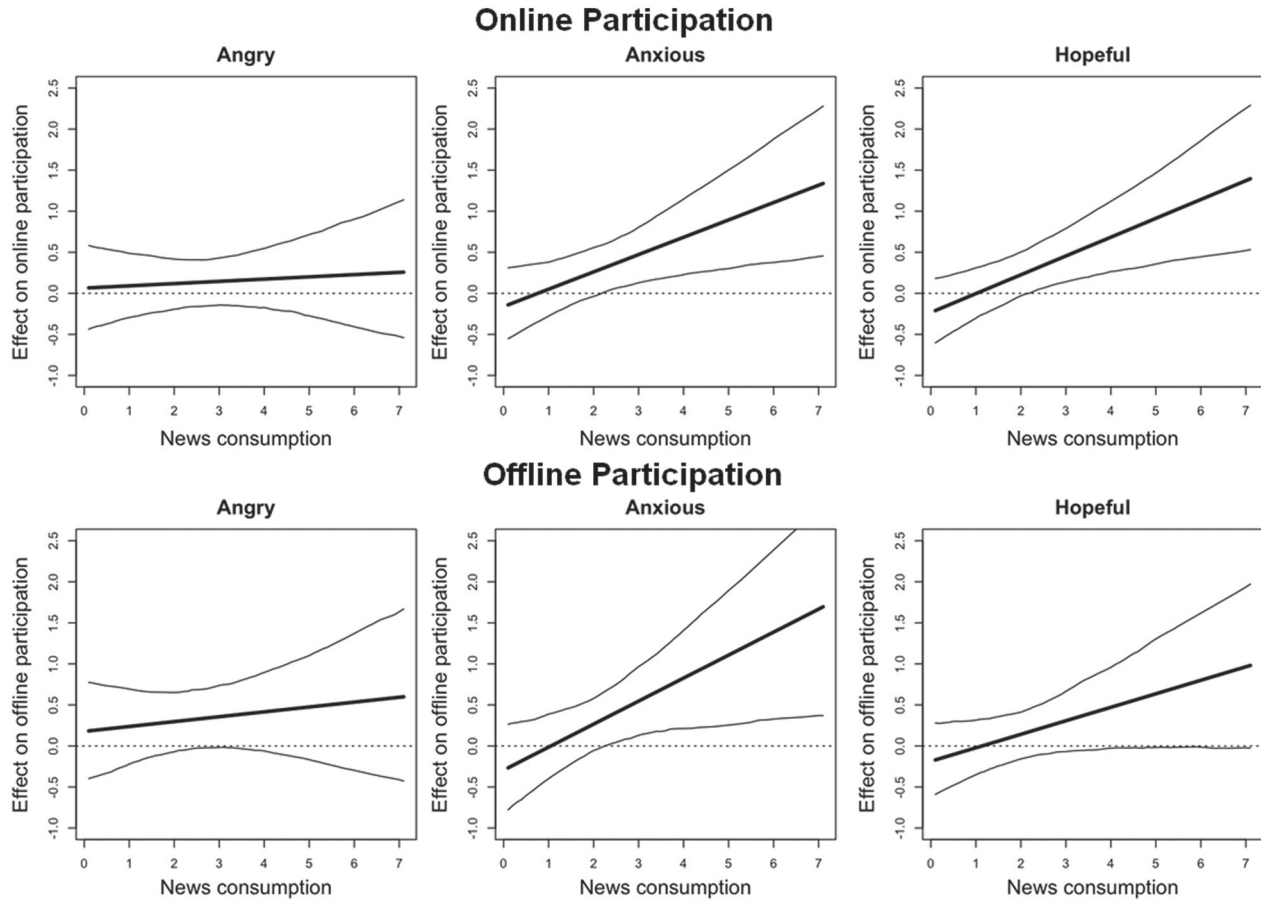
The statistical results are shown in Table 1. We again simulate the results to show their substantive significance, as described in King et al. (2000). Each of the independent variables is set to its mean (for continuous variables) or mode (for categorical variables). We then simulate the first difference in participation between the control group and the emotional appeal group for each value of news consumption. These first differences are shown in Figure 4. Moving from left to right on the  $x$ -axis indicates a greater consumption of news media, while increases on the  $y$ -axis indicate a greater difference between the control and experimental group. 90% confidence intervals around the estimates are shown as thin lines, with a zero effect indicated by the dashed line to help assess significance.

Two key conclusions can be drawn from Table 1 and Figure 4. First, even controlling for a host of predictors of political participation, the emotions that our fictitious candidate expressed had significant effects on likely participation. Second, this effect continues to be moderated by general levels of news consumption. All else equal, seeing the 'hopeful' Carlson increased the likelihood of online participation by 1.48 [.52, 2.43] points and offline participation by 1.03 [.02, 2.04] points for those respondents who scored at the very highest end of the media consumption scale. For those at the lowest end of the scale, this appeal had no discernible effect ( $-.22$  [ $-.64, .16$ ] and  $-.17$  [ $-.61, .27$ ], respectively). Likewise, seeing the 'anxious' message resulted in an effect of 1.34 [.37, 2.29] for online and 1.67 [.40, 2.93] for offline participation for those at the maximum value of news consumption, but had no effect on those at the other end of the scale ( $-.15$  [ $-.59, .26$ ] and  $-.23$  [ $-.72, .26$ ], respectively). The estimates for the 'angry' appeal, on the other hand, do not show any distinct effect across the range of news consumption. This null-finding stands in contrast to the expectations in much of the literature about the distinct and significant effects of anger in motivating citizen participation.

## Discussion and conclusions

Investigating the role of emotional appeals in shaping mass political behavior is not a new task. An extensive literature has explored how their own affective state can influence citizens' engagement with politics. Until now, however, far less has been known about the effects of target affect – appeals made by emotional elites in explicitly political messages – on citizen participation. The experimental results in this study show that voters exposed to candidate appeals expressed through the use of emotion are more likely to participate on that candidate's behalf – *but* that participation is boosted solely amongst the most politically-engaged citizens. Further, in contrast to the literature on observer affect, the results show that different emotional states did not have significantly different impacts on behavior. An emotional candidate – no matter the specific emotion he expressed – increased participation amongst the most politically sophisticated. These findings contribute significantly to the growing literature on emotions and mass behavior in several ways.

First, we have shown that target affect, as measured by the emotional state expressed by a candidate, can play a significant role in shaping democratic participation. Multiple



**Figure 4.** Simulated first difference in likelihood of participating online (top row) and offline (bottom row) on behalf of candidate, by type of emotional appeal and news consumption. First differences and 90% confidence intervals simulated from regression results shown in Table 1.

previous studies show that the emotions citizens experience shape their political engagement and participation (e.g. MacKuen et al., 2010; Valentino et al., 2011). The novel results in this study show that the emotions candidates express when communicating with citizens *also* influence mass political behavior. Then-Senator Clinton's tears in New Hampshire, or Senator McCain's temper on the campaign trail, serve a function beyond just human interest news stories: they likely boost participation and engagement with politics.

Second, the results offer a significant counterpoint to fears that the use of emotion in appeals to voters will primarily affect the less-engaged, less-interested masses. The effects of target affect in this study are limited solely to those who are *already* engaged with politics to a relatively high degree. Those who have the most experience with, and "operative knowledge" of, how elite cues should be translated to action are the most affected by target affect. It seems that emotional appeals, for these voters, are not devoid of informational content. Rather, the emotional appeal itself served as information relevant to the decision to participate.

As with all experimental research designs, the present study has important limitations in regard to its internal and external validity. Internally, the survey did not include questions about the potential mechanisms linking the emotional state of the candidate to the behavior of the respondent. We do not have measures of how respondents processed the information they were presented with, nor do we have measures of respondents' emotional states before or after viewing the candidate's appeal. For example, it is possible that respondents who see an angry person will become angry themselves. The psychological literature on this type of 'emotional contagion' reports conflicting results and does not support a straightforward transmission of target emotion to observer emotion (Gump and Kulik, 1997; Hsee et al., 1990). Future work would do well to investigate if, and under what conditions, respondents adopt the same emotion as displayed by in candidates' appeals.

While the experimental images shown to respondents were carefully modeled on existing candidates' sites, there are necessarily still limitations to the experiment's external validity. First, exposure to the candidate and his message occurred once for only a short period of time. Most campaigns involve intense, repeated appeals to voters. As such, we might expect the results here to represent the lower bound of an effect that would occur with repeated and sustained exposure to a message from a campaign. On the other hand, the effect of emotional appeals may well diminish significantly over time, and we encourage future research to extend the study here to account for this possibility. Second, the dependent variables we study are the respondent's *intention* to participate on the candidate's behalf, not their actual rates of participation, and were measured immediately following the stimulus. Talk is cheap: saying you would volunteer for a candidate is qualitatively different from actually showing up at their headquarters. Nonetheless, many of the participatory acts asked about (e.g., signing up for news updates, liking the candidate on a social networking site) could have been accomplished easily by following prominent "links" from the main page of the site. Finally, the amount of information respondents were presented with was minimal. This was a deliberate decision to isolate the effects of emotional appeals, but not necessarily a realistic one. Few voters evaluate a candidate knowing nothing about them other than their emotional state and a handful of policy positions. Future research could replicate this experiment but alter the



emotional states attributed to known politicians, a similar design to Sullivan and Masters' original studies (Masters and Sullivan, 1989; Sullivan and Masters, 1988). Future research could also explore the effects of different website design elements on voters' likely participation. We exposed respondents to an emotional appeal via a splash page, as well as other non-emotional appeals to action on the main page (e.g., "Join the campaign!" and "Sign up to help in your area today"). Although beyond the scope of the present study, there remains work to be done on which design elements of campaign sites have the most impact on viewers and we encourage researchers to extend the experimental methods used here in that regard.

Ultimately, the results in this study suggest a new avenue for research on emotions and mass behavior. *Target* affect in an emotional appeal, not just observer affect, influences citizens' participation. And the critical finding that this influence is strongest amongst the most engaged points us to a greater understanding of the heterogeneous effects of affect that future researchers should build on. The notion that, in the absence of other relevant information, affective states of the message source might be processed as judgment-relevant information, hence mobilizing our most politically-sophisticated citizens, should give us pause. This means that, in a campaign environment devoid of substantive debate, emotional appeals by political elites might have the strongest influence on opinion leaders who are actively looking for information to guide their actions. The consequences of this finding are broad, and highlight the need for substantive policy debate in a campaign environment to foster rational decision-making among the most engaged in our electorate.

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## Notes

1. These studies generally focus on ads that aim to provoke a particular emotional response in the audience rather than ads that feature an individual expressing that emotion, but still signal the importance of emotional messages for campaigns.
2. Critically for our purposes, there were no statistically significant differences in students' ratings of how "believable" and "convincing" the website was across the different conditions of candidate images. In other words, no matter the emotional image (or lack thereof) students were exposed to, they were equally likely to consider the site plausible.
3. One concern is that respondents exposed to the "splash" page may have perceived that the candidate was prioritizing the economy since the appeal included an additional reference to "fixing the economy" that those who saw the main site did not see. If the splash page were signaling to respondents that Carlson was prioritizing the economy, then we should expect respondents in the splash page conditions to have "the economy" primed, and hence pay more

attention to and recall more of his economic policy positions as a result. We fitted regression models predicting respondents' recall of his policy positions with the experimental condition, their news consumption, and the interaction of the two. If the splash page primed the economy as an issue for respondents, we would expect to see positive and significant effects for the experimental conditions compared to the control group. This is not the case. The only significant coefficient (for the interaction between news consumption and the 'hopeful' condition) is *negative*, suggesting that those exposed to the hopeful candidate were less, not more, aware of his positions on the economy. Full analyses are available from the authors.

4. There are no differences in the empirical results if we combine all activities into a single scale; for interested readers, we present the scales separately.

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