The Influence of Emotion on Who Runs for Office

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Some debate exists over the extent to which emotion is a key factor in influencing political participation. Much literature focuses on the effect that emotion has, specifically with reference to right-wing populism (Beland, 2020; Magni, 2017; Nai, 2021; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021; Rico et al., 2017). Other approaches emphasize more general effects that certain emotions can have on various factors that influence political participation (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Frijda, 1986; Marcus et al., 2000; Thorisdottir & Jost, 2011; Young, 2019). Overall, the emotion of anger is generally seen as a mobilizing factor. Existing literature also indicates that fear is highly impactful with regard to political participation among the rank-and-file populus.

Fear, as an emotion, tends to motivate people away from dissent (Young, 2019). As a motivator, it may see especial success in influencing those who tend toward populist movements, given the increased presence of fear-based tactics in populist as compared to non-populist campaigns (Nai, 2021). One study found that negative emotions, such as fear and anger, triggered by economic crises, lead to increases in populist movements as a result of cultural dissatisfaction, the dissatisfaction itself a product of the economic struggles (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). Fear, then, can be manipulated not only by those already in power as a means of limiting dissent, but also by those seeking to garner increased support from those who hold populist ideals and by challenging economic or other cultural-discontenting factors. Should one desire an increase in participation from the “common man”, all they need to do is take advantage of fear.

Anger, to some, holds greater sway than other emotions in terms of influencing political participation. This position may find its greatest support from the psychological side of the

research, as anger has been demonstrated to be an “approach-related affect”, meaning that the emotion, “anger”, has been shown to be an emotion that influences action; in other words, anger causes people to engage with the things that they are angry about (Carver and Harmon-Jones, 2009). In relation to fear and economic crisis, it has been found and argued that anger can have two outcomes, based upon the political efficacy of angry citizens. Those with higher efficacy participate more, leaning into the engaging side of anger, where those citizens who possess lower political efficacy disengage from political participation and throw their support into populist parties, who they feel will be representative of them (Magni, 2017).

Emotion, more generally, strikes at the heart of motivation. Frijda discusses the evidence that suggests emotion is the result of people’s assessments of situations. People will assess the situations they experience as either favorable or harmful to their self-interests (Frijda, 1986). This assessment theory presents a foundational way of understanding why emotions such as fear or anger are so motivating, politically. The fear response suggests to an individual that great harm can come to their self-interest, and the anger response suggests to an individual that they can do something about the situation that they think may be harming them.

When it comes to determining who runs for office, existing literature seeks mostly to understand determining factors or causes from empirically measurable criteria, such as socioeconomic status, demographic information, and level of education (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2011; Bueno & Dunning, 2017; Carnes, 2013; Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Dal Bo et al., 2017; Lawless & Fox, 2005; Thompson et al., 2019). Other studies also factor in psychological information such as personality typing, the cultural role of gender, or emotional motivations such as ambition (Carreri & Payson, 2020; Dynes et al., 2021; Schlesinger, 1966).

Among the most important questions of this debate are, “who becomes a politician, and what makes someone a good one?”

According to gathered and analyzed election data, it is quite common for high levels of education to be prioritized by voters (Besley and Reyna-Querol, 2011). This latent favor from voters provides natural, perhaps even unconscious motivation for those of highly educated statuses to run for office. Alongside favor for higher education is a tendency for voters to prefer to elect affluent individuals (Bueno and Dunning, 2017). When one is rich, that may be seen by constituents as potential for greater economic prosperity—or at least greater security. However, it is important to note that this hope doesn’t always translate into benefits for the lower economic classes. As those making policy decisions tend to be financially distant from most of the populus, they tend to legislate in a way that will benefit those of similar economic status (Carnes, 2013).

Another important factor in who runs for office is level of experience. Carreri and Payson (2020) suggest that the biggest qualifying factors for mayors and city managers are public service motivation and managerial skill. Carnes and Lupu (2016) indicate that the general population seems to be favorable toward candidates of experience and skill, regardless of the candidate’s socioeconomic status. Level of experience, then, can be seen as an important predictor of who runs for office. Highly competent leaders are the most common in democratic societies, as well (Dal Bo et al., 2017).

In considering the difference between representation from male political candidates as compared to female candidates, the is an apparent underrepresentation by female candidates. Some have inquired as to why this is. Personality traits appear to be consistent among men and women candidates, indicating that the same types of people have political ambition (Dynes et al, 2021). However, there seems to be a significant impact from the simple fact that there are gender

differences between candidates (Lawless and Fox, 2005). It might be stated that the difference in political motivation based on gender is the result of cultural attitudes related to the roles of men and women in society, but over the last several decades that understanding has shifted greatly, allowing for greater acceptance generally of women candidates as adequate political representatives. However, the latent attributes of men and women that supersede cultural influence are still present: there are emotional differences between men and women, and that may be a significant influence on who runs for office when examining "who becomes a politician?" at the gendered level.

An important indication that emotion has influence in deciding to run for office is the reality that not all who meet the described traits of those most likely to run for office, run for office. Men and women can and have met the traits that most politicians have. Those who would, in theory, make good politicians, likely need some kind of emotional stirring to move in that direction. One potential roadblock to the effect of emotion on running for office is gender. My hypothesis is that the "fear" and "anger" emotions hold a significant amount of sway in determining who decides to run for office and who does not, from among those most likely to try their hand at candidacy. Men, typically stereotyped as more aggressive (an anger-related attribute), contrasted with women, who are usually stereotyped as being more passive (a trait susceptible to fear reactions), in the same way that political efficacy determined political participation based on reaction to anger.

Women may think that they lack political efficacy, leading to fear of running for office despite meeting or exceeding criteria patterns established in measures of education, affluence, and experience. On the other hand, men are more likely to perceive that they "have what it takes" to run for office and be competitive in the political sphere. This more aggressive outlook reflects

the approach-related affect promoted by anger as an emotional response. It is reasonable, then, to think that political ambition requires aggression. Aggression can come from several places: anger is the faster creator of aggression, though some people of either gender may possess more aggressive tendencies naturally. We may suspect that this implies that only certain personality types will seek political office; some research supports this conclusion (Dynes et al., 2021). More research will be necessary before a perfect conclusion can be reached, but the present literature suggests that emotion holds significant impact on who runs for office by supplying the motivating factor, though the effect of that factor may find varying degrees of influence between different genders.

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