

Topic 4: How do Affective and Motivational States Influence the Stability of Political
Ideology?

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How do affective and motivational states influence the stability of political ideology?

Over the past few decades, two variables have been especially prominent in the study of political ideology: personality traits and genetics (Adorno et al., 1950; Alford et al., 2005; Carney et al., 2008; Kandler et al., 2012). However, focusing only on dispositional and biological features may automatically lead us to believe that one's political ideology is predetermined and will remain stable in a lifetime. As rising polarisation worldwide has led to growing domestic conflicts and global insecurity (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Jennings & Stoker, 2017; Opzoomer, 2020), alterable aspects in the formation of political ideology should receive greater attention.

In their comprehensive review on the elusive concept of political ideology, Jost et al. (2009) proposed treating ideology as “an interrelated set of attitudes, values, and beliefs with *cognitive*, *affective*, and *motivational* properties” (p. 315). Among the three components, cognitive processes are generally characterised by rationality, whereas affective and motivational processes entail *arousal* (Duckitt, 2001; Stangor & Walinga, 2014), which denotes a higher sensitivity to contextual stimuli. As such, the objective of this study is to look at whether and how political ideology could be influenced by two closely-related stimuli-sensitive states: *affect* and *motivation*.

To facilitate discussions¹, we will employ a widely accepted textbook definition of *affect* offered by Robbins and Judge (1998/2017), namely “a generic term that covers a broad range of feelings, including both emotions and moods” (p. 141; see also Posner et al., 2005). Meanwhile, motivation will be referred to as “the processes that account for an

¹ The definitions of affect, emotion, and mood vary in the literature and there is terminological confusion; the terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Kahn, 1964; Shouse, 2005).

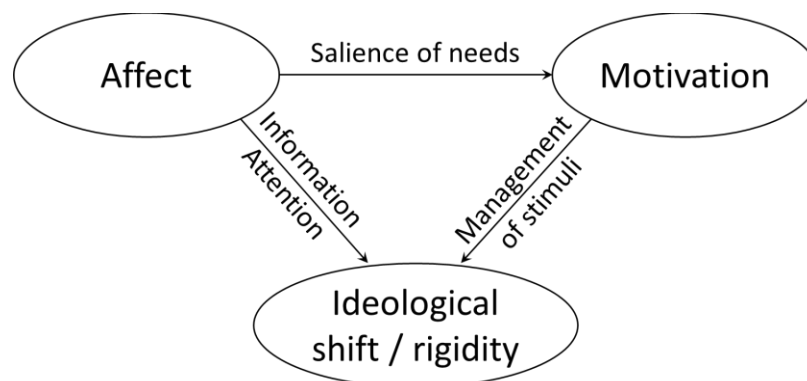
individual's intensity, direction, and persistence of effort toward attaining a goal” (Robbins & Judge, 2017, p.247).

The notion that our ideology is formed by how we respond to affects will guide our discussions in this essay. Polarisation, and indeed all ideological thought, is rooted in affects, notably in people's socialisation to deal with their affective life (Tomkins, 1965). Moreover, affects have evolved as “a system of motivations” for humans (Tomkins, 1962). Therefore, there will be at least two possible paths of how affective and motivational states could influence political ideology (see Figure 1).

By this logic, the first section will attend to how affect, as a valenced feeling state, directly contributes to ideological malleability, particularly by impacting the scope and focus of information and attention. Later, the second section will deal with how discrete emotions and moods may lead to changes or reinforcement of one's political ideology by stimulating different motivations according to epistemic and existential needs.

Figure 1

Two Paths of Affective and Motivational Effects on Political Ideology



Direct effects of affective states

In this section, we will adopt valence-based approaches to discuss the interplay among affects, motivations, and ideological stability. As “the most basic building block of

emotional life” (Barrett, 2006, p. 48), valence is a core dimension of affect that indicates the positive-to-negative evaluation of an experience (Harmon-Jones et al., 2013).

Subjective well-being (SWB), characterised by “longer-term levels of pleasant affect (e.g., enthusiasm, happiness, interest), lack of unpleasant affect (e.g., anxiety, distress, anger), and life satisfaction” (Diener, 1984, 2009), is believed to be associated with political beliefs and behaviours. Among people over 60 years old, happiness was found to be linked with the motivation to learn new things and the need to stay informed about politics (Lebo, 1953). In general, happy people tend to be better informed about political issues and to exercise their voting rights more often (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), which are also common characteristics among individuals high in political sophistication (Luskin, 1990). Indeed, a high level of political sophistication may justifiably predict ideological stability through resistance to incongruent information (Zaller, 1992). Ideology, in this sense, can be considered as “the high end of sophistication” (Luskin, 1990, p. 332) – a particularly large, well-organised and wide-ranging political belief system. To achieve and maintain SWB, one needs to feel secure and certain about the surrounding environment, thus stimulating epistemic and existential motivations; this will be discussed in the second section.

An explanation for the correlations between affect and attentional/informational scope mentioned above stems from the broaden-and-build theory (BBT) (Fredrickson, 2001). According to the theory, positive emotions, compared to neutral ones, broaden the scope of attention. To test the hypothesis, Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) let participants watch films that elicit five affective states separately: positive (amusement and contentment), neutral, and negative (anger and anxiety). The participants’ scope of

attention was then measured by allowing them to choose between two figures, one of which was more similar to the standard one. The results corroborated Fredrickson's aforementioned assumption and extended it to the adverse effects of negative emotions.

However, more recent studies have provided some conflicting results. Researchers found that some negative affective states may lead to a broadening cognitive scope as well (e.g., sadness, Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010; depression, von Hecker & Meiser, 2005), which seemingly contradicts the BBT. To resolve empirical inconsistencies, Harmon-Jones et al. (2013) included motivational intensity as an independent variable. Video clips of humorous content and delicious-looking desserts were used respectively to elicit amusement (low-approach-motivated) and desire (high-approach-motivated). It was found that, irrespective of valence, affective states with low motivational intensity (e.g., amusement, sadness) broaden the attentional scope whereas those with high motivational intensity (e.g., enthusiasm, anger) have adverse effects.

Aside from motivational intensity, the characteristics of the task in question may also be relevant to differentiated effects. The conclusions drawn by Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) from relatively simple tasks no longer hold true in more complex ones like the flicker change detection task (Bendall & Thompson, 2015).

Two oppositely-valenced emotions mentioned in SWB, enthusiasm and anxiety, became the central focus of the valence model brought up by Marcus and MacKuen (1993), later developed into Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT) (Marcus et al., 2000). As one of the most influential theories of affective decision-making in politics, AIT suggests that voters' political attentiveness will be conditioned on their affective states through two subsystems. The *disposition* system deals with routine information, eliciting positive

affective responses, labelled as enthusiasm by the authors; whereas the *surveillance* system, once aroused by an unexpected stimulus (e.g., threat or novelty), raises awareness by increasing levels of negative affective responses, labelled anxiety (Marcus et al., 2000). In the aroused state, individuals are more likely to be motivated to comprehend the stimulus out of the need to manage threat and uncertainty.

According to AIT, enthusiasm reinforces individuals' political choices by maintaining their adherence to pre-existing political habits such as ideology and partisanship; there will be minimal political persuasion and defection if only this system exists. On the contrary, anxiety leads to a disruption of habitual actions and a greater engagement into more effortful information processing (Schwarz & Clore, 1996). Isbell (2004) found converging evidence that happy moods, compared to sad moods, encourage more usage of global and abstract information (e.g., stereotypes and traits). Additionally, it is worth pointing out that a heavy reliance on certain types of information does not equate to unawareness or ignorance of other information. Instead, different moods may have led people to discount or correct their judgments of information based on distinct standards of appropriateness (Isbell et al., 2006).

Not only can affects influence ideologies through information seeking and processing, but they can be informational per se. The affect-as-information model (AAI) explains this attributional effect of affects (Schwarz & Clore, 1983, 2003). This model suggests that feelings may influence beliefs by providing sensory information about appraisals of objects or situations regarding one's goals and concerns (Gasper & Clore, 2000). Nevertheless, affective responses may arise from "non-consciously perceived information and situational cues" rather than from the objects attributed to (Verbalysyte &

von Scheve, 2017, p. 166; see also Isbell et al., 2006), leading to cognitive biases.

The misattribution of affective response is more pronounced in moods because they are generally milder, last longer and do not necessarily result from specific stimuli compared to emotions (Beedie et al., 2005; Robbins & Judge, 1998/2017). For example, support for government can be weakened by negative moods following factors beyond its control. Regions that experienced negative events (e.g., floods, droughts, shark attacks) tend to give less support to the incumbent party, though it should not be held responsible (Achen & Bartels, 2002). Likewise, positive moods resulting from events or information irrelevant to government performance may increase support for the incumbent office. When the local football team had a victory within ten days before elections, the support rate for the incumbent authorities increased by 1.61% (Healy et al., 2010). The intensity of this effect increases when victories are more surprising, when teams have stronger fan support, or when more people are occupied with game results. As suggested by the authors, voters' subjective sense of well-being determined by non-political stimuli could impact their judgments of elected representatives.

In addition, to extend the conjecture to more abstract political entities, Verbaelyte and von Scheve (2017) investigated the relations between citizens' affective reactions and their support for the European Union. Based on 2005 Eurobarometer data, they reported that, other pertinent variables being controlled, positive affect (enthusiasm, trust, and hope) are positively correlated with EU-support, whereas negative affect (mistrust, rejection, and anxiety) are negatively correlated with it. Nonetheless, given the potential multicollinearity between beliefs and emotions, the findings would have been more accurate if the survey had included clearer measures of emotions.

In light of the above, it is worth noting that when subjects are made aware of the cause for their moods, the tendency of misattribution decreases (Healy et al., 2010).

Joint effects of affective and motivational states

The main weakness of BBT, AIT, and AAI theories, and indeed all valence-based approaches, might be their inability to address why emotions of the same valence can have different effects (Huddy et al., 2007; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). In this regard, what Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote might be true – “All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (*Anna Karenina*, 1878). Research has shown that positive affect tends to be experienced as general positivity, while negative affect such as sadness, anxiety, fear, or anger, as noted earlier, usually have more varied effects (Isbell et al., 2006). In this section, we will address how specific negative emotions arouse different motivations, which ultimately influence ideological stability.

A typical example lies in how various affective responses to *threat* lead to diametrically opposed consequences for motivations and beliefs. Following the September 11 attacks, U.S. citizens experienced fear and anxiety towards external threats as well as anger at terrorists, which induced different beliefs and behaviours. Huddy and colleagues relied on data from a national telephone survey (N=1,549) to test how threat, anxiety and anger relate to support for antiterrorist policies (Huddy et al., 2005, 2007). Consistent with their assumptions, it was found that citizens who perceived high threat, while not being overly anxious (Huddy et al., 2005) and/or were angry (Huddy & Feldman, 2011; Lerner et al., 2003) had a more belligerent attitude, wanting to retaliate and supporting stricter regulations, even at the expense of civil liberties. On the contrary, those who experienced high levels of anxiety or fear showed a higher level of risk

aversion and were less supportive of bellicose leaders and aggressive military actions (anxiety, Huddy et al., 2005; fear, Lerner et al., 2003).

The aforementioned affect-biased attention towards stimuli may have once again played a pivotal role in accounting for the differences. Huddy et al. (2005) suggest that three distinctive effects of anxiety touch upon ideological biases: high level of anxiety a) impairs cognitive functioning by shifting attention away from non-threatening stimuli; b) increases risk perception due to heightened uncertainty, lack of control and salience of self-relevant negative thoughts (MacLeod et al., 1991, as cited in Huddy et al., 2005; see also Lerner & Keltner, 2001); and c) highlights motivations to reduce the level of anxiety, resulting in *avoidance* of risky choices and a need for security (Huddy et al., 2007).

Notably, younger people, Democrats, women, and Blacks felt more anxious than their counterparts (Huddy et al., 2005). Another key fact worth mentioning is that anxiety, in Huddy et al. (2005), did not increase support for domestic security policies, which belied the authors' expectations. The ambiguity of risk origin might be an important factor underlying this dissonance – it was later reported that anxiety would not undermine support for non-risky domestic security policies but undercut approval of risky ones such as overseas military actions (Huddy et al., 2007).

Furthermore, different affective reactions can influence the attraction of political ideologies by rendering particular motivations more salient. This is because political ideology can be seen as a “motivated social cognition” – one that is largely determined by motivational differences among individuals (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003, 2009). In highly threatening situations, the need to reduce threat and uncertainty may motivate individuals to embrace *conservative* or *extreme* beliefs (Doty et al., 1991, as cited in Bonanno & Jost,

2006; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003) in that they provide relatively straightforward yet cognitively rigid solutions to resolve insecurity and threat. These two directions are referred to as the *rigidity-of-the-right* hypothesis and the *rigidity-of-the-extreme* hypothesis, both potentially predicting ideological stability.

Among high-exposure survivors of the 9/11 attacks (N = 45), Bonanno and Jost (2006) observed a “conservative shift” among Democrats, Independents and Republicans regardless of their political partisanship. The shift could be due to conservatism’s superior suitability for meeting epistemic and existential needs and motivations concerning management of uncertainty and threat as well as control of anxiety and fear (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003). Consistent evidence was obtained in two samples taken shortly before and after the 9/11 attacks (Nail & McGregor, 2009). More specifically, the ideological change was most pronounced regarding levels of support for George Bush (a belligerent President) and increasing military spending. The studies mentioned above, add to the body of evidence that buttresses the rigidity-of-the-right hypothesis. Considering attitudes are more stable when individuals perceive greater certainty about them (Howe & Krosnick, 2017), right-wing ideologies tend to be more stable over time than left-wing ideologies.

Interestingly, recent research related to COVID-19 found a conservative shift among Democrats, but not among Republicans or Independents (Samore et al., 2021). A plausible explanation given by the authors is that several suppressor variables, including low trust in scientists and information from liberal or moderate sources, might have diminished individuals’ perception of threats posed by the pandemic.

Political extremity has been identified as another potent direction of ideological

change vis-à-vis threat and uncertainty. In response to the seminal meta-analysis by Jost et al. (2003), Greenberg and Jonas (2003) questioned the singularity of conservatism when satisfying epistemic and existential needs elicited by threat and anxiety. Relying on precedent research, they proposed that such needs can be met equally well by adhering rigidly to any extreme ideologies, whether right-wing or left-wing. As shown by the authors, the rigidity-of-the-extreme hypothesis results from the fact that extreme ideologies provide epistemic certainty through a system that simplifies complex issues. Since perceiving information as relatively simple may trigger overconfidence in knowledge level and strong conviction in political beliefs (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2020), political extremism can lead to greater ideological stability.

Furthermore, to examine the validity of their uncertainty-threat model and alternative explanations in real-life settings, Jost et al. (2007) conducted field research among three samples of undergraduate students in Texas, New York and Massachusetts, as both hypotheses were proposed theoretically (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Jost et al., 2003). Considering differences in geographical and ideological environment and adjusting for ideological extremity, the three studies consistently supported the uncertainty-threat model instead of alternatives. In other words, conservatism, instead of ideological extremity, has closer relationships with management of threat and uncertainty (Jost et al., 2007). The main weakness of this research appears to be the homogeneity of participants; groups of college students might not be sufficiently representative of the whole population. Furthermore, despite significant correlations, the causality remains unclear due to limitations of cross-sectional and correlational methodologies.

The causality issue was partly tackled in Zwicker et al. (2020), where researchers

investigated the determinants of ideological stability based on two cross-sectional studies in Germany and Austria and a multi-wave longitudinal study in the Netherlands. All three studies produced converging results suggesting that political extremism is significantly and positively related to ideological stability, regardless of its direction, and that the effect was more pronounced at the left wing. However, due to the correlational nature of all three studies, it was impossible to assess whether mediating factors intervened in the correlation between political extremism and ideological stability.

A recent study incorporated socio-economic factors into the uncertainty-threat model (Wiertz & Rodon, 2021). They relied on Dutch panel data (2007-2016) to explore how job loss and unemployment relate to ideological stability. They found that job loss caused a shift, with the effect being stronger when economic shocks were more intense.

Taken together, these findings do not imply that the *rigidity-of-the-right* and the *rigidity-of-the-extreme* hypotheses are of incompatible nature. Rather, since one focuses primarily on the *direction* and the other on the *intensity* of partisanship, there is a great possibility of reconciling and constructively integrating them (Zmigrod, 2020).

By taking valence-based approaches and delving into specific emotions, this essay investigates how individuals' affective and motivational states respond to contextual stimuli, leading to shift or rigidity of their political ideology. The same stimulus may elicit distinct responses and the same need can prompt various solutions. In fact, the tensions between the *rigidity-of-the-right* and the *rigidity-of-the-extreme* hypotheses or the intricacies among affect, motivation and political ideology allude to the malleability of political orientations, which, if appropriately managed, can lead to the building of a more tolerant society.

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