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Pliskin R.; Halperin E.

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The Study of Affective Processes in Political Contexts: Accomplishments and Challenges

Ruthie Pliskin¹ · Eran Halperin²

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People experience intense emotions when it comes to politics. One could even say that emotions are at the core of politics and that political processes cannot be understood without considering affective phenomena like fear, hate, anger, and even disgust. The emotions are experienced and expressed by leaders and laypeople alike, during political campaigns, in interpersonal political discussions in the workplace, and on social media. The political world is so emotional because it contains all of the ingredients to make people experience intense emotions. It encompasses issues that are central and sometimes even existential to almost all people. It engages one's identity and group belonging, thus continuously amplifying people's emotional reactions. And, of course, it generates the kind of competitive atmosphere and dynamics that spur conflict—between competing ideologies and among ethnic groups and nations.

In recent years, scholars have been suggesting that politics are becoming more and more emotional (Banks, 2014; Halperin, 2016; Marcus, 2003). Unfortunately, measuring this claim is hard, and attempts to empirically test it have yielded mixed results. Nonetheless, it seems almost undebatable that current social, technological, and even environmental developments provide fertile ground for the amplification of emotions within the political domain. For example, many western societies have recently been experiencing peak levels of hostility across political lines, often defined as affective polarization (Boxell et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). The challenge of dealing with these internal political conflicts has become intertwined with the challenge of yet another highly emotional phenomenon, namely, the COVID-19 crisis, as well as with newly erupted international ethnic conflicts like the ones in Afghanistan, the Middle East, or Myanmar. The fact that new technologies, and specifically

social media, enable people to express and observe emotional reactions to all abovementioned (and other) political processes further exacerbates the already intense experiences people have in politics (Brady et al., 2017; Gervais, 2015). At times, and in certain contexts, much of our affective energy seems to be directed at the political world.

These developments in the political sphere have not escaped the attention of scientists adhering to both new and traditional approaches, and research in the social sciences has been delving more deeply into the affective world. Recently, a paper by a group of over 50 social scientists posed the question of whether we should see ourselves now as being part of the affective era (Dukes et al., 2021). These scholars identified a rapid increase in interest in, publications about, and funding for research on affective processes among scholars from different disciplinary areas, and specifically among those who study local, national, and international political processes. These rapid developments in the study of affect in politics have led to several interesting theoretical, methodological, and even phenomenological developments in this field.

The goal of the current special volume is to highlight these developments by assembling a non-representative and certainly non-exhaustive collection of papers dealing with affective processes within the political world. We aimed to bring together research rooted within different disciplinary approaches, studying political processes in diverse geographical areas, and using a wide range of methodologies to capture the nature, role, and implications of affective processes in politics.

Accordingly, our special issue includes seven papers that are diverse in terms of methodological approach, the affective phenomena tested, and the socio-political context they employ. As such, the collection nicely represents current trends in the study of affective processes within the political world. More specifically, the collection includes one theoretical paper (Leach & Zeineddine, 2021), one broad meta-analysis (Hakim et al., 2021), two papers that use big data

✉ Ruthie Pliskin
r.pliskin@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

¹ Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands

² Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

scraped from social media to explore the spread of emotions following meaningful events (Bellovary et al., 2021; Schöne et al., 2021), two papers that utilize experimental designs to study the effects of emotional experiences (Stefaniak et al., 2021) and expressions (Sasse et al., 2021), and one correlational field study conducted in the aftermath of recovery from violent conflict (Penić et al., 2021).

The papers also cover a broad range of political contexts. The two social media papers focus on emotions in the context of ideological conflict and affective polarization (Schöne et al., 2021; Bellovary et al., 2021), another paper examines gender-based group-level emotions (Sasse et al., 2021), one addresses (the aftermath of) violent inter-ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (Penić et al., 2021), and one examines interventions in the context of intergroup relations within Polish society (Stefaniak et al., 2021). In terms of the affective phenomena studied, the social media papers focus on negativity versus positivity more broadly (Schöne et al., 2021; Bellovary et al., 2021); the meta-analysis paper addresses three different moral emotions, namely guilt, shame, and anger (Hakim, 2021); the gender relations paper focuses on the experience versus expression of anger (Sasse et al., 2021); and the study on post-conflict Sri Lanka examines the role of group-level empathy in support for post-conflict reconciliation mechanisms (Penić et al., 2021).

In the following paragraphs, we first describe each paper appearing in the special issue, highlighting its main contribution to the study of affect in politics. We then provide a more integrative view of the papers, offering insights regarding the main accomplishments of the field as they emerge from reading the seven accepted papers and many more that were submitted for consideration. Finally, we introduce the main challenges and barriers we think persist in the study of affect in politics, offering some ways to address these challenges in the future.

A Brief Overview of the Papers

In the first paper in this special issue (following this introduction), Colin Leach and Fouad Bou Zeineddine propose a new theoretical approach to the study of group-level emotions in political contexts, for which a comprehensive theory has thus far been lacking (see elaborated discussion below). When looking at most work done in the field thus far, Leach and Zeineddine identify a meaningful limitation in that most studies focus on simple, unidirectional causal processes of emotion affecting socio-political context or vice versa. In a way, they argue; this common approach overlooks the complexity of political systems as well as the nuanced roles potentially played by various affective processes as part of these systems. To address this limitation, they put forth a “brief primer” on systems meta-theory, delineating three key

beneficial features: multi-leveled, complex, and dynamic. Their view is thus of emotion as a system of systems: within the person, within interpersonal relationships, and within the world (locally and globally). Such an approach, according to Leach and Zeineddine, can potentially improve our theoretical view as well as the methodological practices we employ when studying affective processes in politics.

Unfortunately, too few large-scale meta-analyses have been conducted to examine the impact of discrete group-level emotions on political outcomes. Therefore, the work of Nader Hakim and colleagues—on the role of group-based moral emotions in promoting support for reparations—is of great importance. In their work, Hakim and colleagues test three major questions that had not been fully tested before: (a) do group-level moral emotions actually promote support for reparations across social and political contexts?; (b) are there meaningful differences in the relative impact of each group-level moral emotion on such support?; and (c) are there specific conditions under which each of these emotions becomes a more or less powerful predictor of support for reparations? In brief, their results reveal a strong link between each of these moral emotions and support for reparations, but no significant differentiation among the three emotions, somewhat contradicting past findings pointing to distinct functions for discrete emotions when examining specific outcomes (e.g., Halperin et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2003; Rosler et al., 2017; Skitka et al., 2006).

Next, two papers (Schöne et al., 2021; Bellovary et al., 2021) integrate two of the most prominent trends in social science research today: the study of ideological conflicts (also termed affective polarization), on one hand, and the study of social dynamics as they develop on social media, on the other hand. Their focus is on the underlying mechanisms contributing to the toxic and hostile social and political discourse in many Western democratic countries. These are by all means not the first studies demonstrating the superiority of negative (compared to positive) affect on Twitter specifically and on social media more broadly (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2015; Brady et al., 2017; Doré et al., 2015; Goldenberg & Gross, 2020), but the authors of these two papers offer several innovative insights that illuminate some of the less-obvious root causes of this destructive phenomenon.

First, Jonas Schöne and colleagues show in two studies that increased negativity (but not positivity) predicts content sharing in both positive and negative political situations. In other words, their data reveal that sharing information on social media is driven by negativity per se and not so much by the congruency (or incongruency) of the shared information with the dominant affect aroused by the event. Complementing this, the findings emerging from the work by Andrea Bellovary and colleagues suggest that news organizations, which naturally strive for greater audience engagement, in effect accurately implement the insights of

Schöne and colleagues. Their results reveal that negative affect is expressed by news organizations much more than positive affect and that negativity—but not positivity—then predicts individuals' engagement with the news organizations' tweets. Speaking to the ongoing debate about ideological symmetry versus asymmetry (e.g., Brandt & Crawford, 2019; Jost, 2017), Bellovary and colleagues find no differences in affect between left- and right-leaning news organizations, suggesting that for both right-wing and left-wing organizations, negativity is more frequent and more impactful on their consumers than positivity.

The work by Anna Stefaniak and colleagues demonstrates another important trend in the study of affect in socio-political systems, namely the transition from a strictly descriptive approach to a more interventionist one (Ford et al., 2018; Halperin et al., 2013; Halperin, Pliskin et al., 2014; Solak et al., 2021). Relying mainly on the building blocks of research on emotion regulation (Gross, 2013), in recent years scholars have started to study the way emotional change can lead to improvement in politics in general and intergroup relations more specifically. In their paper, Stefaniak and her colleagues create and test an innovative intervention targeting the feeling of nostalgia, through highlighting to Polish citizens specific elements in their cultural history. The authors show that up-regulating nostalgia for the history of co-existence between ingroup and outgroup members causes openness across group lines to increase, in turn improving intergroup attitudes. Interestingly, this intervention both increased the magnitude of the emotion (i.e., more nostalgia) and colored it with relevant content (i.e., nostalgia focusing on co-existence) and as such led to durable change among members of the relevant target audience.

Another non-traditional approach to the study of affective processes in socio-political conflicts is presented in the paper by Sandra Penić and colleagues, who tested the way empathy can promote support for transitional justice mechanisms in post-conflict Sri Lanka. It is not too difficult to imagine that feeling empathy towards the political rival would have constructive implications in a post-conflict period (Klimecki, 2019; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Zembylas, 2007), but intergroup empathy in these situations is notoriously elusive, and its actual effects tend to be limited in scope (Rosler et al., 2017). What Penić and her colleagues demonstrate in their work is that even when direct empathy is low, the mere perception that other members of one's own group experience empathy towards different groups can yield a meaningful, positive effect on support for processes like transitional justice. As noted by the authors, their findings provide a more nuanced view of the role of group-level emotions and illustrate the importance of perceived collective emotions for conflict resolution.

Finally, the work by Julia Sasse and colleagues examines group-level emotions in the context of gender relations,

an intergroup context in which the study of affective processes has thus far not received enough attention. The work of Sasse and her colleagues also demonstrates the way in which emotional processes can and should be studied in the context of asymmetric power relations, by integrating literature on group-level emotions on one hand with work on power relations on the other hand. Specifically, Sasse and her colleagues use three experimental studies to test what they define as “the anger gap,” the fact that women express less anger about sexism than what they actually experience. These studies' findings support the assumption that such a gap exists, demonstrating that it is driven by instrumental concerns, specifically the perceived costs and benefits of confronting sexism. Sasse and colleagues nicely conclude in their paper that to understand women's—and men's—reactions to sexism, it is crucial not to mistake their emotion expression for how they really feel, but instead to also consider the strategic concerns at play.

The diversity of these papers reflects many of the developments and accomplishments of recent research on affective processes in political contexts. To understand these developments better, we next discuss them in a broader context and then examine what challenges still lie ahead in this interdisciplinary research.

Achievements in Studying Affect in Politics

The present collection of papers enables us to make several clear observations regarding recent trends and accomplishments in the study of affect in politics. First, the research on affect in politics clearly and nicely touches upon the most pressing and even troubling political challenges currently facing society. In this regard, based on the papers appearing in this special issue (but also on the broader range of originally-submitted papers), at least four major areas of research can be identified: (1) political discourse on social media, (2) affective polarization, (3) emotions in asymmetrically powered intergroup contexts (e.g., race relations, gender), and (4) emotion-targeted interventions (or, in other words, emotion regulation) to bridge intergroup conflict. It should be noted that in many of these areas, the research on affective processes is only in its infancy, a fact that greatly challenges the field's ability to provide evidence-based answers to some of the world's most pressing questions, but also holds great promise for the future contributions of the field.

Another interesting observation that can be drawn based on research presented in the current volume is that whereas, traditionally, most research on affect in politics focused on the role affective processes play in elections and voting (Marcus et al., 2002), research in the past two decades has expanded to study a much wider array of political outcome variables, such as collective action (Cohen-Chen & Van

Zomeran, 2018; Ford et al., 2018; Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019), political decision-making (Redlawsk, 2006), social media behavior (Brady et al., 2017; Doré et al., 2015; Goldenberg & Gross, 2020), political violence (Tausch et al., 2011), support for conciliatory or aggressive actions (Halperin, 2011; Pliskin et al., 2014), and more. This development positions affective processes much more centrally and with (potentially) much broader implications in the wider study of politics.

The collection also clearly demonstrates that while research on affect in politics has traditionally focused almost exclusively on the ways emotions shape political decisions or actions, contemporary research on affect in politics expands to study other aspects of affective processes (beyond the experience of emotion and its influence on political outcomes) and the way they influence the political world. Notable examples are studies focusing on the way people's motivation to experience certain emotions shapes their socio-political behavior (Porat et al., 2016), studies dealing with emotion regulation processes within and between rival political groups (Ford et al., 2018), or studies dealing with the way perceptions regarding fellow group members' empathy towards the "other" group shape people's own reactions to that outgroup (Goldenberg et al., 2020).

Some Critical Observations and Challenges

Notwithstanding these important accomplishments, we would like to use this opportunity to bring forth several critical observations regarding the present state of research on affect in politics. When thinking about excellent interdisciplinary work, we can identify two major challenges to its realization. The first challenge is to generate and increase awareness of the need for such work within each of the relevant disciplines. In the present case—the study of affect and politics—the challenge has been twofold. On one hand, political scientists need to recognize that studying affective processes is crucial for gaining a deep and complete understanding of politics. On the other hand, psychologists and neuroscientists need to recognize political spheres as crucial research contexts for gaining a better understanding of even basic affective and emotional processes.

The second challenge of such interdisciplinary work is to realize its full potential by offering insights that constitute a whole larger than the sum of its individual parts (i.e., disciplines). To this end, the main criteria to consider are whether such interdisciplinary efforts actually generate new, creative questions and/or methodologies and whether they also impact research within the mainstream of each discipline involved. In our case, we can ask whether the emerging insights on affect in politics have made us think differently about political *and* affective processes.

We would like to argue that whereas the accumulated research on affect in politics, as exemplified in the current volume, provides strong indications for successfully meeting the first challenge introduced above (called here "the recognition challenge"), there is still quite a distance to traverse before we can say the same for the second challenge (called here "the breadth challenge"). This means that while there has been a dramatic increase in the magnitude and scope of research in both political science and psychology on affect in politics, its depth, its innovation, and the research's actual contribution to each respective discipline—while substantial—are still sub-optimal. In the next section, we discuss several central challenges that hinder current scientific attempts to realize the field's true potential.

First is what may be termed the "copy-paste" syndrome, wherein the unique features of the context are disregarded when examining affective phenomena in political contexts (Halperin & Pliskin, 2015). Frequently, if not in the vast majority of cases, researchers adopt methods from basic psychological research and apply them to the study of politics, without first carefully considering how the context, with its specific and psychologically relevant characteristics, changes not only the emotional phenomenon at hand but also its expression, functions, temporal dynamics, regulation, and more (Halperin & Pliskin, 2015). For example, when trying to identify politically relevant determinants of emotional experience, such as ideology, it is important to understand how ideology shapes each of the different dimensions of the emotional experience and how features of the context relate to needs and motivations associated with both the ideology and the emotions being considered (Pliskin et al., 2020). Similarly, when trying to implement well-established emotion regulation strategies, like reappraisal, in a political context, it is not enough to employ identical methods to the ones used in lab-controlled studies. Instead, one must ask in what way reappraising emotion-eliciting events in an intergroup, political context may be unique and may, accordingly, require adjustments (Goldenberg et al., 2015).

It is of course natural—and useful—to initially adopt research questions and methodologies from basic research on any topic and apply them in more specific research within particular domains. As a first step, this can push scientific knowledge forward and lay the groundwork for more catered modifications, as has happened with the measurement of individual versus group-based emotions (Mackie & Smith, 2016) and with the implementation of emotion regulation research into the intergroup context (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Goldenberg et al., 2015)—both of which progressed into more context-sensitive examinations of the affective phenomena at hand. Nonetheless, research must go beyond these initial steps to truly shape our understanding of these phenomena.

A second challenge is imposed by the presence of competing and divided disciplinary approaches. When looking at past research on affect in politics, one encounters several independent lines of research, with very little correspondence among them and very little offered in the way of bridging between different conceptualizations, terms, methodologies, or even conclusions. For example, affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2002, 2019) has for years dominated research on affect in politics within the field of political science. The theory, which asserts that two central affective dimensions, enthusiasm and aversion/anxiety, govern individual decision-making in politics, is rarely acknowledged in psychological research on emotions in politics (but see Halperin, Pliskin et al., 2014), limiting any ability to integrate its findings with those of psychological research. Not surprisingly, the opposite is also true. Affective intelligence theory incorporates very few central insights from decades of psychological research into emotions in general and relevant topics such as group-based emotions (Mackie & Smith, 2016) in particular. Furthermore, affective intelligence theory's assertion that anxiety pre-disposes people to seek out more information ahead of making political decisions conflicts with many findings in psychological science that fear and anxiety actually lead to avoidance (Pliskin et al., 2015; Skitka et al., 2006) or cognitive freezing (Cohen-Chen et al., 2014; Isen, 1984; Jost et al., 2003; Öhman, 1993).

This lack of communication across disciplines has also led to differing interpretations of similar phenomena. For example, research in political science and political psychology often terms certain phenomena “emotions” even when specifically looking at (and empirically testing) long-term affective dispositions towards specific political targets. Psychological research on these phenomena would instead term them “sentiments,” contrasting them with the multidimensional nature of emotions, which are short-lived reactions involving “feelings, physiological changes, expressive behaviors and inclinations to act” (Frijda et al., 2000, p. 5). These inconsistencies work to the detriment of both disciplines, as well as to our general ability to fully understand affective phenomena in political contexts.

Another challenge, which hinders the realization of the potential contribution of the study of affect in politics, is the mismatch between the dominant approaches taken within each discipline to study these processes. For example, despite an increasing focus on processes of emotion regulation within more fundamental research on emotions, the study of emotion regulation in political contexts has been limited to a handful of researchers (e.g., Ford & Feinberg, 2020; Gross & Ford, 2020; Halperin, Pliskin et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Porat et al., 2016). Furthermore, most if not all of this work is led by psychologists, whereas most political scientists still focus on the nature and impact of affective experiences and reactions in the political world, ignoring

their regulation (but see Maor & Gross, 2015). This has resulted in a shortage of insights, despite the great potential for groundbreaking insights afforded by the progress within each field. Consequently, our understanding of how concepts from different fields function and interact within the same system—or within the same real-world phenomena to which they relate—is fragmented and, at best, limited, impeding true progress towards comprehensive scientific accounts of such phenomena.

Attempts to bridge the two disciplines are complemented by another challenge, namely the difficulty to transform knowledge, theories, and methods from individual-level affective science to group-level phenomena in the political world. The very slow progress in our understanding of group-level or collective emotions may in part be an outcome of a clear bias in research in favor of individual psychology. In basic psychological research, the individual is the unit of measurement, and thus almost all research on emotions has examined them as an individual-level phenomenon. But this is not necessarily the best approach when examining political contexts. Also, given that emotions serve a social function, and as such can be seen as existing *between* individuals rather than strictly *within* a given individual, change in the approach taken to study affect in politics is called for. It should be noted, however, that research on emotions in the political arena in increasingly acknowledging this need, examining phenomena such as group-based emotions (Mackie & Smith, 2016, 2018), collective emotions (Bar-tal et al., 2007; Goldenberg et al., 2020), emotional norms (Manners, 2021), emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993), emotional burden (Goldenberg et al., 2014), and even interpersonal emotion regulation in interpersonal (Zaki & Williams, 2013) and intergroup (Netzer et al., 2020; Rimé, 2007) contexts. These new directions make it exceedingly clear that when examining emotions in politics—which involve intra- and intergroup phenomenon—the individual's experience cannot be understood without acknowledging collective processes. One's own experience, understanding, expression, and regulation of any given emotion is firmly embedded in the norms, affordances, and especially emotions of those with whom she identifies, but also those she sees as adversaries. Overcoming this barrier requires understanding the network dynamics of how emotions develop within and between groups, with social media offering a uniquely appropriate means to this end.

Relating to the above—and perhaps also hinting at a possible solution to it—is the present lack of true interdisciplinary work. Not only are the concepts and approaches diverging, but very few efforts are underway for people across disciplines to *work* together. Such work could be arranged in the form of expert discussion forums or cross-disciplinary research teams. Conferences have been organized with explicit intentions to bring emotion researchers

together from all relevant disciplines, but in practice the organizers' discipline tends to dominate, with intradisciplinary incentives maintaining tendencies for within-discipline navel gazing. While it may be utopian to imagine a reality in which all research on emotion adopts similar approaches and assumptions, it should still be realistic to organize work in a more collaborative and open manner, making it easier to conduct and compare research across disciplines.

Fortunately, there are attempts currently underway to tackle each of the challenges presented above. In the present volume, we have included several of these. In their paper, Leach and Zeineddine (2021) present an ambitious, integrative theory—of the kind that is sorely missing. As such, it offers a way forward on the task of theoretical integration. Hakim and colleagues (2021) attempt, through a meta-analysis, to take a broader view of the emotions they examine and resolve prior disagreements, while also examining specific contextual factors of relevance to the context they utilize. They thus clearly demonstrate an approach going beyond the “copy-paste” challenge discussed above. The presence of emotions between people is effectively examined in the papers by Bellovary and colleagues (2021) and Schöne and colleagues (2021), where the diffusion of emotional content in society takes central stage. Sasse and colleagues (2021) tackle both the multi-dimensionality of emotions and their existence between people in differentiating between the experience and expression of emotions. Furthermore, their focus on asymmetrically-powered intergroup relations puts the unique features of the context centerstage. Finally, Stefaniak and colleagues (2021) and Penić and colleagues (2021) both examine under-studied (historical) conflicts and the role of emotions in their aftermath, taking the study of emotions in political contexts far beyond the immediate, classical approach of understanding how an event immediately influences individual affect. We hope that the volume, as a whole, can set the stage for further such progress in our ever-evolving field.

Additional Information

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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