



## The Paradox of Pathos: The Ethics of Emotions in Political Communication

Despite the United States being one of the most recognizable democracies in the world, it often trails most other developed nations in voter turnout. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, where countries like Belgium, Sweden, and Denmark see upwards of 80% voter turnout, in 2012 the American turnout rate topped out at 58.6% and only barely increased in 2016 to 61% (Ward, 2018). FairVote, a nonpartisan organization which seeks to remedy this problem through electoral reforms, notes that low voter turnout is caused by a variety of factors such as electoral competitiveness, election type, voting laws, and voter demographics. Even among these variables one especially salient feature of low voter turnout is that it is usually attributed to “political disengagement and the belief that voting for one candidate/party or another will do little to alter public policy” (FairVote, 2020). In other words, Americans are increasingly suffering from a lack of voter motivation.



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What is an effective way to address this lack of motivation among political constituencies? The Greek thinker Aristotle identified emotional forms of proof (*pathos*) as one of the central mechanisms for persuasion over two thousand years ago. It is no surprise that throughout history, politicians have always tried to overcome the voter motivation problem through emotional appeals and exciting the electorate through various campaign promises. Since the Donald Trump campaign in 2016 primarily sought to galvanize voters through the stimulation of fear and anger, a new debate surrounding the ethical considerations of emotive political messages has been spurred. From referring to Mexicans as rapists to claiming Muslims hate America, Trump capitalized on a rhetoric of fear and anger which he subsequently promised to fix through strict immigration reform should he be elected (Ortiz & Pickard, 2018). It appeared to have worked: “Trump led an unseen rebellion of working-class voters, most of them white and so disgusted by a stalled status quo that they voted for a candidate promising dramatic change” (Goldmacher et. al., 2016).

Is this use of political rhetoric that evokes intense emotions a good thing? On one hand, there are those like journalist Ron Chandler who argues that Trump’s use of “divisive and isolationist rhetoric” leads to “offensive aggression (aggression that’s not prompted by an actual threat), an unwillingness to compromise, or racism and bigotry” (Chandler, 2020). While it counters the common sense idea that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” there is support for the general notion that messages which cause strong emotional reactions also cause irrational and potentially violent behavior. In fact, a recent study conducted by scholars at the University of Alabama and Chicago School of Law found that “Donald Trump’s election in November of 2016 was associated with a statistically significant surge in reported hate crimes across the United States, even when controlling for alternative explanations... and



counties that voted for President Trump by the widest margins in the presidential election also experienced the largest increases in reported hate crimes” (Edwards & Rushin, 2018). As the *New York Times* reports, these “personal attacks motivated by bias or prejudice reached a 16-year high in 2018 with a significant upswing in violence against Latinos,” a highly targeted group in Trump’s efforts to curb immigration (Hassan, 2019).

On the other hand, researchers Jeff Greenberg and Jamie Arndt argue that fear and anger aren’t always all bad. In their studies surrounding Terror Management Theory (TMT), they discovered that while these strong emotions *can* result in negative outcomes, fear and anger can *also* motivate actions such as generosity and a desire to take constructive action (Chandler, 2020). In fact, psychologist Dr. Michal Strahilevitz emphasizes that “voters are driven by emotions, and negative emotions may have the most impact” and Nicholas Valentino, professor of communication studies and political science, has shown in his studies of emotional effects on voting that “many citizens with few resources can be mobilized if they experience strong anger” (Strahilevitz, 2012; Valentino, 2011). Furthermore, though Trump may be an especially salient example as his emotive messaging has perhaps been more direct than we’ve ever seen (he is not one to sugarcoat his opinion), he is certainly not the only politician to have ever used fear and anger to motivate voters. While Trump played on these emotions for his base, so too did Hillary Clinton for her base in response to Trump’s every move. As journalist Molly Ball argues: “The critics who accuse Trump of cheap fear-mongering may be failing to recognize that the fear percolating in society is real, and somewhat justified; politicians who fail to validate it risk falling out of step with the zeitgeist” (Ball, 2016).

Emotive messaging works, and this is why it has always been used within political communication. The recent focus on negative emotions may be the key to solving the nation’s low voter turnout; in this way, it serves the admirable democratic goal of increasing citizen motivation and participation in politics. It is already projected to drive the largest voter turnout in decades for the upcoming 2020 presidential election. *The Atlantic* reports that “with Donald Trump’s tumultuous presidency stirring such strong emotions among both supporters and opponents... the 2020 contest could produce a massive turnout that is also unprecedentedly diverse” (Ball, 2016). Emotions work to increase participation, but is an increase in voter turnout worth the risk of polarizing the country even further or even another spike in hate-crime related violence? Similarly, is the monotony of non-emotional messages worth the stagnant rates in democratic participation? Is the U.S. truly a democracy if only slightly more than half of the (eligible) citizenry is choosing its leaders?

### Discussion Questions:

1. What values and activities are part of an ideal democratic community? What are the central values in conflict in using emotional messages to drive voter turnout?
2. Can political messages be devoid of emotion? If not, are some emotions more ethically desirable than others?
3. Does democracy have to be rational? Does rationality inherently entail an absence of emotion?



4. Is there a creative way to communicate political messages that utilizes both emotion and reason without privileging one over the other to increase voter turnout?

**Further Information:**

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