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Feeling within reason

How appraisals shape emotional responses to politics

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1 Introduction

Emotions are omnipresent in accounts of political events. “Angry Dutch farmers swarm The Hague to protest green rules”, *Politico* writes in their reporting on the farmer protests in the Netherlands (Schaart, 2019). *The Guardian* describes students’ involvement in the French protests as showing the “depth of anger towards Macron” (Chrisafis, 2023). People discuss the rise of “climate anxiety” among youths (Rannard, 2022) and Biden “warns Democrats of voter anger, anxiety over inflation” (Wingrove, 2022).

As demonstrated by these examples, we attach emotion labels to almost any political event, and implicitly or explicitly assign meanings to these emotion labels. Intuitively, we know what we, personally, mean when we say that we are angry or anxious. From that, we can often infer what others mean when they say that they feel these emotions. But the majority of our experiences of emotions come from our personal lives, just as most theories of emotions were formulated to explain personal experiences and not necessarily emotions in politics. It is unclear how emotions in politics compare to how we understand emotions in the personal realm. Why are Dutch farmers angry when they could just as well be anxious about regulations threatening their ways of farming? What exactly makes young people primarily anxious about climate change? Have policymakers not known about its causes and the imminent consequences for long enough but refuse to take action? Should youths not be angry, instead? To what extent are the emotion labels we use – angry, anxious, disgusted, happy – meaningful? Do they describe different emotional states or are they just synonyms we use for very similar emotional experiences?

Distinguishing emotions from one another and identifying the underlying causes of distinct emotions in politics is not just an empirical challenge but has normative implications for how we understand the role of emotions in political life. Normative accounts of emotions arguing that they have no place in politics have a long tradition dating back to Popper (1945/2012), and Habermas (1991), to more recently Nussbaum (2013), who argues that specifically the negative emotions, fear and anger, are detrimental to political life and should be avoided. Critiques of the political

uses of emotion often suffer from the misconception that emotion and reason can be separated. In fact, they are inextricably linked: reason is informed by and impossible without emotion (Damasio, 1994; Marcus, 2010), and emotions are informed by reason as far as they emerge through appraisals of our environment (Ellsworth, 2013; Scherer & Moors, 2019). Thus, emotions are not per se unreasonable. Rather, emotions are often justified – and adaptive – responses to our environment.

Most people would probably agree that political debates would benefit from an avoidance of emotions stirred up by fear-mongering or rage-baiting – fear or anger based on false or exaggerated threats, or a demonizing of political opponents. However, there are many occurrences of emotions in politics that cannot be condemned as easily. Srinivasan (2018) argues that rather than focusing on potential consequences, when judging the normative aspects of emotions we should assess whether they are justified given the situation. Anger can have unproductive consequences but that does not change the fact that it can be a reasonable and justified emotional response (Srinivasan, 2018). Asking people not to feel anger is cynical in such circumstances, and the same goes for other emotions.

Emotions in the political domain should not be seen as either good or bad, as long as they are reasonable responses to the environment. Thus, the normative debate becomes an empirical question that prompts us to look deeper into the nature and roots of emotions in politics: What drives distinct emotional responses and who experiences emotions in response to politics? Emotions are the result of appraisals of our environment and help us navigate complex social situations through action tendencies, i.e., motivational states that prepare us to respond to stimuli in an appropriate manner (Frijda, 1987). For most emotions, these action tendencies can lead to both positive (e.g., prosocial), and negative (e.g., harmful) behaviors (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Thus, emotions are not intrinsically good or bad but they are justified or unjustified depending on whether they follow appraisals of political events and issues.

Generally, discrete emotions, such as anger, fear or hope, are seen to result from distinct appraisal profiles of events and situations and lead to distinct behavioral outcomes, i.e. action tendencies. Anxiety, for instance, which is a result of feeling uncertain about and not in control of a situation, makes us alert to threats (Albertson

& Gadarian, 2015), risk-averse (Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007), and increases our attention to help us cope with uncertainty (Valentino, Hutchings, & Banks, 2008). Each of these consequences can be seen as positive or negative depending on the context in which anxiety occurs.

Anger usually emerges in situations when we feel certain about an event's causes and consequences, i.e. when we feel that we can understand it, and when we experience a strong sense of agency. Most of all, anger emerges when we blame somebody else for a negative event. Anger puts us into an approach-attack mode: it increases political participation (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011; C. Weber, 2013) but also makes people more closed-minded, more reliant on heuristics (Parker & Isbell, 2010). It makes us less likely to engage in political deliberation (MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010), and increases polarization (Webster, Connors, & Sinclair, 2022).

While the impact of emotions on politics has been extensively studied, a deeper understanding of their underlying roots is still lacking. To uncover the complex interplay between emotions and rationality in politics, it is essential to examine the appraisals that give rise to distinct emotions. In this dissertation, I argue that political science has mostly focused on studying the *consequences*, i.e. action tendencies of emotions. Although existing work on political action tendencies rests on the assumption that action tendencies are directly or indirectly the result of underlying appraisals, it has largely skipped over this important component of an emotion episode. As a consequence, some of the core assumptions of appraisal theory have never been tested in the political domain.

Readers might ask themselves why it is necessary that we test a theory that is well established in psychology and has been applied to political science for years. I argue that emotions in politics might work differently than in the personal domain. According to Schiller et al. (2022) emotions are allostatic. This means that they are directed towards an allostatic concern, a situational demand, and help us deal with them (similarly to an emotions' action tendencies described by Frijda, 1987). Schiller et al. (2022) identify different levels at which such allostatic concerns take place, from immediate (internal, physiological), and interpersonal, to distant (moral) concerns. The more distant a concern becomes, the higher the com-

plexity of the steps that need to be taken to deal with said concern, i.e. to go from an object/event and its appraisal to an action tendency.

While appraisal theories have primarily described emotions about immediate and interpersonal concerns (Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990; C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), I argue that emotions in politics are situated between interpersonal to the most distant, i.e. moral concerns. This makes emotional processes in politics significantly more complex and abstract than emotions in the personal domain. Thus, I argue that the applicability of a core assumption of appraisal theories – that emotions are related to distinct appraisal profiles – needs to be (re-)evaluated in the political domain. This leads us to the first empirical question that this dissertation aims to answer:

RQ1: Are emotions in politics related to distinct appraisal profiles of political issues and events?

While public debate often portrays emotional voters as inferior to rational, calculating voters, emotions can have a positive impact when they direct our attention to where it is needed and mobilize us to take action on political issues we care about (Marcus, 2010). Ultimately, emotions help us to appropriately respond to an event. Anxiety directs our attention to the threat (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015), anger and disgust help us to keep political actors accountable for moral transgressions (Bakker, Schumacher, & Homan, 2020). However, the positive impact of emotions is limited to those who respond emotionally to politics, and experience an appropriate emotion. Picture an electorate that responds with sadness, instead of anger, to corruption. Their lack of an appropriate emotional response will keep them from dealing appropriately with the problem at hand. Thus, it becomes important to know first, who gets emotional about politics and second, who can translate specific appraisals of political issues and events into appropriate emotional responses.

Past work has identified political sophistication as one of the core predictors of experiencing emotions in response to politics (Miller, 2011). Sophistication, a level of being interested in, knowing about and understanding politics is thus seen as prerequisite for (emotionally) engaged citizenship. However, this argumentation depends on the mechanisms that link political sophistication and emotional engage-

ment, and the component(s) of sophistication (interest, knowledge, confidence-in-knowledge) that predict emotional responses to politics. Thus, the second empirical question of this dissertation examines who gets emotional about politics and through which mechanism:

RQ2: What is the relationship between political sophistication and emotional responses to politics?

To answer the two core research questions of this dissertation, I will first define emotions through the Component Process Model (Scherer & Moors, 2019), which provides the core theoretical framework throughout this dissertation. I then outline the four empirical chapters, which aim to answer the questions above and summarize their key findings. The Introduction of this dissertation is followed by four empirical chapters, which use several original survey experiments and data from the American National Election Study to provide insights into the role of appraisals in shaping discrete emotional responses to politics. The empirical chapters consist of two parts: Chapters 2 and 3 seek to answer RQ1, while Chapters 4 and 5 focus on RQ2. I conclude by reflecting on the key findings of the dissertation and discuss key theoretical and empirical implications for future studies of emotions in politics.

1.1 Defining ‘Emotions’ - The Component Process Model

Notoriously, in 1984, Fehr and Russell wrote: “Everyone knows what an emotion is, until one is asked to give a definition. Then it seems, no one knows” (Fehr & Russell, 1984, p.464). The challenge to define emotions was further elaborated on by Scherer. He claims that while usually we have a thing, an object or phenomenon, and debate what to call it, in “emotion psychology, we have the opposite problem. We have a name, ‘emotion’, but disagree about the thing. What is an emotion?” (Scherer, 2022, p.155). What does not help in this debate is that the words ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’ are used daily for many things, from moods, to physical states (feeling tired), and interpersonal relationships (having feelings for somebody), to personality characteristics (describing people’s characters as happy or anxious), and attitudes or evaluations (feeling disgusted by a disliked policy).

To distinguish emotions from these other mental states, we need a clear definition of what constitutes an emotion (for a recent discussion on the distinction of emotions – as *episodes of experience* – from affective dispositions, mood, or affect see Schiller et al., 2022). Definitions of emotions, starting with that of William James in 1884, have usually included a stimulus and a response. Emotions are seen as something that happens between the two, helping us to deal with the stimulus. Most if not all definitions also recognize a physiological and a cognitive part of emotions. However, which comes first, or which is more important, differs by definition and theory of emotion (Scherer, 2022).

Broadly, three theoretical traditions have emerged over the past decades: Basic or evolutionary emotion theories usually focus on a small number of basic emotions (often 6). They are elicited automatically and set off an innate affect program, consisting of typical behaviors and facial expressions with an evolutionary adaptive purpose (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Tooby & Cosmides, 2015). Appraisal theories focus on a broader range of discrete emotions that are considered to result from a range of evaluative judgments of events (Scherer & Moors, 2019; C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Constructivist theories propose that we constantly survey our bodily affect and construct an emotion by assigning a subjective label to a physiological state. Emotions in constructivist theories are often represented in a two-dimensional valence (negative to positive) x arousal (low arousal to high arousal) space (Barrett, 2017; Barrett & Russell, 2014).

The Component Process Model (CPM) is an effort to consolidate these traditions (see Figure 1), arguing that the different approaches to emotions have much more in common than what separates them (Scherer, 2022). Above all, they each acknowledge that “emotions 1) consist of an episodic process in response to a perceived event or situation of major significance, 2) which is characterised by recursive causal effects (forward and backwards) between several components that include the evaluation of the event in terms of its significance for the goals and values of the individual, 3) creating physiological reactions, motor expressions, and action tendencies and 4) that this process is partially accessible to consciousness, resulting in feelings that 5) can be categorised and subsequently labelled by the individual in terms of its subjective conceptual structure” (p. 164., see also Scherer & Moors,

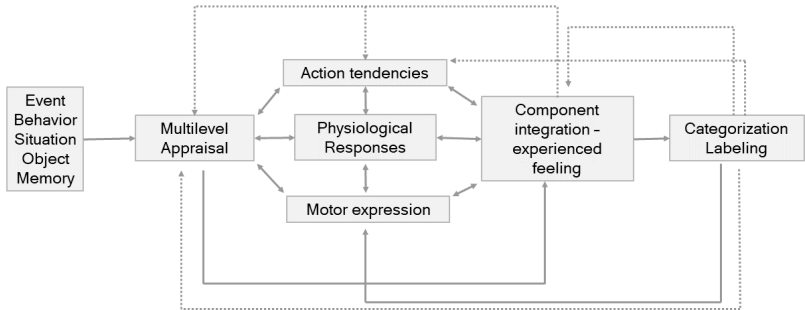


Figure 1. The dynamic architecture of the Component Process Model (Scherer, 2022). Dotted lines represent weak effects, solid lines represent strong effects, and double arrowheads indicate recursive effects.

2019). The different theoretical accounts of emotions differ primarily in how they understand the relationship between the components of an emotion episode and the relative importance they ascribe to the different components. While for instance evolutionary accounts focus more on physiological and motor responses, appraisal theories view the evaluative process as central in an emotion episode, and constructivist theories focus on the labeling of the emotional experience.

Instead of focusing on one specific component of an emotional episode, the CPM tries to provide a framework that combines the different components and theorizes about the relationships between them. It defines an emotion as “an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism” (Scherer, 2005, p.697). Figure 1 shows the full model as outlined in Scherer (2022). The core components are multilevel appraisals, i.e., conscious and subconscious evaluations of an object or event, which lead to and are influenced by physiological responses, action tendencies and motor

expressions.¹ These three components then affect the experienced feeling, which affects the labeling of the emotion episode. Most of these relationships are bidirectional and most components that seem to come “later” in the process feed back into “earlier” components, although these feedback loops are generally assumed to have weaker effects.

Despite the integration of all components, the CPM is part of the a larger family of appraisal theories (Frijda, 1987; Lazarus, 1991; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), as it considers appraisals central in an emotion episode and sees appraisals as the decisive factor in the elicitation of distinct emotions. So, what exactly are appraisals?

Appraisals describe the detection and evaluation of an event’s significance for one’s well-being (Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer, & Frijda, 2013, p. 120). When we appraise an event or a situation, we consider how it helps or obstructs our needs, attachments, values, goals and beliefs. We constantly monitor and evaluate our surroundings, which shapes our emotions and prepares us for action. The appraisal process usually starts with appraisals of relevance and goal congruence, which are according to Scherer (2022) are the most central appraisal dimensions. The event must first matter to us for us before we quickly appraise whether it is goal congruent or goal incongruent, i.e. positive or negative.

While there is some disagreement about which secondary appraisals follow, most theories include the following three: certainty, agency (who or what is the event caused by), and coping potential or control (Moors et al., 2013, p. 120). Others also consider appraisals of novelty, expectancy, urgency, intentionality, legitimacy, or fairness, and/or norm compatibility. Appraisals are made sequentially and new information can change appraisals and the experienced emotion (Scherer & Moors, 2019; Scherer, Schorr, & Johnstone, 2001). With each recursive cycle, i.e., each appraisal that is made, the emotion episode becomes more nuanced and more complex (Moors et al., 2013).

From the earliest test of appraisal theories, scholars have tried to establish relationships between specific appraisal profiles, or core appraisal themes, and distinct

¹Throughout this dissertation, I usually simply refer to them as appraisals, as I do not empirically distinguish between the different levels – conscious and subconscious – at which politics appraised.

emotions (C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). It has become widely accepted in appraisal theories that anger is related to the appraisals of goal incongruence, high certainty about the causes and consequences of an event, high control or felt power to deal with an event and an appraisal of the responsibility of others. Some add intentionality of the responsible agent as a necessary appraisal for anger (Petersen, 2010). Guilt can be distinguished from anger in its responsibility appraisal, when it is not someone else but oneself who is considered responsible. In many ways, anxiety stands in opposition to anger, as it is characterized by appraisals of low certainty about causes and consequences and low control to deal with an event. Similarly, among the positive emotions, enthusiasm is related to appraisals of high control and certainty, while hope is related to low certainty (Scherer et al., 2001; C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985).

When appraisal theorists say that appraisals cause emotions, they mean that appraisals – in most but not all cases – mediate between the stimulus and the emotion (Moors, 2013). Appraisal theorists “accept that the influence of appraisal on other components is fed back to the appraisal component (i.e., recurrence) where a new appraisal starts (i.e., reappraisal)”, seeing appraisals not as a necessary but a “typical cause, accepting marginal instances of emotions that are not caused by appraisal” (Moors, 2013, p.134).

Appraisals are subjective and are made at both conscious and subconscious processing levels. Scherer and Moors (2019) provide an example for the subjectivity of the appraisal process by asking readers to imagine that they overhear two of their friends talking badly about them. How would they feel? 3,000 working adults were asked this question in different countries. Over 40% said they would feel angry, 24% contempt. But others said they would react very differently: with good humor (14%), sadness (38%), fear or worry (6%) or shame and guilt (6%). What distinguishes a person who feels anger from one who feels sadness? Appraisal theories argue that they have made different appraisals of the situation. Feeling that one has agency to change the situation in their favor makes anger a more likely response. The same situation can however lead to sadness or even fear in another person who feels powerless, or shame and guilt in somebody with a tendency to find the fault for unpleasant situations in themselves. Nonetheless, the emotions experienced in re-

sponse to a certain situation are not random, as this example also illustrates. Anger and contempt, both part of the same emotion family, have similar appraisal profiles and are by far the most common emotional responses to this situation. One could think of many other examples where, despite some individual-level variation in appraisals and emotional responses, we can expect a distinct emotion.

1.2 Studying Emotions in Politics and their Components

During a first upswing of emotion research in political science in the late 90s and early 2000s, the field had its own theory of emotions, Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Since then, and perhaps because Affective Intelligence Theory only recognized three emotions – anxiety, enthusiasm, and later aversion/anger – political psychologists have started to borrow more general theoretical models from psychology, in particular appraisal theories.² Applying appraisal theory to politics has helped us understand how emotions function in politics. Some of these findings have been replicated several times across the years. Anger, for instance, has been shown repeatedly to increase political participation (Valentino et al., 2011; C. Weber, 2013) and to decrease deliberation across party lines (MacKuen et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2022), while anxiety stimulates information seeking (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Valentino et al., 2008).

Appraisal theories have provided a framework for studying emotions in political science through three distinct approaches, namely (1) the integral observational approach, the (2) integral experimental approach, and (3) the incidental approach.

Integral emotions are emotions that are directly related to the primary event or task that is studied. For instance, a study of integral anxiety might ask: what are the effects of feeling anxious about terrorism on attitudes towards military action to fight terrorism (Huddy et al., 2007)? We can study integral emotions in two ways. First, an observational approach simply measures both emotion and outcome and controls for possible confounders. This has been done cross-sectionally (e.g. Petersen, 2010; Valentino et al., 2011; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2020), and in

²This applies to the main basic discrete emotions, anger, anxiety, enthusiasm, pride, hope, etc. Some specific emotions, such as disgust, especially pathogen disgust, are primarily viewed through an evolutionary lens. (e.g. Aarøe, Petersen, & Arceneaux, 2017; Inbar & Pizarro, 2016)

panel studies (Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017; Rudolph, Gangl, & Stevens, 2000; Vasilopoulos, 2018; Wagner, 2014).

The advantage of this approach is that it studies emotions as they occur naturally. However, this approach usually only measures the emotion label, and the associated action tendency. A large part of the emotion model shown in Figure 1 remains unobserved. Thus, this approach always suffers from problems of endogeneity (Ladd & Lenz, 2008, 2011), as we have no grasp of the feedback loop between action tendencies, behaviors and appraisals and most of the observed relationships are bi-directional. While we often assume that appraisals are – at least partial – causes of distinct emotions, this has rarely been tested. We observe emotion, appraisals and action tendencies but we often do not know which one came first.

The second approach, the experimental integral approach to emotions, tries to deal with the endogeneity problem of observational studies either through integral emotion induction tasks (Valentino et al., 2011, 2008), or by manipulating specific appraisals (Kühne, Weber, & Sommer, 2015). Hypotheses within this approach are often limited to a very specific selected case, such as populism (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017) or manipulate only a single appraisal dimension, such as group identity (E. W. Groenendyk & Banks, 2014), message congruence (Bakker, Schumacher, & Rooduijn, 2021; Suhay & Erisen, 2018), or responsibility attribution (Hameleers et al., 2017; Kim, 2016; Kühne et al., 2015). There are few studies that have manipulated or measured several appraisals to study how they shape emotions in politics.

Kang and Capella (2008), for example, showed that appraisals of novelty and unpleasantness increase fear, while appraisals of low norm compatibility increase anger. Against their expectations, coping potential was neither related to fear, nor anger. However, the authors do not try to manipulate distinct emotions but rather show positively or negatively valenced ads and subsequently measure the elicited appraisals and emotions. To give another example, Chadwick (2015), has designed hope appeals containing distinct message appraisals. The results showed that message appraisals of goal congruence and possibility (conceptually similar to certainty appraisals) increase subjective feelings of hope (Chadwick, 2015). Finally, Feld-

man and Hart (2016) showed that efficacy messages, closely related conceptually to appraisals of coping potential, decreased fear of climate change, although only among liberals.

The third approach uses incidental emotions to isolate causal effects of emotions. Incidental emotions are emotions that are unrelated to the outcome that is studied. The action tendencies carry over to the appraisal of other stimuli (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001). For instance, people in an angry state, a high control emotion, tend to be more risk-taking, and tend to show approach behaviors (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Incidental affect has been used to study political outcomes in the form of images (Erisen, Lodge, & Taber, 2014), emotion recall tasks (Banks & Valentino, 2012; Parker & Isbell, 2010), movie clips (Renshon, Lee, & Tingley, 2015), or “impossible tasks” that induce anger (Ambroziak, Safra, & Tsakiris, 2022).

All three approaches rely on two core assumptions. The first assumption is that appraisals of emotions in politics work similarly in the political domain as in the personal domain. This means that we can use appraisal theory to make predictions about which political events elicit which emotion, and among whom, and that emotions predict specific action tendencies related to their core appraisal profiles.

The second, and related, assumption is that there are meaningful differences between someone reporting that they are anxious and another reporting that they are angry. In practice, emotions with distinct appraisal profiles – anxiety and anger, or anger and disgust – are often highly correlated (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, & Utych, 2020) and experimental manipulations often affect more than one emotion (e.g. Aarøe, 2011; Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008; Valentino et al., 2008; C. Weber, 2013; Weeks, 2015; Wisneski, Hanson, & Morgan, 2020).

Following this assumption, the integral emotion induction approach trusts that emotions have the same meanings for different people, i.e. that people have uniform appraisal profiles that drive effects across individuals. However, appraisals are subjective: different people might not talk about the same underlying appraisals when they say they are angry.

Certain individual-level differences, such as political sophistication might help us make “better”, i.e., more informed and consistent appraisals. Yet, we know too little about how distinct appraisal profiles are related to emotions, if there are

universal patterns, and which individual-level differences explain convergence with or divergence from such universal patterns.

Relying on these assumptions has allowed work in the past to focus primarily on two components of the emotion process - the feeling component and the emotion's action tendencies - while largely skipping the underlying appraisals that differentiate an emotion. With the exception of the integral-experimental approach, which does consider the appraisals that differentiate distinct emotions but often focuses on a small subset of appraisals, these approaches have usually considered appraisals a given.

This is problematic because appraisals are considered the key parameter that differentiates distinct emotions in appraisal theories. Whether appraisal theories are a useful lens through which we should study emotions in political science depends on the extent to which its core tenets are true in the political domain.

1.3 Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation sets out to contribute to our understanding of emotions in politics by examining the appraisal component from two perspectives. The first part focuses on the appraisal profiles of discrete emotions in politics with a focus on the cognitive and affective dimensions at the heart of discrete emotions. In the second part, I investigate individual differences, specifically political sophistication and its components, which affect how people make appraisals about politics (see Figure 2). By addressing these questions, this dissertation provides new insights into the nature and determinants of emotional responses to political events, thereby filling a critical gap in the existing literature on emotions in politics.

In the first empirical chapter of this dissertation, *Affective Modeling of Emotion Labels in Politics*, I focus on subjective appraisal profiles linked to discrete emotions in politics. For this study, which I conducted together with Gijs Schumacher and Matthijs Rooduijn, we rely on a large sample (N=1,241) of U.S. citizens who report an emotional experience that is either related to politics or to their personal lives. We then contrast the distinct emotion profiles in each domain and use a machine-learning algorithm to predict emotion labels based on their appraisal pro-

files. The chapter's main contribution lies in testing the two core assumptions laid out above by investigating whether distinct emotions are related to distinct appraisal profiles in the political and the nonpolitical domains. We find stark differences in how appraisals and emotions are linked in the political versus the nonpolitical domains. In the nonpolitical domain, we can clearly distinguish emotions based on their appraisal profiles, which are largely in line with our theoretical predictions. However, in politics, negative emotions look strikingly similar to each other. Anger, anxiety, despair, and guilt are all related to appraisals that we would theoretically link to anger responses. While we can predict joy and despair with high accuracy in a nonpolitical setting, in a political setting, we can best predict joy and anger, but the overall model performance in the political domain is low.

While the second chapter examines differences in subjective appraisals between the political and nonpolitical domains, the third chapter focuses on the causal role of appraisals in emotional appeals. This chapter centers around one of the core differences between emotions in the political and nonpolitical realms, namely that events are mediated and appraisals can be provided to people through political communication. Past work has shown that emotional appeals can contain specific appraisals of, for instance, certainty and coping potential (De Castella & McGarty, 2011; De Castella, McGarty, & Musgrove, 2009; Zerback & Wirz, 2021) and that such appeals elicit emotions in a predictable way (Zerback & Wirz, 2021). But research on appraisals as emotional appeals remains scarce. Thus, in the third chapter, *Using message appraisals to elicit anger and anxiety responses to political issues*, I present a study, co-authored with Gijs Schumacher, which proposes appraisals as emotional appeals. In two-preregistered survey experiments conducted in the Netherlands ($N_1 = 1,842$ and $N_2 = 1,325$), I test whether message appraisals of certainty, control, and responsibility lead to anger and anxiety responses to various political issues. This chapter also provides a framework for studying integral emotions while considering multiple appraisals at once. Our results confirm that participants report more anger when responsibility is clear. Anxiety is not elicited by distinct message appraisals. Rather, it seems to be a response to appraisals of political issues in which responsibility is ambiguous.

It should be noted here that Chapter 3 is not informed by Chapter 2 but vice

versa. While Chapter 3 systematically tests how we can use appraisal theory for integral emotion manipulation, its results, and its null-results specifically, were the core motivation to look deeper into the content of emotions in politics.

The fourth and fifth chapters focus on individual differences to respond to message appraisals and to make specific appraisals that lead to more intense emotional responses to politics. In both chapters, I investigate political sophistication as a core determinant of emotional involvement in politics (Miller, 2011). In Chapter 4, *Relevance, Consistence and Resistance. What explains the link between political sophistication and emotional responses to politics?*, I test three preregistered mechanisms, based on prominent theories of information processing (Zaller et al., 1992) and the sophistication-emotion link (Brader, 2006) to explain how political sophisticates respond to message appraisals, compared to non-sophisticates. I use the data collected for the previous chapter and test whether the effects of message appraisals on distinct emotions are moderated by levels of political sophistication. In addition, I use open-ended questions of responsibility appraisals and measures of subjective certainty and control to assess people's subjective appraisals of the same political issues, which I link to political sophistication. I find that political sophisticates appraise politics as more relevant to their goals, and are more likely to have thought about responsible actors prior to an experiment. However, their appraisal-emotion links are not more consistent with theoretical expectations than those of non-sophisticates.

Exploratory analyses of the data presented in Chapter 4 have shown that political interest primarily drove the effects of political sophistication. This motivated the main idea of Chapter 5, which separately and more thoroughly investigates the effects of the different components of sophistication.

In Chapter 5, **Disentangling the Sophistication-Emotion Link: Political Interest and Confidence-in-Knowledge drive Emotions in Politics**, which I co-authored with Gijs Schumacher and Matthijs Rooduijn, we argue for a conceptual decomposition of political sophistication in political interest, confidence-in-knowledge and factual knowledge. In consideration of the subjectivity of the appraisal process, we argue that appraisals do not need to be factually correct. Instead, we expect political interest to be related to experiencing strong emotions in

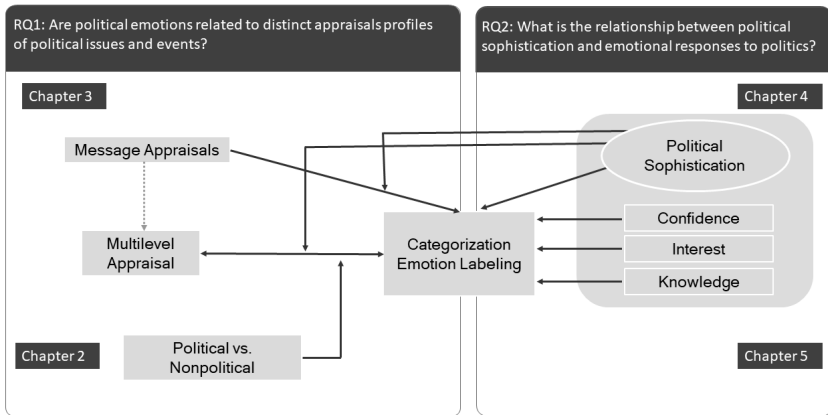


Figure 2. Overview of the four empirical chapters within the component process model (shown in simplified terms).

response to politics through higher appraisal of goal relevance. Additionally, we expect that people who are more confident make less ambiguous appraisals and therefore experience stronger emotions. We use three waves of the American National Election Study (2012-2020) and two preregistered experiments conducted in the Netherlands ($N = 1,991$) and in the U.S. ($N = 1,250$), that manipulate confidence-in-knowledge through question difficulty. We show that interest and confidence are positively related to emotion self-reports. Political knowledge is unrelated to it or suppresses self-reported emotional responses to politics. We show that confidence has a causal effect on emotion self-reports. If people are less confident, they report lower levels of anger and anxiety. These results call into question the view that emotions are an expression of informed citizenship. Our findings demonstrate the necessity to disentangle the different components of political sophistication when studying emotions in politics and other political outcomes.

1.4 Conducting Social Science Research during COVID-19

It goes without saying that this work has been impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The first data collection (Study 1 in Chapter 3) was scheduled exactly when the pandemic reached Europe in March 2020. We collected data in June 2020. Study 2 was conducted a year later in May 2021. The next data collection was not until another year later in summer 2022. Arguably by then COVID-19 had moved to the backdrop of not only the public's minds but also social science research. Nonetheless, doing social science research during the COVID-19 pandemic provided several challenges. I want to focus on two.

The first challenge concerns the type of research we could do, in terms of both location and design. Perhaps the main challenge for many researchers was data collection, particularly if their research relied on in-person contact. At the onset of the pandemic, the first data collection (Chapter 3) was already planned to be online and I kept it that way for the remainder of the dissertation. But the circumstances required us to rethink our measures and research design several times. This mostly affected the first study we conducted, as is described in more detail in its methodology section (Chapter 3). To summarize, during the first data collection in 2020, we added a measure for fear of COVID-19. Unsurprisingly, those with high levels of fear of COVID-19 also reported higher levels of fear generally but fear of COVID-19 did not change how people responded to our stimulus. Thus, in the second data collection (Study 2, Chapter 3), we dropped this measure. Moreover, the COVID-19 situation had calmed down, and the Dutch vaccination program had started, so we were less concerned that anxiety in relation to COVID-19 would affect our results.

However, we did have to change our experimental stimulus according to the ongoing pandemic development twice. Months before the pandemic broke out in December 2019, we had pretested stimuli for the first study. One set of stimuli concerned a polio and measles outbreak due to decreasing vaccination rates in the Netherlands. Clearly, in summer 2020 this could have stirred up a lot of anxiety related to COVID-19 but not to the issue at hand amongst participants. Thus, we decided to drop it and replace it with COVID-19 as one of the five issues, we studied. We chose this approach for two reasons. First, the issue was impossible to

avoid at the time, attempts to do so would have failed, and second we would not have been able to say much about how the context affected our study. The rollout of the vaccination program in the Netherlands in 2021 prompted us to adapt the stimulus material we had used in the previous study.

The second challenge concerns the generalizability of research conducted during COVID-19. The Netherlands is likely a convenient place to have done social science research at the start of the pandemic. Compared to many other European countries, COVID-19 measures were moderate and the public was less affected by the pandemic than in many comparable countries. A 2020 Eurobarometer survey shows that the Dutch ranked second best in terms of how the COVID-19 measures had affected them (European Parliament, 2021). 70% said they were easy to cope with or even an improvement to their daily lives. Moreover, Dutch people were not too concerned that their economy would not recover after the pandemic. Only 3% thought it would never recover (EU average was 7%) and 25% thought it would recover in 2021 (EU average 17%).

Research has since shown that work conducted during the pandemic generalizes beyond it. Replicating 12 pre-pandemic studies in 33 replications, Peyton, Huber, and Coppock (2022) have shown that studies replicate in terms of the direction of the effects and significance. However, effect sizes during the pandemic are generally smaller, perhaps due to inattentiveness in online samples. In Chapter 3, although this was not the focus of the study, we find that people appraise and form emotions about COVID-19 in very similar ways as they do with other issues. We can thus be quite confident that the findings are generalizable beyond the pandemic context.