Feeling within reason
*How appraisals shape emotional responses to politics*
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6 Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation has been guided by two core questions: 1. Are political emotions related to distinct appraisal profiles of political issues and events?, and 2. Who gets emotional about politics and through which mechanisms? In the following two sections, I provide answers to each of these questions based on the findings provided in Chapters 2-5. In each section, I will briefly summarize the key results of the two corresponding chapters before discussing their implications and directions for future research.

6.1 Are Political Emotions Predicted by Distinct Appraisal Profiles of Political Issues and Events?

In Chapter 2, we tested a core assumption of appraisal theory in political psychology: that emotions in politics work similarly as in the personal sphere and have distinct appraisal profiles and action tendencies, and as a consequence that we can use nonpolitical incidental emotions to study the behavioral outcomes of political emotions.

Together with my co-authors, I tested this by contrasting emotions and their appraisal profiles in the political and nonpolitical domains. Appraisal profiles distinguished clearly between distinct emotions, largely in line with predictions of the Component Process Model, in the nonpolitical realm but not in the political domain. One of the most striking findings of Chapter 2 is that, in the realm of politics, anger cannot be distinguished from anxiety or despair in terms of its appraisals. Anxiety is related to higher appraisals of moral acceptability of an event but apart from that, anger and anxiety appraisal profiles are largely identical. Despair is related to higher levels of goal relevance and goal obstruction, but otherwise also looks more like what we would expect from anger’s appraisal profile.

In the second part of Chapter 2, we used a computational approach to predict emotion labels. The second core finding is that the model performs worse when predicting emotion labels in the political domain compared to the nonpolitical domain. The most pronounced difference between the political and nonpolitical model lies in
appraisals of power and control. While power and control are central appraisals in appraisal theory, our findings suggest that in the political domain they neither help us distinguish emotions based on their appraisal profiles, nor play an important role in predicting emotions labels.

In the third chapter, I tested a second claim often made in appraisal theory: that appraisals, at least in-part, causally affect discrete emotions (Moors, 2013). While Chapter 2 focused on subjective appraisals, Chapter 3 considered the possibility that appraisals are conveyed through emotional appeals. I call these appraisals message appraisals, conceptualized as distinct characteristics of emotional appeals, and tested how they affect self-reported levels of anger and anxiety. I tested this in two preregistered studies, each with 5 individual rounds concerning different political issues. In line with the preregistered hypotheses, I found that high responsibility in emotional appeals causes anger. Contrary to prior expectations, certainty and control have no effect on anger. Regarding anxiety, all preregistered hypotheses were rejected: people do report high levels of anxiety, but our experimental treatments do not explain different levels of anxiety.

Both chapters aimed to test the applicability of appraisal theory, as a theory of emotion elicitation, in the political domain. The goal was to answer the first key question of this dissertation: Are political emotions related to distinct appraisal profiles of political issues and events? Together, the two chapters cast doubt on whether appraisal theory, as it is used in nonpolitical settings can explain emotions in the political domain. In the following three sections I summarize several key findings in more detail and discuss their implications for future work on appraisals in politics. I start with a reflection on the contradicting findings about the role of responsibility in Chapter 2 and 3, followed by a reflection on the role of control appraisals in politics. I conclude by arguing that we should measure emotions as multi-componential, rather than focusing on the emotion label alone.

The Role of Responsibility in Appraisals of Politics

Responsibility, or blame attribution, is certainly the most extensively studied appraisal in political science. The study presented in Chapter 3, which was conducted about two years before Chapter 2 was written, seemed to confirm a core finding of
past work: responsibility is what differentiates anger from anxiety, in politics and beyond. When responsibility is high, people experience anger, while when it is ambiguous, they are more likely to feel anxious (Kühne et al., 2015; Petersen, 2010; Wagner, 2014).

However, the follow-up work presented in Chapter 2, which studied appraisals in an observational manner, cast doubt on the ecological validity of these findings. Chapter 2 shows that people rarely make low responsibility appraisals. People report more anger about politics than any other emotion, but even if they report anxiety, despair, or guilt, they identify the cause for that negative emotion in someone else – that is, they attribute responsibility. As a consequence, in observational data, we cannot differentiate anger from anxiety, or any of the other negative emotions by responsibility appraisals.

While this contradicts past findings on the role of responsibility, it is not in conflict with appraisal theories, which assume that we can feel anxious regardless of responsibility appraisals, as long as we feel low control or power in relation to whoever is causing a threat to our goals or well-being. The first explanation for these findings is therefore that the determining factor is the appraisal of control. We did not find any effects of control appraisals on distinct emotions but there are multiple ways in which we can and should keep studying it in the future. In the following section, I reflect on the role and conceptualization of control, as an appraisal that can be seen in relation to a specific event, as a stable trait, and on the individual or collective level.

**Control Appraisals: Event-based, Individual or Collective?**

The findings in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 have shown that control appraisals do not have the same importance in politics as they do in the nonpolitical realm. But this finding might rather be a reflection of how control functions differently in the political domain.

Control appraisal can be made at different levels. Scherer and Moors (2019) distinguish between two types of control: situational and general.\(^{14}\) Situational

\(^{14}\)Note that this is not the same situational control that Lerner and Keltner (2000) speak of. They see situational control as a lack of human agency.
control refers to an appraisal of a specific event, such as low control during a natural disaster. In interpersonal situations, situational, event-based, control appraisals are made in relation to another person, where one has more power than the other.

The second type of control appraisal is general control. Here, control is conceptualized as a more stable trait that develops through repeated appraisal of control over a life-time. The two are related in that general control tends to influence situational control appraisals, but as Scherer and Moors (2019) argue, they can come apart. For instance, someone might be generally good at maths but unable to solve a specific math problem (Scherer & Moors, 2019, p.726). In politics, general control might be best captured by internal political efficacy, which has been used in the emotion literature as a proxy for control appraisals (Rico et al., 2020). Yet, it is unlikely that all control appraisals are captured by efficacy. In fact, in the 2012 ANES data, where efficacy was included in the same wave as the emotion items, internal efficacy has no effect on anger but on hope and pride (see Table A33).

For work on emotions in politics and their consequences, it is important to disentangle general from situational control. We should not necessarily expect any sense of control to lead to approach action tendencies in any situation. Rather, in each situation, people evaluate the expected utility of engaging with a stimulus (Moors, Boddez, & De Houwer, 2017; Scherer & Moors, 2019). We might get angry about corruption, because we think that political protest can discourage it, but anxious about climate change, because we feel little power to do anything about it. The level of felt control is situational, i.e., issue-specific.

However, general control, which is closely related to political efficacy, is independent of specific issues and describes a broader appraisal of one’s political power (Rico et al., 2020; Valentino et al., 2009). For general control, i.e. political efficacy, to lead to anger and ultimately political mobilization, it has to translate into situational control. Anger will only lead to political action, if a person (also) feels high situational control, not necessarily because of their internal political efficacy. Future work should try to understand under which circumstances general control transforms into situational control, or why sometimes even a sense of low efficacy, i.e. low control, can lead to anger (Magni, 2017).

Studies in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 conceptualize control as a situational
appraisal and at the level of the individual (although Study 2 of Chapter 3 also included message appraisals of collective power). This is how appraisal theory has traditionally viewed it, and how it is measured and understood in the Component Process Model. However, this conceptualization of control does not seem well-suited to understand appraisal processes in politics.

The second conceptual question concerns the distinction between individual vs. collective levels of control appraisals (Mackie & Smith, 2018; E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2016). When we consider how much power we have in politics, we can think about ourselves as individuals or as part of a larger group (E. W. Groenendyk & Banks, 2014; Phoenix, 2019). Then the question becomes: how much power do people like me have?

Collective emotions have been studied in politics (see for instance E. W. Groenendyk & Banks, 2014; Mackie & Smith, 2018; Phoenix, 2019). E. W. Groenendyk and Banks (2014) manipulate the extent to which people make an appraisal as a group or as an individual. Undoubtedly, this is a smart experimental design that allows us to test differences in individual and group-based appraisals. However, this dissertation suggests that appraisals in politics are fundamentally different from appraisals in the nonpolitical domain and one of the key differences lies in control appraisals, which have been primarily suggested to be related to collective power. Future work should therefore consider the possibility that some appraisals in politics happen only at the group-level. Control is the first and strongest candidate. Other appraisals, such as responsibility appraisals which happen through a partisan-lens (Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008) or responsibility appraisals which lead to group-based guilt (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006), follow closely. The appraisals that should be studied at both individual and group-levels are therefore not limited to control appraisals.

**Emotion as a Multi-componential Process**

Chapter 2, in particular, has shown what we can gain from measuring different components of an emotion process, in this case: appraisal and emotion label. Recall that the Component Process Model conceptualizes the emotion process as consisting of multiple components: appraisals, motor expressions, physiological response, ac-
tion tendencies, experienced feeling, and labeling of an emotion. A growing body of emotion research in political science is studying the physiological and motor expression components of emotions (Bakker et al., 2020, 2021; Homan, Schumacher, & Bakker, 2022; Karl, 2021; Schumacher, Rooduijn, & Bakker, 2022). However, the appraisal component has so far received little systematic attention. This is not just a matter of a more comprehensive conceptualization of what an emotion is, or a question of better measurement, but it should be used to help us understand the mechanisms through which emotions affect political behavior. This is especially important when the different components, appraisal and emotion label, of an emotion do not align.

Future work should pay particular attention to the distinct effects of the different components of an emotion, e.g., physiological (see also Bakker et al., 2021; Karl, 2021), appraisal and labeling. In appraisal theory, action tendencies are assumed to be the result of underlying appraisals. Social constructionist theories of emotions, on the other hand, ascribe a more important role to the categorization, i.e., labeling of an emotion in predicting subsequent behavior (Barrett & Russell, 2014). This dissertation has shown that component misalignment is more frequent in politics than outside of it. Integrating different views on emotions, and measuring and theorizing carefully about several of its components is therefore especially important if we want to understand emotions in the political domain.

### 6.2 What is the Relationship between Political Sophistication and Emotional Responses to Politics?

The second part of the dissertation aimed to uncover who gets emotional and why. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I studied if and how political sophistication and its components drive emotional responses to politics. The focus on political sophistication was informed by past work that has identified it as a core predictor of emotions in politics (Brader, 2006; Miller, 2011). Whether and how sophistication, and which of its components, is linked to emotions is also important for how we normatively view emotions in the political realm: in opposition to or as part of informed citizenship.
6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Understanding the Sophistication-Emotion Link

In Chapter 4, I proposed and tested three possible mechanisms that link sophistication and emotion. First, the Relevance Hypothesis holds that political sophisticates find politics more relevant, pay more attention to it and, as a consequence, experience stronger emotions generally, and in response to experimental manipulations. Second, the Resistance Hypothesis, informed by Zaller et al. (1992) argues that high sophisticates are pre-treated and it is therefore hard to experimentally manipulate their attitudes. Low sophisticates, on the other hand, have limited prior knowledge that could help them make sense of novel stimuli. Therefore, the moderately sophisticated should have the strongest responses to experimental manipulations of emotions. Finally, the Consistence Hypothesis views emotions as part of a larger cognitive-affective structure where high sophisticates will have more consistent networks, i.e., their subjective appraisal profiles are more tightly linked with distinct emotions. In Chapter 4, I found convincing evidence for the Relevance Hypothesis. Overall, sophisticates report stronger emotional responses to politics than non sophisticates. This does not mean that they pay closer attention to experimental stimuli, but it suggests that they do pay more attention to politics in their everyday lives. When asked to name responsible actors, sophisticates were more likely to do so and often the actor they named was the same we showed in the high responsibility treatment. This suggests that they do not assign responsibility randomly but carefully think about the issues and the actors involved. I found little evidence for the Resistance or Consistence Hypotheses. Overall, we might conclude from these results that it is true what Miller (2011) has argued: that emotions are, in fact, reflections of informed and engaged citizenship. However, Chapter 5, which was motivated by an unexpected exploratory finding – that the effects were driven mainly by interest, not knowledge – casts doubt on this conclusion.

In Chapter 5, I refined my approach to the relationship between political sophistication and emotions by splitting sophistication into its components: knowledge, interest, and confidence-in-knowledge. We argue that political interest leads to emotions because people with higher interest simply find politics more important, i.e. through higher appraisals of goal relevance, and that confidence-in-knowledge leads to emotions through secondary appraisals. People with high confidence in
their understanding of politics make less ambiguous appraisals and feel more certain about their emotions. As a result, we expect them to report any emotion with higher intensity. We test these expectations in several observational studies and by manipulating confidence-in-knowledge. The findings demonstrate that confidence-in-knowledge and political interest are related to more intense emotions about politics. Political knowledge, on the other hand, is unrelated, and sometimes even negatively related to the intensity of self-reported emotions. These findings have two key implications for both the study of political sophistication and emotions in politics.

The findings presented in this final chapter show that to really understand how political sophistication is linked to emotions, we need to conceptually disentangle its core components. Political interest is related to stronger emotions, which is in line with the Relevance Hypothesis specified in Chapter 4. However, the patterns are not entirely uniform. Rather, there is substantial variance in terms of the emotions that political interest positively predicts across time and contexts. Trying to explain this variation will help us to understand which mechanisms link political interest and emotions. Future work should try to understand the mechanisms that link political interest and emotions, such as cue-taking, salience of political issues, higher goal relevance and higher exposure to politics, but also cultural norms of emotion expression that might differ across time and social context and within societies.

Recently, work in political science has paid close attention to political knowledge and how to measure it in an unbiased way (K. Dolan & Hansen, 2020; Jerit & Zhao, 2020; Kraft & Dolan, 2022; Pérez, 2015; Style & Jerit, 2020). Recent efforts to understand political misinformation have added confidence-in-knowledge as an important dimension of political sophistication (Graham, 2022). A core problem of measuring knowledge is that people’s knowledge and their confidence-in-knowledge are not necessarily related (Lee & Matsuo, 2018). Although this has not been tested, people with high confidence-in-knowledge might be more likely to cheat on knowledge questions, because they are so-called self-enhancing responders (Style & Jerit, 2020). Thus, disentangling knowledge and confidence-in-knowledge is an intricate task. In Chapter 5, I propose a simple manipulation
of confidence-in-knowledge and demonstrated how it can help us understand the effects of different components of political sophistication.

Finally, I want to return to the core question of the sophistication-emotion link: are sophisticates more emotional and should we see emotions as a good thing, if they are driven by sophistication? The answer is significantly more complicated. While it is true that sophisticates have stronger emotional responses to politics, this is only true if we conceptualize and operationalize it as an index of several components. However, if emotions were a product of informed citizenship, we would expect that sophisticates make more consistent appraisals, and that the sophistication-emotion relationship would be driven only by political knowledge, not interest or confidence. However, this is not the case.

In Chapter 4, we do not find evidence for the Consistence Hypothesis. Sophisticates report stronger emotions, but these emotions are not more in line with specific appraisal profiles. Moreover, recall that in Chapter 2, we conducted an exploratory analysis looking at how well we could predict the emotions of different groups. We found no differences for any of the variables (knowledge, efficacy, party identification, ideology), except for political interest. Political interest was, on average, higher among those participants, whose emotions were misclassified. This is striking because together, these results suggest that while politically interested people report higher emotions, they are less likely to be in line with specific appraisal profiles.

Furthermore, once we conceptually disentangle political sophistication, in Chapter 5, we find that political knowledge is unrelated, and sometimes even negatively related to self-reported emotions. Thus, the argument that emotions are in fact part of informed citizenship was not supported by the studies presented in this dissertation.

In sum, Chapters 4 and 5 have shed some light on the relationship between political sophistication and emotions by conceptually replicating existing findings and by generating new theories and insights that link interest and confidence-in-knowledge with emotions. Further, these findings have left us with some open questions and pathways for future research, particularly concerning differences in these relationships across contexts and time.
6.3 Reflections on the Limitations of this Dissertation

Several limitations and questions that were beyond the scope of this dissertation have already been discussed in the previous sections. I also want to reflect briefly on a few more fundamental limitations of this dissertation. I start with a reflection on the term that I have used throughout this dissertation: *emotions in politics*. What really is political and what is not, is a much broader question than I can address here. It can be argued that the personal is political and that politics can feel incredibly personal, especially when it is emotional. When I spoke of politics throughout this dissertation, I understood it primarily in a narrow sense, as events and issues that relate to politicians, candidates, and political institutions. In Chapter 3, I took a broader perspective, as some issues are less directly linked to political actors. The issue about EU refugee policy is the most clearly political, and the results differ from the rest but it is also the most salient issue and one that has been on the media agenda for years. My research design does not allow me to test if the more or less political character of issues is the decisive difference between them and some people might generally disagree with the distinction between political and nonpolitical drawn in this dissertation. However, in Chapter 2, I find that most descriptions of events fit neatly into the political answer categories provided. It therefore appears that this is also how the majority of respondents understand the term when asked about their feelings in regards to politics. I expect that future work can gain important insight by explicitly addressing this issue by, for instance, by manipulating the extent to which the same issue is presented as political, or not.

The question whether appraisals play a causal role in the emotional process is not settled (Clore & Ortony, 2013; Moors, 2013). In Chapter 3, I have tried to test the causal role of message appraisals in emotional appeals but only found consistent effects for responsibility. As discussed in Chapter 3, manipulating appraisals independently is difficult, and despite multiple rounds of pretests I had to accept that some message appraisals might also affect a second appraisal. However, the findings in Chapter 2 suggest that the two appraisals that did not predict anxiety and anger responses – certainty and control – do not play the role in politics that appraisal theory suggests. I recommend that future work first establishes the relationship between certain emotions and subjective appraisals in observational...
work, before continuing the endeavor to investigate the causal role of appraisals in emotional appeals. The shortcomings of Chapter 3 also affect Chapter 4, which is based on the same data. Thus, it should be noted that the conclusions regarding the sophistication-link, and in particularly its null findings concerning varying effect strengths of the manipulations by levels of sophistication, only apply to this conceptualization of an emotional appeal. Emotional appeals take on many forms, from verbal, to visual, to auditory (Albertson & Gadarian, 2016). Whether political sophisticates respond differently to different types of emotional appeals remains an open question.

A final broader limitation is that this dissertation has not been able to study group-level appraisals, despite arguing their importance in politics at several junctures. The main focus of the dissertation was to establish which appraisals do or do not matter on the individual level. The importance of group-level appraisals became evident to me throughout conducting the studies of this dissertation. They have provided important insights into which appraisals matter in the personal but not the political realm. Informed by these findings, I hope that future work will test whether these appraisals are made at a different level. E. W. Groenendyk and Banks (2014), for instance, have shown that we can manipulate whether people make control appraisals as individuals or as groups. This approach should be extended to further appraisals.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

Public debates about the use of emotions have a strong negative undertone. Emotions are often seen in opposition to and inferior to reasoned considerations. This view, however, ignores that we are wired as emotional beings. Emotions and reason cannot be separated. Rather, psychological theories of emotions argue that distinct emotions are the outcomes of specific combinations of appraisals and help us navigate complex situations through action tendencies. Thus, at the outset of this dissertation, I argued that emotions can be justified responses to a given environment as long as they follow predictable patterns. Caring more about politics and having a better understanding of political issues is then expected to increase
emotional responses to politics and emotions can be viewed as a component of informed citizenship. These are two core premises of appraisal theories of emotions in political science.

The problem with this is that appraisal theory has been developed for and validated in the nonpolitical realm where emotions are largely predicted by distinct appraisal profiles. Politics is more abstract and complex and the appraisal process is therefore more complicated. This dissertation has provided a number of key findings about the link between (1) appraisals and distinct emotional responses to politics, and (2) the link between political sophistication and emotions. First, emotions in politics cannot be predicted by distinct appraisal profiles. Second, political sophistication increases emotional responses to politics. However, this relationship is not explained by better knowledge of politics but by interest in politics and confidence-in-knowledge.

The two core assumptions of appraisal theory are therefore not confirmed by the studies presented in this dissertation. I have suggested several ways in which we can improve the theoretical model to understand emotions in politics. However, we should also consider the possibility that theories of emotions cannot truly capture emotions in politics. Rather, there might be such a thing as political emotions, i.e. emotions that follow their own patterns and need their own theory.

Finally, what do these findings mean for the normative question posed at the start of this dissertation? Are emotions in politics reasonable, meaning theoretically predictable responses to political events and therefore justified?

Appraisal theory has stark limitations in predicting distinct emotional responses to politics. Ironically, anger, the emotion that people are usually most concerned about, is the only negative emotion that can be theoretically predicted by its appraisal profile. It appears that emotions that are often seen as more harmless, such as anxiety and despair, are more irrational if we strictly apply appraisal theories as the justification criterion. Still, I do not conclude from the findings presented in the previous chapters that any particular emotion is irrational or unjustified, or that people simply follow political elites’ emotional appeals. Rather, I argue that appraisal theory might not be the best framework to study political emotions.

We frequently talk about emotions in politics but this dissertation has high-
lighted their complexity and the limitations of our current understanding. It is often not clear what people mean when they say that they experience a specific emotion, both because people likely experience a mix of emotions, and because unlike in the personal domain, emotions in politics do not necessarily conform to clear rules. By studying how people understand and express their emotions we can begin to better understand how people make sense of and respond to political events. We can for instance, better grasp why Dutch farmers are angry, or why climate change evokes anxiety instead of anger, and why it is challenging for both individuals and researchers to distinguish between the two.
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