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*Politicians' use of emotional appeals in European democracies*

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# Chapter 6

## Conclusion

”Yes, we can!” – embodied the message of hope in Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008. In contrast, ”Lock her up!” – a regular chant led by Donald Trump during his 2016 campaign – characterized Trump’s angry language. Two presidential candidates, two campaigns, two opposite uses of emotional appeals. This is not just an American phenomenon. In European politics, the contrast between, for instance, Angela Merkel’s “Wir schaffen das! [*We can do it!*]” in 2015 and the AFD’s 2022 campaign slogan “Unser Land zuerst [*Our country first*]” underscores the variations in emotional appeals over time, across countries, and between politicians. This dissertation set out to test old and new questions of when politicians use more or less positive and negative appeals by proposing and testing two overarching explanations. The first, aligning with existing work in political behavior (e.g. Crabtree et al., 2020; Kosmidis et al., 2019; Osnabrügge et al., 2021), suggests that emotional appeals are strategically deployed by politicians in response to their environment. The second, drawn from the psychological literature (e.g. Pennebaker et al., 2003), proposes that these appeals serve as a consistent ’fingerprint’ of an individual’s language, echoing their remarkably stable psychometric attributes. These two explanations are connected to a larger debate in political psychology, that questions whether language is primarily a reflection of individual traits or a response to situational contexts. The four chapters of this dissertation worked towards answering the aforementioned question by improving the measurement of emotional appeals in political texts (Chapter 2), by rigorously testing several expectations on when politicians may use more positive or negative emotional appeals (Chapter 3 and 4), and by introducing a methodological innovation by connecting rhetorical styles in a network model for future research on this topic (Chapter 5). Most previous work on this topic assumes a strategic logic and provides evidence that politicians and parties strategically appeal to emotions that appear to be the most beneficial to them (e.g. Crabtree et al., 2020; Kosmidis et al., 2019; Müller, 2022; Osnabrügge et al., 2021; Rheault et al., 2016; Schwalbach, 2021). Yet this dissertation highlights that focusing on strategy alone misses an important part of the puzzle. In Chapter 3, I present what can arguably be considered the most compre-

hensive test of the strategic argument to date, examining it over time and across various countries. My findings indicate that aside from the effect of being in government, there is no systematic use of emotional appeals in connection to previously claimed strategic determinants (e.g. that politicians use more positive appeals when the economy is in a boom, or that they are reactive to the public mood). Meanwhile, I show – in Chapter 4 – that a politician’s personality is an important factor to consider when analyzing how emotional appeals are used in politics. This diverges from a purely rational strategy, where actions and decisions are based on calculated risks and opportunities rather than the personality of individual politicians. In this concluding chapter, I will review the findings from previous chapters, discuss the broader implications for studying emotional appeals in politics, and suggest possible directions for future research.

## 6.1 Findings

This section offers a summary of the research findings from Chapters 2 to 5 of this dissertation. In line with open science principles, Chapters 3 and 4 employ preregistered research designs to test several hypotheses, ensuring both transparency and rigor. These studies focused on improving sentiment analysis in political texts, testing expectations about the use of emotional appeals in political language across different time periods and parliaments, examining the role of politicians’ personalities in their communication, and developing a network model for political rhetoric.

In Chapter 2, aiming to refine dictionary-based sentiment analysis, I explored the Joint Sentiment Topic model (JST) and its counterpart, the reversed Joint Sentiment Topic model (rJST), presenting them as improved alternatives for measuring sentiment in political texts. Given that sentiment reflects an individual’s evaluation of a subject, context is essential to its measurement. In this light, I argued that, within a bag-of-words framework, JST and rJST offer significant improvements over traditional dictionary methods, as they account for contexts and topics. This ensures a deeper understanding of the of the setting in which emotional appeals occur, and also aligns the measure of sentiment closer with theories of emotions that highlight the importance of context. For instance, cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991) posits that emotions stem from individual perceptions or interpretations of events, emphasizing the interpretative role of context. Similarly, constructionist approaches (Barrett et al., 2015) suggest that emotions are derived from basic psychological operations, intertwined with sociocultural contexts. To evaluate the validity of JST and rJST, I analyzed legislative speech data from the British House of Commons, the German *Bundestag*, and the Dutch *Tweede Kamer*. I assessed concurrent validity by comparing JST sentiment scores with human coding of the same texts across the three languages and predictive validity by examining JST’s ability to capture government-opposition differences. For rJST, I evaluated face validity, discriminant

validity, and predictive validity by examining the model’s performance in placing words in different sentiment categories across topics, and by assessing government-opposition sentiment dynamics within specific topics. My findings showed that JST correlates higher with human-coded sentiment in Dutch, English, and German legislative speech than often used sentiment dictionaries like LIWC, NRC, and Lexicoder. I also demonstrated that rJST produces valuable estimates of topic-specific sentiment. My analysis revealed that JST consistently outperforms context-free dictionaries and performs as well as dictionaries developed specifically for parliamentary rhetoric. To facilitate the estimation of JST and rJST, I introduced the *sentitopics* R-package, which allows researchers to easily implement these models in their own work. In conclusion, I found that JST and rJST provide more accurate sentiment analysis and help researchers study new questions about emotional appeals in political text. This package is currently in preparation to be submitted to CRAN<sup>1</sup>, the standard repository for stable R-packages.

Using the method from the previous chapter, in Chapter 3 I analyzed the variation in emotional appeals in political language over time, between countries and politicians. The aim was to systematically test correlates of emotional appeals in politics that have been proposed by earlier research (e.g. Crabtree et al., 2020; Kosmidis et al., 2019). Taking an innovative leap from previous single-country analyses, I employed a multiverse analysis (Steege et al., 2016), scrutinizing emotional appeals in seven national parliaments in Europe. This expansive approach allowed for a more comprehensive and systematic testing of divergent theories. The results of these analyses did not support any of the theorized and previously claimed correlates of the use of more positive or negative appeals, with a singular exception: politicians of government parties make more positive emotional appeals compared to those in opposition parties. The multiverse approach adopted in this chapter provided a robust evaluation of the prevailing notion that emotional appeals are strategically used by politicians in response to their environment. It demonstrated that existing explanations, such as liberals using more positive language than conservatives or politicians speaking more negatively during economic downturns, previously tested in isolation and on limited cases, lack strength. Overall, the null-findings of this chapter suggest that a more nuanced examination of context and agency is needed to better understand the observed variation in political language across time and different countries. For instance, the ideological asymmetry claim stems from an assumed personality difference between liberals and conservatives (Carney et al., 2008; Hibbing et al., 2014). Ideology does not cover all the differences in personalities, therefore individuals’ personalities could play a bigger role in how they use emotional appeals than their political beliefs alone. Taking a step away from a long standing theoretical assumption in political science, I pick up the the idea that personality traits are instrumental for understanding why politicians use different emotional language in response to the same events in Chapter

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<sup>1</sup>CRAN: The Comprehensive R Archive Network, <https://cran.r-project.org>

4. And although my multiverse analysis offers a comprehensive view, there are indications that these big system-level explanations need more nuance, as political mechanisms aren't uniformly applied across different systems. Diverse factors, from party control in national parliaments to individual speaking opportunities and electoral incentives, also potentially influence politicians' strategic considerations about using emotional appeals (Fernandes et al., 2021; Proksch & Slapin, 2014; Ridout & Searles, 2011).

In Chapter 4, I delved deeper into the relationship between politicians' personality traits and their use of emotional appeals in their communication. The study was based on a unique dataset of personality traits of candidates in the 2015 Danish parliamentary elections (Schumacher & Zettler, 2019) and their communication in parliamentary debates and on Twitter. The analysis aimed to determine if variation in emotional appeals are associated with broader psychological dispositions, such as personality traits. I discovered that in parliamentary debates there was a significant positive association between the agreeableness trait and the use of more positive emotional appeals. Conversely, there was a positive and statistically significant association between the emotionality and honesty-humility traits and the use of more negative appeals. These patterns were echoed in politicians' Twitter communication, though the associations there did not reach statistical significance for the majority of traits and (sub-)samples. This chapter emphasized the role of politicians' personalities in political communication, and suggested that even in highly strategic environments like parliamentary debates, politicians' personalities should not be overlooked, as they predicted the emotional appeals employed in their communication. This, in turn, could shape voter perceptions and influence vote choice, as voters often prefer political candidates with personality traits that match their own. By acknowledging personality as an essential aspect of politicians (Nørgaard & Klemmensen, 2019; Schumacher & Zettler, 2019), this chapter contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of elite behavior and democratic representation.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I introduced a network model of political rhetoric, aiming to analyze politicians' rhetorical strategies by examining how different styles are interconnected. Rather than measuring and analyzing these styles individually, network models (see Ward et al. (2011) for an overview of network models in political science) enable researchers to study the relationships between them. This allows me to better understand the complex rhetoric space used in politics. Network models have two approaches: Unimodal networks, where individual rhetorical styles are connected by the degree they are used together; and bimodal networks, where politicians are connected to each other through their usage of rhetorical styles. Using speech transcripts of debate contributions delivered in the UK parliament between 1992 and 2019, the chapter illustrated how political rhetoric can be modeled as either unimodal or bimodal networks. In my exploration of factors determining rhetorical distinctiveness in the UK parliament, I found several compelling associations. Culturally conservative MPs tend to have a lower degree of dis-

tinctiveness, as do those who are nearing the end of their parliamentary career. Notably, female MPs and members of the government parties also display marginally less rhetorical distinctiveness. However, in terms of timing, MPs exhibited a pronounced increase in rhetorical distinctiveness after the Brexit referendum compared to the period leading up to it. The results from these explorations underscore the value of network models in revealing intricate patterns and nuances in political discourse often missed in conventional analyses.

Overall, the findings from this dissertation show that the emotional landscape of political discourse is a dynamic interplay between individual personalities, broader strategic considerations, and the specific context in which politicians operate. To fully understand the rhetoric and emotional appeals in politics, we must account for both the inherent traits of politicians and the intricate web of relationships and strategies they navigate in.

## 6.2 Implications

The findings from these dissertation chapters have important methodological, substantial, and theoretical implications for the study of emotional appeals in politics and for understanding how political elites more broadly use rhetoric. In this section I elaborate on the three most important implications of this dissertation.

### Context matters

The first implication concerns the importance of context. When studying emotions in political text, using topic-sensitive measures of emotional appeals highlights the importance of taking context into account. Building on theories of emotions, such as appraisal theories (Scherer et al., 2001; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), which emphasize the significance of context and the environment for understanding emotional experiences, this work demonstrates the need for more context-sensitive methods to measure and analyze emotions in political communication.

One of such contexts is the issue a politician or a party talks about. For instance, in a debate on technological policy, a word like "security" is often positively connotated, reflecting protection against cyber-threats or data breaches. Yet, in debates on immigration, it might take on a more divisive and negative tone, depending on one's views on border control and migrant rights. Only by using issue-sensitive measures we can untangle these explanations.

The rhetorical styles in which emotional appeals are embedded can also be understood as context. Conceptualizing rhetoric as a network of interconnected styles aligns the measurement of emotional appeals more closely with theories of political communication. Taking Entman's framing theory (Entman, 1993), which describes how an issue is presented or "*framed*" to shape public perception, this perspective offers a nuanced understanding of framing. Entman defines a frame as the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text. By appreciating that these aspects – problems, causes, moral evaluations, and remedies – are not standalone but interconnected, i.e., they form a network of rhetorical elements, my approach allows a more detailed analysis of frame interactions, overlaps, and evolutions. This interconnectedness can also guide the investigation of how certain frames gain prominence or persuasiveness within the network. Importantly, by incorporating emotional appeals into this networked frame, we can better comprehend how emotions amplify or modify the impact of specific frames, enhancing the theory's predictive and explanatory strength.

## The importance of the individual politician

The second implication highlights the significance of systematically studying the personalities of individual politicians. Focusing on big, system level explanations of the dynamics of emotional appeals in political communication can obscure the importance of the individual politician in determining how emotional appeals are used in politics. The personality-emotion link is an important aspect to consider when analyzing political communication, as it can offer valuable insights into how politicians' individual traits shape their emotional appeals. My research in Chapter 4 has shown that personality plays an important role in determining the emotional content of politicians' messages, emphasizing the need to consider individual traits when studying political communication. One major implication of this finding is that it challenges the traditional assumption that politicians can simply choose how they come across, e.g. deciding to conform to their party line when communicating their message, or consciously choose to act against it (e.g. Castanho Silva & Proksch, 2021; Duell et al., 2022; Herzog & Benoit, 2015; Lauderdale & Herzog, 2016). While this may be true for content and substance, this dissertation demonstrates that when it comes to the way politicians speak, individual personality traits have a greater influence. This suggests that political parties may be less successful in dictating the emotional tone and rhetorical approach used by their representatives, resulting in a more diverse range of communication styles within a single party.

Furthermore, my research highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of political strategy. While some politicians may employ a strategic use of emotions to advance their political goals (Crabtree et al., 2020; Osnabrügge et al., 2021, e.g.), others may not, resulting in less deliberate or calculated emotional appeals. But it is not just that some politicians act more or less strategically because of their personalities.

According to the environment-fit-personality hypothesis (Holland, 1997; Snyder, 1983) individuals, including politicians, are likely to select environments and roles that align with their personality. For instance, extroverted individuals might seek public roles that allow them to interact with people, thereby articulating more socially-oriented policy appeals. Politicians with high openness to experience might be drawn towards roles involving innovation and change (e.g. select a portfolio on environmental or technological policy), while those high in conscientiousness might prefer roles that require meticulous administrative roles. This selection process could also interact with strategic incentives in the environment, effectively shaping politicians' roles and policy stances. For example, a politician with high openness to experience might favor progressive policies in an environment that is dynamic and open to change.

The environment, in this case the political arena, can also influence personalities over time (Hopwood et al., 2011). For instance, repeated exposure to negotiation and conflict in politics might cultivate traits like agreeableness or conscientiousness. This



dynamic process could, in turn, influence the political appeals these individuals present. An increasingly agreeable politician, for example, might begin to advocate more for compromise and cooperation. Therefore, the reciprocal relationship between personality and environment plays a pivotal role in shaping political dynamics.

The interplay between personality and environment in politics underscores the importance of considering individual personalities in political science research, including the study of emotional appeals. Politicians' specific traits could predispose them towards particular political roles or strategies, including their use of emotional appeals. The dynamic interaction between personality and environment informs the nature of political behavior, with strategic incentives and situational factors potentially shaping their political messaging. The idea that politics can influence personality introduces a layer of complexity and challenges traditional views of static personalities. While this understanding can improve the analysis and prediction of politicians' use of emotional appeals, it also necessitates more sophisticated research designs. Conducting analyses over time, accounting for selection processes, and integrating moderators are essential, but they also raise a trade-off: these advanced methods demand expertise and resources that might not be universally accessible.

## **Research beyond a single country**

The third implication is that if we move beyond the English speaking world, our conclusions about emotions in politics can change. The current dominance of English language application of computational methods in the social sciences (Baden et al., 2021) limit the scope and generalizability of existing theories, with many empirical studies being focused on either the U.S and the United Kingdom. As demonstrated in this dissertation, explanations that work in one case may not hold true in others, emphasizing the importance of broadening the research to encompass multiple countries and languages. In chapter 3, the multiverse analysis of emotional appeals across European countries serves as an excellent example of this principle in action. While some previously proposed explanations work well in the United Kingdom's context (e.g. that more party polarization goes together with more negative emotional appeals, or that politicians use more positive appeals when the economy is good), they lose their explanatory power when applied to other countries. Other explanations, e.g. the association between ideology and appeals, even flip direction between countries. This observation is crucial for generating generalizable theories of when and why politicians use emotional appeals. Different political systems may have unique norms and expectations regarding the use of emotional appeals and rhetorical styles. By conducting cross-country research, we can identify if our explanations generalize.

### 6.3 Limitations and future directions

These contributions notwithstanding, the empirical chapters are subject to some limitations. First and foremost, chapter 4 relies on a sample of politicians from a single country to establish the evidence for a strong personality-emotion link. While this insight is important, the rigour with which this claim has been tested is much smaller compared to chapter 3, which tests previously stated claims with a multiverse analysis across countries, time, and languages. The criticism that this dissertation tests others' claims with the utmost rigour to refute them, but only provides a single-case, one point in time study in support of my own claim, is not unfounded. There is, however, an obvious reason for this divergence: We simply lack broad, cross country, longitudinal data on politicians personality traits. This already makes the first fruitful avenue for future research on the use of emotional appeals in politics. To tackle the single country and one point in time problem, researchers from different countries should collaborate and pool personality data collected by their individual teams Amsalem and Sheffer (e.g. 2022), Amsalem et al. (2020), Joly et al. (2019), and Joly et al. (2018), and to further develop and validate computational methods to measure personality traits from text Mairesse et al. (2007) and Ramey et al. (2019). Future research could also consider building an infrastructure similar to the EU-funded Horizon 2020 project OPTED<sup>2</sup> for collecting, storing, and processing political texts OPTED (2023) or the long running CSES<sup>3</sup> project for election studies CSES (2019) to further enhance cross-country comparisons and data sharing. By harnessing this combined data, researchers can examine the relationship with larger samples and in cross-national contexts, thus providing more robust evidence for the claims I made in this dissertation. This approach would not only enhance the rigor of analyses but also facilitate comparisons across different political systems and over time.

A second limitation of this dissertation is that it treats strategy and personality as separate. While the decision to not integrate the analysis of personality with strategic considerations makes sense because of data constraints, future research could further harness larger data sets of politicians' personalities. By combining measures of personality traits with an analysis of strategic factors like electoral incentives, party discipline, and institutional constraints, researchers could develop a more comprehensive understanding of how politicians' individual characteristics interact with their strategic choices about their use of emotional appeals. Similar to studies that found correlations between personality traits and legislators' behavior (Dietrich et al., 2012; Ramey et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2021), this approach would allow for the examination of how certain personality traits may influence a politician's responsiveness to strategic pressures or their propensity to engage in strategic behavior. For instance, research could investigate how politicians with high

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<sup>2</sup>OPTED: Observatory for Political Texts in European Democracies, <https://opted.eu>

<sup>3</sup>CSES: Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems, <https://cses.org>

levels of extraversion or narcissism may be more likely to engage in strategic messaging or adopt more aggressive negotiation tactics. Conversely, those with higher agreeableness or conscientiousness may be more inclined to cooperate or prioritize consensus-building (Ramey et al., 2017), hence using more positive appeals even in situations that would generally be associated with more negative appeals (e.g. a conflict situation or a tight electoral race). This integration of personality and strategy also offers an avenue to delve into the environment-fit-personality hypothesis, testing if politicians are predisposed to select environments and roles that are congruent with their inherent personality, and subsequently, how this alignment influences their rhetoric and emotional appeals.

Methodologically, the methods I introduce in this dissertation can be used to address diverse research questions across the social sciences, including political communication, legislative behavior, or persuasive and corporate communication.

Future research could use rJST to measure topic-specific sentiment to analyze how politicians and parties strategically employ sentiment in the context of issue ownership. By examining the emotional appeals used by parties on issues they "own" or are perceived as competent in, researchers can uncover the tactics employed to maintain or enhance their reputations. Conversely, investigating sentiment on issues where parties are perceived as weaker can reveal efforts to shift public opinion or undermine opponents' issue ownership. Comparing these sentiment patterns across various political systems and party ideologies could provide valuable insights into the role of emotion in issue ownership dynamics.

Future research could also employ the method of measuring political rhetoric as a network of rhetorical styles to address a broad range of topics in political communication such as personalization Van Aelst et al. (2012), framing Entman (1993), or policy narratives Schlauffer et al. (2022). By analyzing the interconnectedness of rhetorical styles, researchers could gain a deeper understanding of how political actors strategically use language to advance their agendas. In the context of personalization, this approach could help reveal how politicians craft narratives that emphasize their individual qualities or achievements to create a distinct public image. By examining the links between various frames and their associated rhetoric, researchers can identify common strategies and the factors that drive their effectiveness. Within the Narrative Policy Framework Jones et al. (2014) and Schlauffer et al. (2022), analyzing political rhetoric as a network of rhetorical styles can help to understand how policy narratives are constructed and disseminated, as well as the role of key actors and institutions in shaping these narratives.

The introduction of the network method, as detailed in Chapter 5, marks a transformative shift in the analysis of political texts. This change mirrors the profound impact that network methods previously had on the study of belief systems in psychology Dalege et al. (2016), Dalege et al. (2017). Far from being simply an improved or more accurate textual measure, the network method uniquely uncovers the relationships between dif-

ferent narrative components, such as characters, settings, and causal mechanisms. It offers a depth of insight into political storytelling that traditional linear models of textual measures simply cannot match. Additionally, the network approach opens the door to a multimodal analysis of emotional appeals, which manifest in diverse forms beyond just text, including facial expressions, vocal features, and posture. Recent efforts to provide researchers with efficient tools to computationally measure multiple modalities of emotional appeals, e.g. by the MEXCA<sup>4</sup> project, make it easy to capture the emotions politicians express at scale. The network approach can integrate these different modalities into a larger network of rhetorical styles.

Given the rapid evolution of text analysis, it is hard to ignore the potential impact of large language models like ChatGPT or LaMDA on automated text analysis. These models could be changing how we approach text as social scientists, potentially offering a fast, cheap, and reliable way to extract complex constructs from textual data Gilardi et al. (2023). We should nevertheless not underestimate the continued relevance and advantages of simpler, established methods, as they often offer transparency, interpretability, and computational efficiency - traits that can be obscured or compromised in more complex models. As models like ChatGPT rise in prominence, hopefully alongside open-source alternatives supporting the idea of open science, combining their strengths with those of traditional methods might be the best way forward for comprehensive text analysis in the social sciences.

## 6.4 Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the chapters in this dissertation have provided important insights into the determinants of emotional appeals in politics and the role of politicians' personalities, as well as provided innovative methodological tools to study political communication and legislative behavior. While limitations exist, such as the single country focus and the separation of personality and strategy, these challenges present exciting opportunities for further exploration. By pooling resources, building infrastructures, and examining the interconnectedness of rhetorical styles, researchers can deepen their understanding of how politicians strategically use language and emotions to advance their agendas. Ultimately, the insights and methods presented in this dissertation can serve as a valuable foundation for future research in political communication, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics shaping political discourse, and enable the development of more fine grained theories on emotions in politics.

In this dissertation, I have tried to "tell it like it is". In conducting this research, I have maintained a commitment to the principles of open science. This decision has

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<sup>4</sup>MEXCA: Multimodal Emotion eXpression Capture Amsterdam, <https://github.com/mexca/mexca>

shaped my research process and trajectory. Following an open science approach means being willing to go where the data and inquiry lead, even when that journey comes with uncertainties about results and makes it challenging to weave everything together into a consistent narrative. I am sure this dissertation would have told a much more linear story about politicians going positive or negative had I not followed this commitment. Still, I believe this was the right choice for me in becoming a better researcher as well as for the advancement of the study of emotional appeals in politics.

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