

THE STRATEGIC USE OF FEAR IN PUBLIC POLICY DEBATES

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ABSTRACT

JOSHUA M. JANS: The Strategic Use of Fear in Public Policy Debates
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While emotions are powerful determinants of political behavior, how these emotions are activated by the appeals of elites is not fully understood. However, this needs to change given the potentially large impact of emotions on policy outcomes. This paper argues that political actors will appeal to different emotions depending on their policy stance; defenders of the status quo appeal to fear and enthusiasm and proponents of change appeal to hope and anger. Hope and anger lead to risk-taking behavior that proponents of change need to harness in efforts to persuade citizens and lawmakers to change policy. Likewise, defenders of the status quo appeal to fear and enthusiasm in an effort to maximize risk-averse behavior. To test the theory, a dictionary of fear words is applied to statements on gun-control in an automated content analysis. Support is found for the hypothesis that defenders of the status quo use fear at a higher rate than advocates of change. Most importantly, the study lays the groundwork for new forays into the mediating force of emotion in relationship between political actors and the mass public in the public policy process.

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Introduction

Emotion is on prominent display in nearly every political struggle. Just by looking at the last few years of American politics, one can easily observe the anger of the Tea Party, the hope inspired by Barack Obama, and the all too often devotion into the politics of fear, from death panels to terrorism. These emotions are more than just the makings of a good story; they actually have large consequences for politics and policy making. The enthusiasm the voting public feels for Social Security makes it the “third rail” of politics, while the uncertainty surrounding the contents of the Affordable Care Act kept the public cold to the bill and nearly sank its chances of passage.

Politics and emotions go hand-in-hand. Emotions help people form impressions and react to the world around them, and political scientists are often interested in how people understand and react to the political system. Only recently, however, has emotion begun to take a more central role in political science research and only in the study of mass political behavior. Although we know that political elites frame issues, mobilize the grassroots, and use the bully pulpit to help them win political battles, we know much less about how emotions are strategically appealed to by political elites as a means of accomplishing their goals. Thus, we are left with the question: How do political actors use emotional appeals to help them affect public policy?

In particular, the emotions of fear, hope, anger, and enthusiasm are often appealed to by political actors. These emotions influence political behavior because they affect perceptions of risk. Advocating for a change in policy is asking lawmakers to take a risk, replacing the known (even if it is broken) status quo with an untried policy proposal. As a result, defenders of the status quo attempt to max-

imize risk-averse behavior through appeals to enthusiasm and fear. Conversely, proponents of change attempt to maximize risk-taking behavior through appeals to hope and anger. In a limited test of the theory, statements from interest groups involved in the recent gun-control debate were collected and analyzed for instances of fear appeals. These statements were coded both by hand and through an automated content analysis using a first-of-its-kind dictionary of fear words. Support is found for the hypothesis that fear, on average, is appealed to by defenders of the status quo.

The Effect of Emotional Appeals

In much of the political science literature, humans are assumed to be cool calculators who can easily understand the costs and benefits of policies and the related arguments for action. However, recent research in political science, psychology, and neuroscience suggest this is not the case. In their book on affective intelligence theory and political decision making, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) make the case that human cognition is inextricably linked to emotion. In fact, emotional response precedes cognitive processes. According to affective intelligence theory, humans are given a stimulus; this stimulus produces an emotional reaction, which helps form a cognitive and conscious assessment of the situation. For example, anxiety causes people to gather more information about the situation and potentially reconsider their standing assessment, while enthusiasm reinforces standing assessments and provide no motivation for reconsidering them (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Just, Crigler, and Belt 2007). Thus, unless provoked by a particular emotion, humans are creatures of habit that rely on preconceived preferences. Cognitive appraisal theory (see Lazarus 1991, Roseman 1991, Roseman and Smith 2001) works in a similar manner. Humans are presented with a stimulus; the brain subconsciously recognizes the stimulus and

recalls the appropriate emotional response. The mind then becomes consciously aware of the stimulus via the emotional reaction. In other words, humans learn how to emotionally react to familiar stimuli. Only truly unique stimuli create learning situations; the human brain does not recognize the unique stimuli and therefore has no standing decision or emotional reaction to recall. Affective intelligence theory and cognitive appraisal theory are very similar. In each, humans rely on emotions to make conscious our immediate reaction. Humans are creatures of habit, only learning when presented with new, uncertain and unsettling stimuli.

There are a variety of emotions that people can experience, branching far beyond simple valence (“positive or “negative”). In fact, psychological research has shown that the dichotomy between positive and negative emotions has proven to not be very useful. Instead, specific, or discrete, emotions are much more important to our understanding of cognition, as they combine valence and temporal orientation in assessment and behavior (Just, Crigler, and Belt 2007). The literature identifies four politically relevant emotions: fear, enthusiasm, hope, and anger. Enthusiasm is a positive, zealous, and feverous feeling about what has happened or is currently occurring. Hope, on the other hand, is a positive, excited, and optimistic feeling about what is to come. Both are positive emotions, but enthusiasm is present-oriented and hope is future-oriented (Just, Crigler, and Belt 2007). Likewise, fear and anger are both negative emotions, but have different temporal orientations with fear being future-oriented and anger being present oriented.

Each of these emotions have an effect on attitudes toward risk and thus behavior. Research on anger and hope find that they are both related to risk-taking behavior (Huddy, Feldman, Cassese 2007); subjects exhibited a willingness to take action with less careful consideration of alternatives and diminishment of perceived risks. Fear, on the other hand, is linked to risk-avoidance behavior through heightened sensitivity and attention to threat, an overestimation of risk, and careful information processing (Huddy, Feldman, and Cassese

2007). Research on prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Quattrone and Tversky 1988) shows that risk-assessment affects the choices people make. In particular, people are risk-adverse when potential “gains” or “benefits” are on the line. Fearing loss of these benefits, people become cautious. However, when people have no benefit to lose, they are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior. Table 1 displays the discrete emotions, their temporal orientation, valence, and resulting behavior.

Table 1: Emotions and Political Behavior

Future Oriented	Present Oriented	
Fear [#]	Anger [◇]	Negative
Hope [◇]	Enthusiasm [#]	Positive

[#] Risk-averse [◇] Risk-taking

Constructing Emotional Appeals

The most common way political actors appeal to the public and other political actors is through the use of frames. Stone (1989) argues that framing is the process of defining a societal condition as a public problem worthy of attention. While there are many things in life that are problematic, that does not mean the public views them as problems worthy of public attention and political action. When defining problems, blame is often assigned to something for causing the problem. This is the causal story, or frame, that is meant to change the way people think about the problem. The way the masses and elites think about the cause of the problem is inextricably linked to how they act to solve the problem.

Similarly, Schneider and Ingram (1993) discuss the social construction of groups as framing. Society tends to label groups as worthy or unworthy of public benefits. Government, as a result, will act in a particular way toward these different

groups, depending on how they are framed. Taking welfare policy for example, much of public opinion on welfare spending is based on the perception of recipients being predominantly black (Kuklinski et al 2000; Soss and Schram 2007; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005). The framing of groups is a critical component of public policy that informs the attitudes people hold towards those groups and overwhelms the objective facts on welfare spending.

Other authors have taken a different approach to framing, including Jones (1994) who argues that framing is simply highlighting certain dimensions of an issue. The issue of the superconducting supercollider is a good example of this type of framing. The supercollider was first seen as a boon to jobs and scientific discovery, but then viewed as a boondoggle in an increasingly weakening economy and ballooning deficit. Funding for the superconducting supercollider was terminated following the shift in attention from jobs to the deficit.

The common component to each definition of framing is that frames a) define something, whether it is defining the key dimension of focus, the person of blame, or the mission of a social movement and b) are inextricably linked to policy outcomes. Benford and Snow (2000) sum this up nicely, identifying framing as explaining whether we need to act, how we need to act, and why we should act.

Included in frames are emotional appeals, or information meant to elicit affective reactions in order to persuade a person into supporting a particular action on an issue. Political actors appeal to emotions for the same reasons they frame issues: to convince the public and policy makers to act in a particular manner. The concept of emotional appeals is not new. Aristotle famously identified the three components of an argument as logos, pathos, and ethos. Logos is the logic of the argument, the most substantive part of the argument that offers evidence and data to support an argument. Pathos, however, is the emotional content of the argument. Pathos provides examples, images, and reasoning meant to evoke an emotional response in the audience. Ethos is about establishing the credibility of the speaker so that an argument carries extra heft. Examples can easily be

drawn for each of these components just by looking at current events—logos is represented every day in newspaper articles covering the benefits and drawbacks of different policies, pathos is represented in impassioned speeches, and these arguments are carried by experts and policy insiders who use their reputations to support their arguments.

Common among these three components are the use of rhetorical fallacies. Rhetorical fallacies are devices commonly used in argumentation although they represent “errors in reasoning” (Walton 2008). Pathos, in particular, has many rhetorical fallacies associated with it, including directly appealing to emotions. A non-fallacious emotional argument provides illustrative examples of the logic of the argument that are likely to draw endearment from the audience. Nonetheless, fallacies can serve the rhetoricians’ intentions of convincing the audience. For example, framing the Affordable Care Act as a government takeover of health care was not simply a strategy to make people think about the logic behind greater government intervention. Instead, it also cued emotional responses such as fear of what government involvement might entail (such as death panels) and the implementation of a so-called “socialist agenda.” While these are the rhetorical fallacies of exaggeration of threat and ad hominem, they nonetheless served as an effective strategy to tamping down support for President’s Obama’s key piece of domestic legislation.

Why Elites Make Emotional Appeals

Emotions are appealed to by elites in an effort to achieve political and policy goals. David Easton, a pioneer in the study of public policy, observed that public policy is the authoritative allocation of values on society (1965). Different actors, whether they be political parties, social movements, interest groups, or individual office holders vie for influence over the public policy process. Conflict is inherent

in the formulation and adoption of policy, as the values of one group can come into conflict with the values of another. Political actors coalesce around these values, advocating for why their preferred public policy would be beneficial. Even if purely motivated by reelection, elected officials will engage in some level of policy debate. Richard Fenno (1973), in his discussion of the goals of congressmen, points out that the achievement of any of his three goals (re-election, public policy, and influence) is dependent on excelling in the other two.

Some work has been done on emotional appeals and its ability to motivate political behavior. Thomas Frank (2004) examines the use of anger as a strategy that perpetually motivates support for the conservative movement. Prominent conservatives, according to Frank, are constantly prompted to feel angry, motivating a high degree of engagement and mobilization. Many scholars have discussed the use of fear in political rhetoric as a major contributor to the growing “culture of fear” (Furedi 2006; Glassner 1999; Robin 2004). The culture of fear is the society-wide fixation on risk and desire to reduce undesirable outcomes even if it means sacrificing other democratic values. According to this thesis, elites are active in shaping the culture of fear, using it to derail undesirable policies and instead garner support for their own, desirable policy proposals (Glassner 1999). The culture of fear is prominently featured in Michael Moore’s famous documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2003), in which he uses the fear of racial minorities as an explanation for the rise in gun ownership in the United States. Fear is often cited, as Moore does, for inciting overreactions in society. Furedi (2006) explains that is because people routinely fail to grasp the true risk involved in certain actions. In other words, people are terribly inept at grasping how risky things actually are, systematically overreacting to scary things and under-reacting to things that are just as detrimental but not as scary.¹

Though studies have often focused on the strategy and consequences of negative

¹ This is supported by empirical research by Slovic (1987), who found that humans tend to judge risk based on whether a situation is controllable, dreadful, or unfamiliar. We do not fear the things we can control, that are not dreadful, and that are familiar—even if they are more likely to kill us.

advertising (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997), others have looked at discrete emotional appeals. Roseman, Abelson, and Ewing (1986) find that various discrete emotions are appealed to in print advertising, while Brader (2005) finds that candidates use audio and visual appeals to emotions in their television advertising. De Castella et al (2009; 2011) find that western leaders routinely appealed to fear and anger in their speeches on terrorism, and at politically opportune times. From the literature, we can gather that emotions 1) have consequences for public opinion and political behavior and 2) are routinely appealed to by political elites. In particular, emotions can affect the assessment of risk and thus the perception of the political world. What is left unknown is whether all emotions appealed haphazardly, or are there differences in emotional appeals based on the goals the political actor is trying to accomplish?

A Theoretical Framework of Emotional Appeals

Because emotions have a profound impact on political behavior, political actors will attempt to appeal to emotions. Appealing to emotions in the electorate is a means of achieving political goals. Because emotions have particular behavioral effects, political actors appeal to the emotions that correspond with the behavior they wish to activate. That is, the appropriate strategy for defenders of the status quo is to appeal to fear and enthusiasm in an attempt to dissuade risk-taking in the form of adopting a new policy. On the other hand, proponents of change appeal to hope and anger in order to convince people to go with an unknown policy over the known status quo. This basic strategy applies across spectrum of ideology and issues.

Policy conflict often spills out of the halls of government and into the wider public. This is often deliberate, what Schattschneider (1960) calls a conflict expansion. When losing on a given public policy fight, actors appeal to the public

to turn the tide. Often, this involves trying to convince the public that the status quo is either problematic or worthy of keeping in place. Generally, the losing side tends to want to expand the scope of conflict; there is little incentive to tinker with a winning strategy. However, emotions are still appealed to by both sides because it is an effective and essential rhetorical strategy that can affect both the masses and elites. That is, emotions can move people to become involved in politics by motivating them to contact their legislator, donate to causes, and spread the word among their acquaintances. Emotions can also move elites. Emotional reactions to news, witness testimony, or even the knowledge of emotional reactions in the electorate can prompt legislators to behave in a particular manner.

Political actors strategically attempt to motivate different political behaviors through the use of emotional appeals. Emotional appeals change a person's frame of reference by affecting perceptions of risk and therefore political preferences. In politics, conservatives feel anger toward the Affordable Care Act, while liberals feel anger toward the Iraq War. Conversely, conservatives may feel enthusiasm toward the Iraq War, while liberals are enthusiastic about the Affordable Care Act. Anger is associated with negatively appraised policy and motivates political mobilization against that policy. When feeling anger toward a policy, an individual finds themselves in the domain of losses. The existing policy, whether it is sustaining high troop levels in Iraq for liberals or implementing parts of the new health care law for conservatives, represents the status quo for that policy area. Because the status quo is incongruent with their policy preferences, this is a "loss" or "lack of benefit" as the status quo is providing no or negative utility. Since there is no benefit to the status quo, risks can be taken in order to change the status quo. These risks may include motivating participation in get-out-the-vote drives or in donating to a political party or interest group. Feeling enthusiastic, on the other hand, is linked to the appraisal of "gains" or "benefits" in the status quo. To protect these gains, risk must be minimized and, therefore, people who feel enthusiastic about a policy will be averse to changes in it. This is where elites

step in. While ideologues likely have strong emotional appraisals of policies, many people fall in the middle of the road without strong feelings on policies. Elites can make emotional appeals in order to send information on how people should feel about the status quo.

The type of emotion political actors appeal to depends on what side of the debate they find themselves on. A policy debate generally breaks into two sides: defenders of the status quo and proponents of change. Proponents of change propose that the status quo is unsustainable and thus must be changed, forwarding a proposal to do so. The goal of defenders of the status quo is to prevent the proposed change from becoming policy. This may be because the defenders were invested in the formulation of the status quo policy and are now invested in its continued existence, or that they simply view the change proposed as the wrong fix to the broken status quo. The status quo may reflect their values, values that the proponents of change oppose. The status quo may also represent an economic, social, or political benefit for certain interests, making it a policy that will be defended vigorously. Whatever the case, defenders of the status quo view the direction of change as detrimental to their concept of good public policy.

Defenders of the status quo, convinced that the policy change should not be adopted, work to convince the public, media, and lawmakers that preserving the status quo will yield a greater benefit than changing it. In other words, they want people to view the status quo as a beneficial gain rather than a detrimental loss. This can be done by extolling the virtues of the status quo, framing the policy in a positive light. It can also be done by making the proposed change look risky, half-baked, dangerous, and all together bad. Attacking the other sides' plans, motivations, and the possible consequences (however unlikely they may be) can elicit the emotions necessary to give the message strength and win the policy battle.

Fear and enthusiasm motivate risk-averse behavior, one by creating good feelings toward the present and the other by creating aversion to possible changes.

Thus, defenders of the status quo use frames that promote the uncertainty of the effectiveness of proposed changes, highlight the what-ifs and slippery-slope nature of change, while also explaining how the status quo reflects revered values and creates positive benefits beyond what it might seem when taken on face value. These emotions can be elicited through code-words, rhetorical fallacies, and even images and sounds.

Appeals to fear have several effects that make them particularly attractive to status quo defenders. First, it motivates people to gather more information about the issue, slowing down the charge toward change in hopes that stalling it will kill it. Second, it primes people to feel threatened by the change in hopes of convincing people to support the status quo and thus defeat change. Enthusiasm is also attractive to status quo defenders because it discourages information gathering about the status quo. In this way, feeling enthusiastic about the status quo discourages criticism and reconsideration of the status quo. A fear and enthusiasm appeal will shift focus from the supposedly broken status quo, instead shining a bright spotlight on the proposed change and what it might do. The increased scrutiny and slowing of the policy process on its own could be enough to kill change.

Turning to the other side of the debate, hope and anger are appealed to by proponents of change in order to motivate risk-taking behavior. These appeals will attempt to create a revulsion to the status quo, highlighting its detriments, costs, and general unsustainability while also increasing feelings of efficacy, that change can happen and should happen. These emotions, like fear and enthusiasm, can be elicited through code-words, rhetorical fallacies, images, and sounds.

Appeals to hope have several effects that make it particularly attractive to proponents of change. First, it motivates people to see the political process in an efficacious way, prompting mobilization of opinion and resources in favor of change. Second, it discourages information gathering, instead speeding up the push for change and sweeping aside delay. Anger is also attractive to proponents

of change because it encourages information gathering about the status quo. In this way, feeling angry about the status quo encourages criticism and reconsideration of the status quo. A hope and anger appeal will keep the nitty gritty details of change in the dark and instead shine the light on the status quo, its detriments and need for change. This leads to the formal hypothesis listed below.

Fear Hypothesis: Defenders of the status quo, all else equal, appeal to fear at a greater rate than proponents of change.

Enthusiasm Hypothesis: Defenders of the status quo, all else equal, appeal to enthusiasm at a greater rate than proponents of change.

Hope Hypothesis: Proponents of change, all else equal, appeal to hope at a greater rate than defenders of the status quo.

Anger Hypothesis: Proponents of change, all else equal, appeal to anger at a greater rate than defenders of the status quo.

Measuring Emotional Appeals

While we can grasp emotion and its power because of familiarity through experience, defining it in a manner that makes measurement possible is much more difficult. Few studies have tried to measure emotional appeals by political elites, and none have measured them in a manner that employs automated content analysis.² To develop measurements of emotional appeals, this paper focuses on a single emotion: fear. Fear is perhaps the most well researched of the politically–

² De Castella et al (2009, 2011) employ a hand coding scheme of speeches on terrorism based on cognitive appraisal theory and Brader (2005) codes advertisements based on their sounds and images, but not the words of the advertisement.

relevant emotions, with the literature providing descriptions of its components when used in rhetoric, as well as a vibrant debate over its use by political elites.

In particular, the literature on fear tends to focus on two dimensions: threat and uncertainty.³ That is, words and phrases that elicit fear are those that emphasize the threat a situation poses and an uncertainty or inability to control the consequences of that threat. Rather than providing an efficacious frame in which a threat exists but something can and should be done about it, fear instead is highlighted by a lack of control over the situation.⁴ Eliciting fear is about demonstrating a threat (threat words), but also a susceptibility to that threat (uncertainty words).

The next challenge comes from actually extracting the emotion meant to be elicited by political speech. New developments in a) the automated coding of large amounts of text and b) the measurement of emotional sentiment in text makes it possible to build a dictionary of threat and uncertainty words that can be used as a measure of the use of fear in political speech. Laver, Benoit, and Garry (2003) developed software to extract policy positions from party platforms by analyzing the frequency of certain words in a document rather than human reading and interpretation. An automated approach allows the researcher to develop a dictionary of words to serve as the measure of the concept forwarded in their theory, apply that dictionary to a corpus of documents, and get a frequency of dictionary words for each document in the corpus. This approach can be adapted for this paper by providing a theoretically based dictionary of fear and applying it to a corpus of political speech. Work has also been done on computer measurement of the emotional sentiment of a piece of writing, used mostly in psychological and rhetorical research to capture the emotions expressed by the author (Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth 2001; Strappavara and Valitutti 2004).

Dictionaries of emotion exist, but are tailored for measuring the underlying

³ See De Castella et al 2009 for an outline, which borrows predominately from the cognitive appraisal literature on eliciting emotions.

⁴ This also comports with Slovic's (1987) findings on what people fear.

emotional state of a patient or writer, not for attempts to elicit emotion. The concept this paper is attempting the capture is the strategic use of fear, while existing sentiment dictionaries capture the feeling of fear. This was a severe limitation of the dictionaries that required the inclusion of other words that are much more commonly used in political speech. Though many words can be borrowed from these dictionaries for a dictionary on the use of fear, other words that are more commonly used in political rhetoric also needed to be incorporated to correctly capture the concept being tested. To begin, words pertaining to fear in existing sentiment analysis dictionaries⁵ were gathered and separated into either a threat word or an uncertainty word. Threat words are words that describe the danger or risk of a situation. For example, threat words include scheme, strip, trample, endanger and destroy. Uncertainty words are words that describe the unknowable or uncontrollable nature of a situation. Examples of uncertainty words include might, could, secrecy and distrust. Next, several different types of political speech were gathered and analyzed for additional threat and uncertainty words. These types of speech include speeches from presidential candidates during the 2008 campaign, floor speeches by members of Congress during the debate to raise the debt ceiling, and conservative and liberal blogs on the health care reform debate. Words that were used to discuss the threat a policy or politician posed to the audience and appeared across each of the three different types of political speech were included as threat words in the fear dictionary. A similar method was used to compile words that convey uncertainty into the fear dictionary. Again, looking across multiple types of political speech, words that were often used and in a manner that discussed the unknowns associated with a policy or politician were included in the dictionary. Words that were gathered from the sentiment dictionaries that did not appear across the three types of speech were dropped from the dictionary, as there was little evidence of their use in actually political speech

⁵ These dictionaries include the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count dictionary by Pennebaker et al (2001), Regressive Imagery Dictionary by Martindale (1975), and WordNet Affect by Strappavarra and Valitutti (2004)

(and therefore not commonly used to elicit fear). The entire dictionary can be found in the appendix of this article.

Data: The 2012–13 Gun Control Debate

To test the hypothesis that defenders of the status quo, all else equal, will use fear at a higher rate during public policy debates, data was gathered in the form of press releases from gun-related interest groups. The statements are taken from seven different groups, four of which are gun-control advocates (Brady Campaign to End Gun Violence, Campaign to Stop Gun Violence, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, and Violence Policy Center) and three of which are gun-rights groups (Gun Owners of America, National Rifle Association, and Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms). Each press release was generally on one sub-issue related to gun control and press releases that did not involve a policy discussion, for example those that discussed election results or community events put on by the group, were not collected. 116 press releases come from the gun-control groups and 170 press releases come from gun-rights groups, for a total of 286 press releases.

Coding and Verifying the Dependent Variable

The press releases range in date from May 2012 to February 2013.⁶ To construct the dependent variable (the use of fear), each press release was coded for how many fear words appear in their text. The free content analysis program Yoshikoder was used to apply the fear dictionary to each of the press releases.

⁶ During this time frame, the salience of the gun control debate ranged from very low salience to very high salience following the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary in late December 2012. My theory does not presuppose a dynamic relationship between salience and use of fear, so it is not explored in depth here. However, some preliminary analysis including an error correction model with salience as an independent variable showed no reason to believe there was a dynamic process in determining the use of fear in political rhetoric.

Yoshikoder produces a count of words and their concordances (the five words before and after the dictionary hit). False hits were eliminated from the count of fear words by examining the concordances.⁷ A summary of the results of coding the dependent variable are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics: Dependent Variable

	Total	Min	Mean	Max	Std. Dev.
Threat Words	593	0	2.07	12	2.20
Uncertainty Words	321	0	1.12	11	1.55
Fear Words	914	0	3.21	23	3.12
All Words	146393	64	51.86	3177	325.80

The dictionary of fear words is meant to extract the emotional appeal being made in a theoretically sound but efficient manner. Past studies have hand-coded speech to identify emotional appeals. Most notably, De Castella et al (2009, 2011) use a coding scheme in which they look for relevancy, threat, and uncertainty statements as evidence of appeals to fear in speeches by western democratic leaders during the height of the War on Terror. This represents a more traditional way of coding text and a method that can be used to verify the validity of the dictionary of fear words. To do this, a subset of 84 press releases were hand-coded for the use of fear. This was done for two reasons: the first being to provide qualitative evidence of what the use of fear looks like, and the second being to validate the fear dictionary’s ability to capture the concept of the use of fear. When hand-coding, I looked for five different types of rhetorical devices that could be used to elicit fear: slippery slope arguments, highlighting unknown or unintended consequences, hyperbole in relation to threat, insinuation of ulterior motives, and

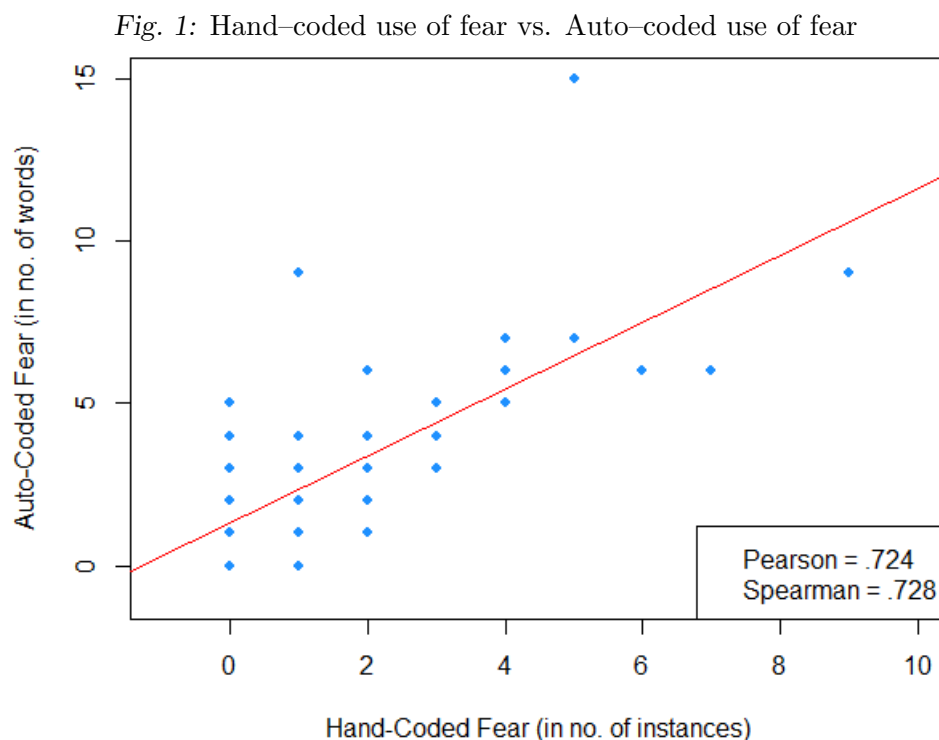
⁷ For example, question is a word included in the uncertainty portion of the dictionary. Question was used in rhetoric such as when the press release questions the consequences and motives of a particular policy. Sometimes, question was used in a simple, descriptive contexts such as “Attorney General Eric Holder was on the hill to answer questions today.” These false hits were eliminated.

explaining the uncontrollable nature of the situation.⁸ The former three center on the discussion of the policy itself, while the latter two focus on the efforts of the opposite side of the debate. There is also considerable overlap in that each tends to tap into both the threat and uncertainty aspects of fear. See the appendix for full operationalization of these rhetorical strategies.

So what does the use of fear look like? Often times, one side of the debate attempted to paint the other side as holding ulterior motives. For example, the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms (CCRKBA) stated that “Pat Quinn wants to take away the freedom of Illinois citizens because some psycho misused a gun in Colorado...He’s just exploiting that case to please his anti-gun supporters.” Rather than attack Quinn on the facts of the issue, or even on his stated motivations for pursuing gun control measures, the CCRKBA instead attempts to make Quinn out to be the puppet of anti-gun activists. The attack on Quinn is meant to raise feelings of fear through uncertainty over the motives of the governor. Other common examples of fear in context include the hyperbole in relation to threat, such as the Brady Campaign’s statement “Quite simply, Rand Paul is promoting the gun lobby’s agenda and if he and the gun lobby have their way, innocent people will die.” This type of rhetoric is meant to enhance the threat that average citizens (in this case, the citizens of Washington, D.C.) feel from efforts to legislate the wider availability of guns. Yet another example is that of slippery slope arguments, such as the Gun Owners of America’s (GOA) statement that “This treaty would pave the way for an anti-gun Obama Administration to unlawfully impose registration restrictions...This is a huge problem, as gun registration has historically been a first step towards gun confiscation.” Here, the GOA wants to highlight the fact that support for the U.N. Arms Trade Treaty is actually a step toward total gun confiscation. Therefore, the treaty should not be viewed as a disagreeable policy, but a major threat to the value system of Americans.

⁸ Some guidance for these was taken from Sobieraj and Berry’s (2011) work on incivility and outrage in talk radio.

Each of the press releases in the subset were coded for these rhetorical devices and then compared to the automated count of fear words generated by applying the fear dictionary to the press releases. The correlation between the number of fear instances and the number of fear words was calculated using Pearson's correlation coefficient. A line graph depicting the results is provided in Figure 1. Here, the hand-coding of fear tracks closely with the automated measure of fear words, resulting in a Pearson's r correlation of .724. The relatively high correlation is good evidence for the soundness of the fear dictionary in actually measuring fear in political speech. The correlation suffers from the fact that it is comparing the same concept, but two different things. That is, hand-coding of fear picked up mostly individual sentences that conveyed fear while the dictionary is word based; Multiple fear words can be used in a single use of fear. For a second check, a Spearman correlation between the hand-coding and auto-coding was calculated to be .728. The dictionary of fear tracks strongly with a hand-coding of fear.



Independent Variables

Each press release was coded for the sub-issue addressed. Nine sub-issues were identified, including 1) gun control measures including proliferation and assault weapons ban, 2) ammunition control and bans, 3) background checks, 4) home defense, including “Stand Your Ground” laws, 5) gun rights and gun deregulation, 6) general gun culture and gun violence, 7) Operation Fast and Furious, 8) United Nations Arms Trade Treaty, 9) Other issues identified by the groups as having implications for gun policy. Each press release was also coded for the whether it came from a gun-control group or a gun-rights group. Finally, each statement was coded for whether it was advocating a pro-status quo position or a pro-change position. A release could fall into one of four meaningful categories: pro-gun control/pro-change [N=93], pro-gun control/pro-status quo [N=23], pro-gun rights/pro-change [N=64], pro-gun rights/pro-status quo [N=106]. Although the overall stance or ideology of the group is fixed as either pro-gun control or pro-gun rights, the group could take pro-change or pro-status quo positions. For example, the Brady campaign could advocate for background checks in one press release (pro-gun control/pro-change) and in another rail against efforts to pass “Stand Your Ground” laws at the state level (pro-gun control/pro-status quo).

Two methods are used to test the hypothesis. First, a difference-in-means test was conducted between the rates of fear of the four categories of statements. Next, a negative binomial count model was estimated. The unit of observation for the model is the press release [N=286]. The dependent variable is the automated count of fear words. The independent variables include an indicator for whether the press release was pro-status quo, an indicator for whether the press release was issued by a gun-rights group, and a series of indicators for each of the nine sub-issue areas. The first sub-issue was excluded so the model would estimate. The indicator for pro-status quo is expected to be positive and statistically significant and represents a direct test of the theory that fear is used by defenders of the status quo to help them accomplish their policy goals. The expectation is that

the coefficient on the gun-rights group indicator will be statistically insignificant, as no differences between the two sides are expected.

An indicator for each of the sub-issues is included for two reasons. The first is that there is a clustering of sub-issues in the data that needs to be controlled for otherwise risking biased estimates. That is, not all the releases are addressing the same issue, but rather they cluster into different sub-issues. Some sub-issues may or may not be topics that inherently generate more fear rhetoric than others. For example, discussion of the UN’s attempts at gun trafficking treaties may be an easy topic for gun-rights advocates to drum up fear, more so than simple background checks. The second reason is that future work will extend to multiple issues. Including an indicator for each of the sub-issues will keep the structure of the model consistent and may yield insights into whether we expect some issue to come up much more fearful than others. I did not include an independent indicator variable for each of the groups. Though this clustering is also potentially problematic, most of the variance is captured by the indicator for pro-gun group. That is, the variance captured in the dichotomy of the two sides accounts for most of the clustering by group. The negative binomial was run with an individual indicator for each group and the point estimate and standard error on the status quo defender variable was the same out to the fourth decimal point. Also included in the model is an offset for the total number of words. This is simply an “exposure” variable for which no parameter is estimated; its purpose is instead to control for the fact that there is likely to be more fear words in statements that have more words all together. This technique effectively transforms the dependent variable into a rate rather than a count. The results of the difference-in-means and model estimation are discussed below. The total number of observations for the independent indicator variables are included in the appendix.

Results and Discussion: Defending the Status

Quo With Fear

To start, difference-in-means t-tests were conducted to see if there was a statistically significant difference between the four meaningful categories of statements. The results of these t-tests can be found in Table 3. The rate of fear is calculated by taking the total number of fear words across all statements in the category and dividing by the total number of words across all statements in the category. Categories that share symbols are statistically significantly different from one another. Examining pro-gun control groups, there is a statistically significantly higher use of fear in press releases that advocate for the status quo than releases from the same groups when advocating change. A similar pattern is found for gun-rights groups; gun-rights groups use fear at a lesser rate when advocating for change than when they want to prevent change. Gun rights groups were statistically significantly more likely to use fear than gun-control groups when advocating change, but the relationship is not statistically significant when defending the status quo. This is initial evidence that fear is a strategy used by status quo defenders, evidenced by both the difference within sides depending on the stance taken and the lack of difference in the use of fear between sides when defending the status quo.

Table 3: Rate of Fear

	Pro-Gun Control	Pro-Gun Rights	Total
Pro-Status Quo	.011 [†]	.008 [*]	.009
Pro-Change	.004 ^{† ‡}	.005 ^{‡ *}	.004
Total	.006	.006	.006

^{† ‡ *} Each symbol represents a statistically significant difference

between the cells sharing the symbol at $p < .05$ level

The negative binomial model also provides support for the fear hypothesis. The coefficient estimate for the status quo defender variable is statistically significant and in the expected direction. Being a status quo defender, as opposed to an advocate of change, has a positive effect on the use of fear words, all else equal. The ideology of the group was not a statistically significant predictor of the use of fear. It did not matter if the group was a liberal pro-gun control group or a conservative pro-gun rights group; rather, both used fear when defending cherished policies and to much less of an extent when advocating for change. Turning to the sub-issues, discussion of the Operation Fast and Furious scandal was the only issue that was statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. Debating it is more likely to feature the use of fear than the excluded category (gun control, including the assault weapons ban). Although many were significant at the $p < .1$, I did not have any directional hypothesis about the issues' exhibition of fear and therefore would not conclude that these issues are more or less fearful than the excluded issue.

Table 4: Negative Binomial Model Results

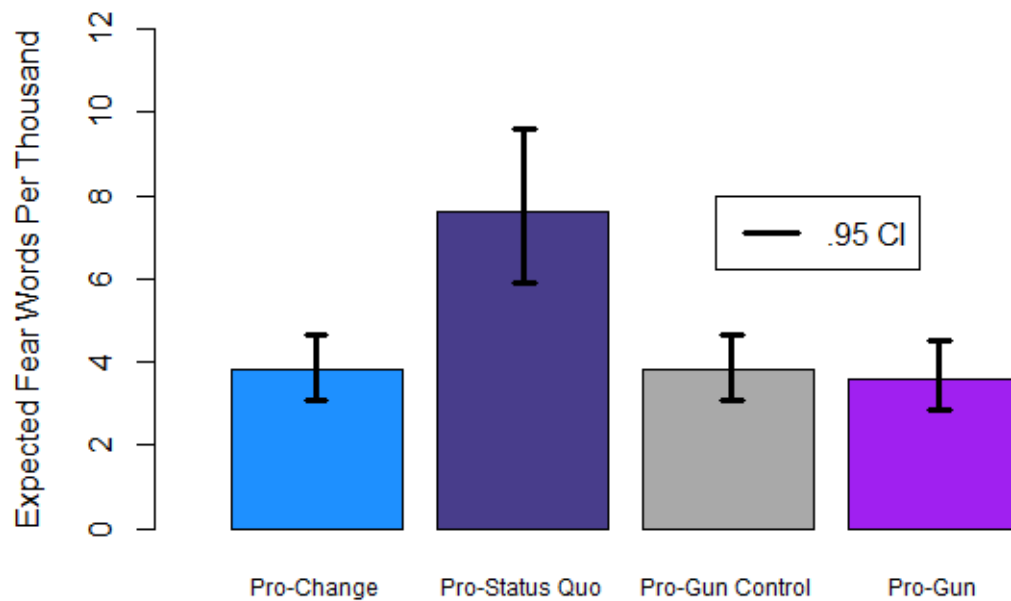
	Estimate	Std. Error	Pr(> z)
Intercept	-5.5824	0.1107	0.0000
SQ Defender	0.7001	0.1096	0.0000
Pro-gun Group	-0.0565	0.1123	0.6147
Ammunition	0.1321	0.2531	0.6018
Background Checks	0.2646	0.1536	0.0851
Stand Your Ground	0.3020	0.1622	0.0626
Gun Rights/Deregulation	0.3634	0.2019	0.0719
Gun Culture/Violence	-0.0345	0.1489	0.8166
Fast and Furious	0.5615	0.1885	0.0029
Arms Trade Treaty	0.3137	0.1815	0.0840
Other Issues	0.4028	0.2166	0.0630
N 286			
ϕ 4.361			
AIC 1197.392			
BIC 1241.264			

An expected use of fear words can be calculated from the model estimates. This quantity of interest yields an estimate of how much fear, on average, can be expected in political rhetoric given the ideological position and the position on the particular issue of the statement. The expected use of fear words is featured in Figure 2. With the other variables held at their minimum,⁹ being pro-status quo yields an expected use of eight fear words per thousand words. Being pro-change yields an expected use of fear of about 4 words per thousand, thus being pro-status quo produces an expected use of fear that is two-fold higher than being pro-change. Both pro-gun control and pro-gun rights also have an expected use

⁹ Since the independent variables are all indicator variables, holding them at their mean does not make substantive sense. Instead all were held at their minimum.

of fear around 4 words per thousand. The confidence intervals of pro-change, pro-gun control, and pro-gun rights overlap one another, while pro-status quo is statistically significantly different. Taking a pro-status quo position results in double the use of fear in political rhetoric compared to being a proponent of change. Therefore, I conclude that there is substantial support for my hypothesis, that defenders of the status quo will use fear at a greater rate than advocates of change.

Fig. 2: Expected Use of Fear Words



Next Steps in the Study of the Politics of Emotion

In 1933, during Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address, the newly elected president hypothesized about the role of emotions in public policy making, stating

“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” Roosevelt states what is often observed by politicians, pundits, and the public—emotions can be activated by the events in the political world and used to accomplish policy goals. In other words, emotions matter for public policy making. In particular, this study finds that fear is used more often by defenders of the status quo than advocates of change, much like Roosevelt hypothesized years ago.

Because of the different effects emotions have on political behavior, political actors will strategically appeal to certain emotions depending on their stance on an issue and regardless of their ideology. The study is limited in nature, both a strength and a weakness. By focusing on fear, I was able to build a first-of-its-kind sentiment dictionary tailored for political rhetoric. This process can then be expanded to the other three emotions discussed in the theoretical framework for a full, rigorous, and innovative test of the theory. Focusing on the gun control debate in some ways limits the generalizability of the findings, but it proves a hard test for the hypothesis as both advocates of change and defenders of the status quo could capitalize on fears of mass killings, murder, and crime to forward their agenda. Furthermore, by dividing the statements into nine different sub-issue areas, I was able to investigate how the results may hold across many different issue areas. Even when controlling for the different topics within gun-control, being a defender of the status quo was estimated to have a positive effect on the use of fear. Nevertheless, this paper should be expanded in four ways: 1) across each of the discrete emotions theorized to be important for political behavior, 2) across many issue areas, 3) across a greater span of time, 4) across many different types of political rhetoric.

There is some evidence here that political actors not only appeal to emotions, but do so in a systematic manner. The fact that fear is appealed to by defenders of the status quo, whether they be a liberal or a conservative group, is evidence of a

“master-frame” that could play out across multiple issues. While much attention in the literature has been paid to how individual issues have been framed, and the power of those frames in fueling policy outcomes, less work has been done on a master framing strategy. In other words, there may be a larger strategy to defending the status quo or advocating for change that involves strong cognitive frames and appeals to particular emotions. In particular, the power of fear could be one of the reasons it is so difficult to enact change. While research on emotions is beginning to flourish in the mass political behavior subfield of political science, there are many applications to elite level politics, institutions, and policy making that could also yield fruitful insights.

APPENDIX

Total Number of Observations for Independent Variables

Variable	N
Pro-Status Quo	129
Pro-Change	157
Pro-Gun Rights Statements	170
Pro-Gun Control Statements	116
Assault Weapons and Proliferation Sub-issue	101
Ammunition Sub-issue	10
Background Checks Sub-issue	28
Stand Your Ground Sub-issue	31
Gun Rights/Deregulation Sub-issue	17
Gun Culture/Violence Sub-issue	44
Fast and Furious Sub-issue	24
Arms Trade Treaty Sub-issue	19
Other Issues Sub-issue	12

Number of Statements by Group Type and Issue Position

	Pro-Gun Control	Anti-Gun Control
Pro-Status Quo	23	106
Anti-Status Quo	93	64
Total	116	170

Number of Statements by Group

Group	No. of Statements
Brady	54
CSGV	10
Mayors	23
VPC	29
GOA	64
NRA	75
CCRKBA	41
Total	286

Qualitative Coding Scheme

Slippery Slope	Claiming that the policy is a step in the direction to a much more unseemly policy. Also known as Trojan horse arguments.
Ulterior Motives	Painting the opposing side as acting for a reason other than the one that they have stated.
Unknown Consequences	Highlighting the unknown nature of the opposing side's policy, especially the "what-ifs" and "coulds" about the policy and its consequences.
Uncontrollable Situation	Demonstrating the presence of threat by highlighting the inability to control the efforts or consequences of the opposing side or issue.
Hyperbolic Threat	Using overly deterministic language or exaggeration about the opposing side or issue.

The Dictionary of Fear Words

Threat			Uncertainty
extort*	abridge	insidious	alarm*
extrem*	agenda	obliterat*	anxi*
fundamental*	attempt	obsess*	bidding
grave	backdoor	pressure	cautio*
gut	breakneck	push	could
unnecessary	code	radical*	distrust
unrelenting	coerc*	ram	doubt*
unremitting	cram*	reckless*	false
violate*	danger*	relentless	gamble
weaken	deliberat*	scar*	hidden
	destroy*	scheme	maybe
	destruct*	seige	might
	disaster	slip*	motive*
	disembowel	slope	question
	draconian	sneak*	risk*
	egregious	step	secrecy
	endanger	strip*	secret
	erase	tantamount	secrets
	erode	threat*	so-called
	eviscerat*	toward*	ulterior
	exploit*	trample*	unable
	extinct*	transform*	uncertain
No. of Times in Data		593	321

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