# Political Trust Moderates the Relationship between Anxiety and Political Participation

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## Abstract

We examine whether political trust moderates the relationship between feelings of anxiety and political participation. Political trust was tested as the moderator as one way to account for previous inconsistent findings regarding the link between anxiety and political participation. Anxiety prompts a fight or flight reaction in the individual, producing two possible causal directions. In today's political environment, uncertainty and threat are relatively high, making the study of the effect of anxiety on political participation important. We propose that anxieties effect on political participation is moderated by the level of trust an individual has in either their elected representatives to make good decisions or in the United States government ability as an institution to mitigate and address threatening issues. We posit that individuals with greater trust in the government are more likely to participate in politics when confronted with threat and uncertainty while those individuals with little or no trust in the government are likely to stray away from political participation when confronted with threat and uncertainty.

Anxiety is commonplace in politics. From routine sources of threat like immigration or the economy to existential threats like global pandemics or terrorist attacks, the political world is full of cues that can put citizens in a state of anxiety or fear. This anxiety can, in turn, influence political behavior. As part of our fight-or-flight system, state-based anxiety helps us respond to threats by heightening our awareness of the environment. In politics, this translates primarily into greater information seeking (Marcus and MacKuen, 1993; Redlawsk, Civettini and Lau, 2007; Valentino et al., 2009; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Clifford and Jerit, 2018), but anxiety may also change citizens' issue positions and vote choice (Huddy et al., 2005; Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008; Ladd and Lenz, 2008).

Because of its link to fight-or-flight decisions, it is natural to assume that anxiety should result in action in addition to monitoring. Yet, empirical support for anxiety's role in shaping participation is decidedly mixed. Although some have found evidence that anxiety or fear can increase turnout and other forms of participation (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen, 2000), other studies find anxiety plays a much smaller role than other emotions such as anger (Valentino et al., 2011; Valentino, Gregorowicz and Groenendyk, 2009; Groenendyk and Banks, 2014). These conflicting findings are surprising given anxiety's central role in the fight-or-flight decision-making system.

Why would anxiety promote information search, but not action? And why do these results hold in some, but not all, studies?

In this paper, we argue that the apparent disconnect between anxiety and political action in previous literature is due to an omitted moderator: political trust. Political trust should condition when and for whom anxiety will lead to action. Central to the concept of political trust is the level of confidence citizens have in their political institutions. When confidence is high, we argue, citizens should perceive government as a viable means of ameliorating threats. Citizens lacking confidence in their institutions, in contrast, should not believe that government action is capable of reducing threat. As a result, we expect that individuals with

higher levels of political trust should be more willing to participate in politics when put in an anxious state.

Using an original survey experiment inducing anxiety, we show that political trust is a strong moderator of the link between anxiety and participation. Our findings, however, point to a relationship that is opposite our hypothesis – those with low trust in government become significantly more likely to report a willingness to participate in politics when they are induced to feel anxiety and those with high trust become less likely to participate when they are induced to feel anxiety. In our discussion, we posit that this is because citizens with low trust are responding to anxiety in line with a "fire alarm model" of politics; by participating in politics, they can remove government officials that they believe are incapable of ameliorating threats. Our findings have important implications for how we should expect citizens to behave when politics are dominated by threat and uncertainty.

## Emotion and Political Behavior

Emotions are complex phenomena, and scholars have long debated exactly how to characterize their role in psychology and neuroscience (Niedenthal and Ric, 2017; Russell, 2003). One of the more dominant approaches to the study of emotions is the "core affect" approach, illustrated by Russel's circumplex model of emotions (Russell, 1980). In this model, scholars view emotions as affective states that can be defined by their valence (positive or negative) and intensity/activation (Niedenthal, 2007; Russell, 1980, 2003). The combination of valence and intensity can then be interpreted by humans as emotions such as happy, sad, angry, or anxious. These emotional states can in turn affect the way in which an individual engages with their political environment (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Brader, 2006; Folkman et al., 1986; Ladd and Lenz, 2008; Valentino et al., 2011). For example, a person feeling higher levels of overall anxiety might seek out more, and different, information in order to

assuage fears generated by uncertainty (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015).

But emotions can also operate through "emotional episodes" or via a cognitive-appraisal process (Folkman et al., 1986; Russell and Barrett, 1999; Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Roseman, 2001; Russell, 2003; Roseman and Evdokas, 2004). In these instances, an external stimulus or object induces a change in an individual's core affective state. After this change occurs, individuals will make some cognitive appraisal of the object, and then will be motivated to take an action to respond to the stimulus. For example, the enactment of a policy might make some voters angry. If they view voting as the right sort of behavior to resolve this anger, they might become more likely to turn out to vote (e.g., Valentino et al., 2011; Valentino and Neuner, 2017).

Key to this understanding of the role of emotions is the determination of what an "overt behavior of the right sort" (Russell and Barrett, 1999, p. 806) might be. When experiencing a negative emotional state, individuals should take actions that will remove or resolve the source of the emotion. But how do individuals determine the right course of action to resolve or cope with their emotional state? This question has been largely ignored in the literature examining emotion's role in politics, and we argue that this oversight may be the reason for mixed or null findings about some emotions' role in politics.

## Anxiety and the Moderating Role of Political Trust

For this paper, we focus on anxiety as our negative emotional episode. Anxiety forms when an individual appraises a situation as being unpleasant, highly threatening and uncertain, or when the situation seems out of control (Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Roseman, 2001; Roseman and Evdokas, 2004). Most scholars have identified a common behavioral response to anxiety: information seeking (Brader, 2006; Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008; Clifford and Jerit, 2018). Gaining more information increases an individual's level of awareness about their

environment, and informs them about the best way to cope with the source of threat or uncertainty. Finally, anxiety will motivate individuals to seek safety, which takes the form of either a fight or flight response (Nabi, 1999; Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal, 2006; Halperin, Sharvit and Gross, 2011).

Because there is ambiguity about the right behavioral strategy to address anxiety (fight versus flight), studies seeking to examine anxiety's effect on political engagement might result in null findings if individuals engage in some combination of these two behaviors. To advance our understanding of anxiety's effects on politics, we need a better understanding of how individuals make the determination about the right course of action in the face of anxiety. One potential avenue for making these determinations is political trust.[1] We define political trust here as the degree to which people perceive the government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations (Cawvey et al., 2018; Hetherington et al., 2005; Rudolph and Evans, 2005). This can be thought of as an individual's running tally of how they believe the government is doing at a given time, although it may also be influenced by who is currently serving in government (Anderson and LoTempio, 2002; Citrin, 1974). Those with higher levels of political trust generally believe the government is performing as expected, whereas those with low levels of trust are skeptical of the government's ability to produce consistent outcomes.

For this reason, we argue that the presence of trust in political institutions is critical for anxiety to translate into democratic participation. Citizens must trust that governing institutions will be responsive to threats to public welfare. In the absence of this trust, "[d]isenchanted citizens may decide to withdraw from politics altogether" (van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017, 1). Thus, those with low levels of trust in government should be less likely to participate in politics when they experience a negative emotional episode. People with high

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[1]An alternative theory might revolve around external efficacy. Although we do not dispute that a modicum of efficacy is likely required as well, in the Appendix we demonstrate that efficacy has no effect on our analyses presented below.

trust, in contrast, should be more likely to participate, as they should be more likely to view government action as a possible resolution of the source of their anxiety.[2] This leads us to the following hypotheses[3]:

***H1*** - Anxiety will increase political participation for individuals with higher levels of political trust.

***H2*** - Anxiety will decrease political participation for individuals with lower levels of political trust.

# Data and methods

To test our hypotheses we use an original single factor survey experiment fielded on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in November of 2019 with a total sample size of $N = 404$. The survey began with basic demographic and political information. Consistent with research on the validity of MTurk as a data source (Clifford, Jewell and Waggoner, 2015), our sample is younger, better educated, more Democratic, and has more men than a representative sample (see Appendix for demographic information). To avoid post-treatment bias in measures of political trust (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015), subjects next completed a question asking "How much trust do you have in the following [institutions]?" This question measured trust towards: your representative in Washington, Congress, the White House, courts, police, politicians, and political parties. Each item has a 0-10 response scale that we re-scaled and combined into a 0-1 index of political trust by averaging across these seven items. We also asked two external efficacy items (reported on in the Appendix).

Following norms in the literature (e.g., Albertson and Gadarian, 2015, 2016; Lerner and

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[2]This is consistent with research by Albertson and Gadarian (2015) that finds that the actors individuals turn to when feeling anxious are different. In general, people turn to trusted actors that they believe have the expertise to alleviate threat. In the context of a pandemic, for example, we should expect people to turn to doctors and medical experts to reduce anxiety, rather than less trusted actors like Congress.

[3]These hypotheses were pre-registered with the Open Science Foundation at `https://osf.io/nbdjz/?view_only=11215afb2a4b4994bc8a7b1b8c07b95a`

Keltner, 2001; Valentino et al., 2011), we then employ an emotion-induction task to stimulate anxiety among subjects. Because levels of political trust are near historic lows (Pew, 2019), we used block randomization on levels of trust (cut at the midpoint of our scale) to ensure that we have sufficient numbers of high- and low-trust subjects in treatment and control.[4] To minimize state-based anxiety, subjects in our control condition were asked to "take a moment to think about something that recently made you feel relaxed. Please describe how you felt as vividly and in as much detail as possible." Subjects in our treatment condition were instead asked to write about a political issue. They were asked 'We'd like you to take a moment to think about [participant chosen issue]. When you think about [issue], what makes you worried? Please describe how you feel as vividly and in as much detail as possible."[5] This emotion-induction task successfully increased average levels of reported anxiety – average anxiety was 0.34 in our control condition and 0.46 in our treatment condition ($p < 0.001$). More information on this manipulation check can be found in the Appendix.

To measure political participation, immediately following the bottom up manipulation we asked participants about their willingness to vote, donate to a campaign, or attend some form of a political meeting in the future. Participants were given five options ranging from "Definitely not" to "Definitely yes." Each item was rescaled from 0-1, and we created a political participation index by taking an average across these three forms of participation.

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[4]Our block randomization was successful. Average levels of political trust in the treatment and control conditions were 0.43 and 0.44 on a 0-1 scale, respectively

[5]To select a political issue, subjects were previously asked to identify the most important problem facing this country from: the environment, terrorism, immigration, crime, and the economy. In keeping with recommendations to use an emotional manipulation "with an eye toward the political circumstances that it covers and what it does not" (Albertson and Gadarian, 2016, 486), we wanted to induce anxiety around an issue that was both salient to the respondent and where government action is a potentially viable source of resolution to that anxiety.

# Results

We present our results in Table 1. Model 1 presents the results of a simple linear regression of our treatment condition on prospective political participation. Consistent with previous research demonstrating a minimal effect of anxiety on participation, we find a null effect for our anxiety inducement task ($p = 0.67$). Model 2 shows the main effect of political trust on participation. Although it was not one of our hypotheses, there is a strong and unsurprising positive relationship between levels of political trust and self-reported willingness to participate in politics.

Model 3 presents our main empirical contribution. This model interacts our anxiety-induction treatment with our predicted moderating variable, political trust. In this model, we now see significant main effects for both our anxiety-induction treatment as well as political trust. The anxiety-induction task increases willingness to participate by 0.12 on our 0-1 scale ($p = 0.02$), and we see an even stronger positive effect for political trust ($p < 0.001$). What is most interesting, however, is our interaction term. The effect of our anxiety-induction treatment actually *decreases* as levels of political trust increase. This relationship is substantively strong (roughly half the size of the main effect of political trust) and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), but runs in the opposite direction of our proposed hypotheses H1 and H2.

To get a better sense of the moderating effect of political trust on the link between anxiety and participation, we plot the conditional treatment effects in Figure 1. In this figure, the x-axis presents our index of political trust across seven institutions, and the y-axis is the estimated treatment effect at that level of trust (a histogram of levels of political trust is presented at the bottom of the figure). As we can see, there is a clear negative relationship between political trust and the effect of anxiety. At lower levels of political trust, the induction of anxiety actually promotes participation. For example, the estimated

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Table 1: Effect of anxiety induction and trust on future participation

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| (Intercept) | 0.61*** | 0.41*** | 0.34*** |
| | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| Treatment | −0.01 | | 0.12* |
| | (0.03) | | (0.05) |
| Trust | | 0.45*** | 0.59*** |
| | | (0.05) | (0.08) |
| Treatment×Trust | | | −0.29** |
| | | | (0.11) |
| $N$ | 403 | 403 | 403 |
| $R^2$ | 0.00 | 0.15 | 0.17 |
| adj. $R^2$ | −0.00 | 0.15 | 0.16 |
| Resid. sd | 0.25 | 0.23 | 0.23 |

Standard errors in parentheses

[†] significant at $p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

effect of our treatment on a person reporting the lowest level of trust in our data (0) would be an increase in our political participation index from 0.34 to 0.47. In comparison, the estimated effect of our treatment on someone with our highest observed level of trust (0.90) would be a decrease in participation from 0.88 to 0.74. Recall that our political participation index combines self-reported willingness to vote, donate to a campaign, or attend a political meeting or rally, each measured on a 5-point scale. These estimated conditional treatment effects, then, correspond to a change in roughly two categories (e.g., from "definitely plan to vote" to "might or might not vote") in one of the constituent parts of our index.

## Discussion and alternative explanations

Our experiment presents clear evidence for the moderating effect of political trust on the relationship between anxiety and future participation. This effect is both statistically significant and substantively meaningful. The direction of effect, however, runs directly counter to our stated hypotheses. Those with higher levels of political trust appear to be demobilized
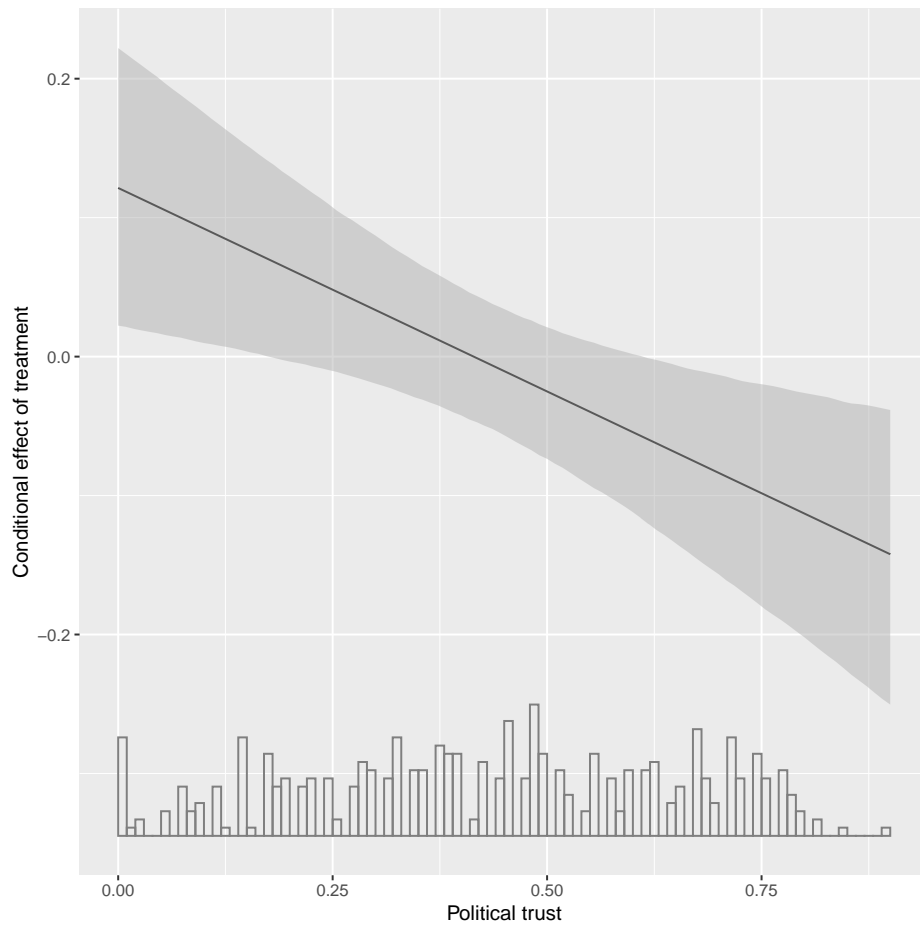
Figure 1: Effect of anxiety on participation across levels of trust

by our anxiety-induction task, whereas those with lower levels of political trust are more likely to participate.

Although this result is counter to our pre-registered expectations, it may still make substantive sense. Our theoretical expectations were derived from the belief that trust is linked to participation via a virtuous cycle; high trust promotes initial engagement, and engaging successfully in democratic governance further boosts trust. What we find, however, might be more akin to a "fire alarm model" of participation. Those with the lowest levels of trust in existing government institutions may be pushed to participate due to a belief that the current government is fundamentally unable to ameliorate threats. As a result, those individuals should wish to participate to "throw the rascals out." For those with high trust, on the other hand, a state of anxiety might disrupt the expected virtuous cycle by leading them to feel that government might not be as effective as previously thought.

The context of contemporary politics may reveal this very dynamic. The course of 2020 has created a tremendous amount of anxiety in citizens across the globe. Nowhere is this clearer than with a pandemic raging throughout the United States, uncontrolled by government (in)action.[6] In this context of heightened anxiety coupled with low perceptions of government competence in handling the COVID-19 crisis, we have actually seen higher-than-expected turnout in Democratic primary elections throughout 2020, despite the potential dangers of in-person voting during a pandemic. This suggests that, at least in times of crisis, anxiety may actually stimulate participation among those who would otherwise be politically disengaged.

Still, our results present tremendous opportunity for future research. Beyond testing this post-hoc explanation of our findings, future research could examine a broader array of political participation. Our measures focus exclusively on electoral participation. It is

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[6]Coincidentally, pre-tests of alternative anxiety-induction tasks we conducted in June, 2020 show extraordinarily high levels of anxiety even in our control condition. One survey respondent wrote about a recent experience that made him/her feel relaxed by writing "when i got tested for covid and it came out negative."

entirely possible that the "fight" response generated by anxiety might take the form of nontraditional participation, including the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests, Women's Marches, or the MeToo Movement. In addition, we have restricted our analysis to one likely moderator of emotion's impact on politics: political trust. There is good reason to believe that many more individual differences might condition the relationship between emotions and political behavior. For example, Phoenix (2019) argues that the role of anger in politics is vastly different for Black Americans versus whites. By beginning to unpack the heterogeneous effects of emotions on politics across individuals, we believe we can better understand how our fundamental emotional systems structure our behavior as democratic citizens.

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