

Anger Mediates the Effects of Fear on Support for the Far Right—A Rejoinder

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We are grateful to John Jost for carefully engaging with our work and presenting a different interpretation of our findings on the effects of fear and anger stemming from the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks on the propensity to vote for the far right. Jost advances a model that holds that anger mediates the effect of fear on support for the far right. In this rejoinder, we respond to the issues he raises regarding our model specification, consider his alternative suggestion, and offer some conclusions about how to resolve this debate empirically. We hope this exchange advances the literature on the impact of various societal threats on voting for the far right.

KEY WORDS: anger, authoritarianism, emotion, fear, right-wing extremism, terrorism

The recent surge in popularity of authoritarian leaders and parties across a number of countries poses a fundamental challenge to civil rights, liberties, and international cooperation. The trend has spurred widespread debate in the social sciences about the psychological mechanisms that lead citizens to endorse such risky and potentially antidemocratic politics. In the field of political psychology, a large stream of research has argued that the experience of negative emotions—especially fear—as a result of real or perceived threats are the main culprit (Jost, Stern, Rule, & Sterling, 2017).

In our article (Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault, 2019), we attempted to explore the affective substrates of support for the far right. We used the occasion of the deadly November 13, 2015, Paris attacks to investigate the distinct impact of popular fear versus anger on the propensity to vote for the far right Front National (FN) in the 2015 French Regional elections that took place three weeks after the events. Our results showed that anger boosted, while fear weakened, the propensity to vote for the far right. Further, we found that anger augmented the role of authoritarianism and right-wing political orientations on voting for the far right, while fear inhibited this same relationship. We

hope that disentangling the effects of fear and anger on support for far-right parties offers a fuller account of the psychological motivations behind the rise of the far right around the world.

We are pleased that John Jost, a valued colleague with a very important contribution in the field of political psychology, has taken an interest in our work and offered an alternative interpretation of our findings (Jost, 2019). Jost's interpretation rests on two arguments. First, he shows results that suggest that when anger is omitted from the analysis, fear is positively associated with voting for the FN. We reported that same result in an attempt to highlight the need to include measures of both fear and anger when investigating the emotional substrates of far-right voters. Jost argues that the proper causal model is one in which fear precedes and therefore causes anger, and anger then boosts support for the far right. To test his hypothesis, he presents a path analysis where anger and authoritarianism simultaneously mediate the effect of fear on vote choice. This causal model produces path estimates that are plausible, but, as we elaborate below, we think our own causal interpretation is more likely.

Even though we disagree with some of Jost's conclusions, his response is valuable, and we hope that our exchange will spur further inquiry into the psychological mechanisms underlying support for the far right. We next respond to the points he raises regarding our model specification, his alternative, and our conclusions about what to do next to resolve the disagreement empirically.

Claims About Our Model Specification

Jost says we consider only two emotional reactions to the threat created by the Paris attacks (anger and fear) although he notes we also take into account enthusiasm. He writes: "They do not adjust for other emotions, only anger (except for a supplementary analysis in which they adjusted for enthusiasm, according to footnote 3), although the research literature in political psychology would suggest that several other emotions—including hope, empathy, guilt, disgust, happiness, and sadness."

Actually, we did measure the extent to which respondents felt *anxious*, *frightened*, *scared*, *bitter*, *resentful*, *hateful*, and *angry* after the Paris attacks. Our theory posits that there are three emotional dimensions, each with distinct political causes and consequences: anger, fear, and enthusiasm. Previous work finds that anger, bitterness, hatred, and resentment together form one emotional appraisal dimension we label Anger, while fear, scared, and worried tap a second emotional appraisal dimension: Fear (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019, pp. 20–21). Therefore, we built additive indexes of each emotional dimension based on these sets of items. Our results also hold when we control for a third emotional dimension—Enthusiasm—consisting of the emotional terms *hopeful*, *proud*, and *enthusiastic*. In sum, while we do not explicitly measure empathy, guilt, or disgust, our measures do include many of the items Jost mentions. We simply do not find that any of the 10 have independent effects in our model beyond their service as components defining the three latent factors, Fear, Anger, and Enthusiasm.

Theoretical Claims

In the path model that anchors Jost's analysis lie two theoretical claims that we find implausible. First, that anger is caused by fear. We hold that anger constitutes an independent emotional appraisal, triggered by different dimensions of threat. As with all survey indicators of psychological phenomena, these two emotions—fear and anger—are measured with error. We think it is likely that these errors are correlated because they are measured similarly and simultaneously and because of the negative tone of both words.¹ As a result, it is critical to control for each when examining the impact

¹But as we note in the article (fn. 11), the Variance Inflation Factor score (1.23) suggests that despite the correlation between fear and anger, multicollinearity is not an issue in our analysis.

of the other. Only then will the independent effects of each emotional reaction on support for the FN become clear.

Second, Jost claims that authoritarianism, a long-term psychological disposition, mediates the effect of fear on vote choice and other political judgments. This also seems implausible because it is unlikely that a short-term threat can substantially alter a long-term psychological disposition. Instead, we suspect that the influence of authoritarianism is moderated by anger—the impact of the former increases as anger increases, but authoritarianism is relatively stable over time within the individual.

We are aware of two major theories regarding the formation of emotions. The first is actually a collection of ideas often referred to as cognitive appraisal theory (CAT). CAT posits that distinct emotional reactions are evoked by different appraisals of the environment by an individual. Specifically, several studies that employ the CAT framework argue that fear is evoked under uncertainty when facing threatening stimuli, when one perceives a threatening stimulus as unfamiliar, and when one lacks the means to effectively deal with the threat (Lazarus, 1991; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Unlike fear, anger is evoked under conditions of certainty and specifically when one perceives goals intentionally obstructed but also possesses resources sufficient for dealing with the threat (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Lazarus, 1991; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Consequentially, it seems to us less plausible that fear *causes* anger, but rather that the two are evoked by distinct appraisals of one's environment.

The second major group of theories on emotion formation comes from neuroscience. The insights from this literature also do not align well with the argument that fear causally precedes anger. Research shows that ascertaining whether the environment is certain and familiar or not is executed rapidly as a focused assessment of that feature of the environment (Adolphs, 2008; Adolphs, Tranel, Damasio, & Damasio, 1995; LeDoux, 1996). And, similarly identifying the presence of noxious threats, generating anger is also a rapid ongoing process with a near identical onset to fear (Maratos, Senior, Mogg, Bradley, & Rippon, 2012). These appraisals function in parallel and are generated before consciousness, subsequently entering into the complex cascade of neural processing that we might eventually become “aware of” in the sense that most would describe as consciousness (Brosch & Sander, 2013; Shenhav & Buckner, 2014). To summarize, neither of the two most prominent theoretical approaches on the formation of emotions render it likely that fear is a necessary causal antecedent for anger.

Then there is the treatment of authoritarianism as a consequence of fear triggered by the Paris attacks of November 13, 2015. Extant literature offers different conceptualizations of authoritarianism, as either a “personality characteristic,” a “disposition,” a “political orientation,” or a “worldview.” Regardless of these distinctions, scholarship sees authoritarianism as a relatively stable individual difference whose origins are either innate or grounded in some socialization process early in life (Feldman, 2003; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, 2018; Stenner, 2005; Vasilopoulos & Lachat, 2018). On the other hand, emotions are swift contemporaneous appraisals of the external environment. Some of Jost's work does indeed suggest that experiencing strong threat may affect long-term dispositions (e.g., Bonanno & Jost, 2006). Thus, it is plausible that an external shock may have a lasting impact on a psychological disposition, though such an effect would be quite rare given authoritarianism's stability. Jost's argument implies that we should place instantaneous appraisals on the right-hand side of an equation predicting authoritarianism, considering them causally prior to long-term psychological characteristics. Such a sequence is theoretically unlikely, and our data are not up to testing it, since we ask about authoritarianism and emotional reactions in the same survey and without any causal leverage in the design. So while we cannot rule out such an effect, we disagree with Jost about this interpretation. In order to resolve our disagreement, we need a different design, perhaps one that would include measures of authoritarianism both before and after the attacks.

Empirical Claims

Jost presents three sets of results: (1) a bivariate analysis that shows that fear is positively correlated with anger, right-wing orientation, and authoritarianism; (2) the results of a model that includes only fear and not anger (which was generated on the basis of Table 1 in Vasilopoulos et al., 2019); and (3) a path model where fear predicts voting for the FN directly and indirectly through anger and authoritarianism. The fact that fear and anger run higher among authoritarians and conservatives in our data and in many other studies is not in dispute. Our focus is rather how, once evoked, these two negative emotions are differentially associated with the propensity to vote for the far right.

As Jost notes, a model that omits anger shows a positive association between fear and voting for the FN. This leads him to the conclusion that “overall, the effect of fear on support for the Far Right is indeed positive, as previous work would suggest, rather than negative, as suggested by Vasilopoulos et al. (2019)” (Jost, 2019). We respectfully disagree with this conclusion. As fear and anger are correlated, a multivariate model (rather than bivariate correlations) is best suited to identify the affective mechanisms that motivate voters to support the far right.

Even if we accept that fear causes anger as Jost suggests, his results illustrate that, unless it subsequently causes anger, unmediated fear is negatively associated with voting for the far right. The path values in his model indicate the direct effect of fear *decreases* support (−.06 in his model) and anger *increases* support (.23 in his model). It is not easy for us to reconcile these findings with a strong claim about the direct positive effect of fear on FN support. Anger is not simply “suppressing” the effect of fear if fear switches signs when we include both in the model.

Overall Commentary

We recognize that testing causal theoretical assertions with observational data is fraught. This is especially true in a one-shot survey. Experiments can often help us, but only if the independent variable can be directly manipulated and randomly assigned to respondents, though of course no single experiment is conclusive. A large set of experimental studies has confirmed some of our claims. When emotions are manipulated directly and randomly assigned in an induction task, fear renders predispositions *less* consequential and increases attention to contemporary information, while anger *boosts* the impact of extant dispositions mobilizing individuals to political action (Banks, 2014; Banks & Valentino, 2012; Brader, 2005, 2006; Lambert, Eadeh, & Hanson, 2019; MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Stevens, 2005; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009). Though the dependent variables in these experiments vary, the theoretical assertions specific to the roles of fear and anger are similar to those we report. More pertinent is a recent experiment by Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno (2018) that shows that anger boosted while fear decreased the impact of sexism on voting for Trump compared to a control group. That said, we need additional experimental evidence showing direct, mediating, and moderating effects of fear and anger on the propensity to vote for authoritarian leaders and parties. The combination of experiments that allow better causal inference, with survey data, and that offer high external validity can help us move forward significantly in discovering the affective mechanisms that may move citizens to the arms of authoritarian leaders around the globe.

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