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# "Emotions, Media and Political Campaign" by Professor Ann Crigler

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- 1 Ann Crigler, Professor of Political Science and Chair at the University of Southern California's Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, came to Paris VIII's LabTop final 2010/2011 seminar on June 27, 2011, for a lecture entitled "Emotions, Media and Political Campaign". She started out by insisting that the sum of the data and original findings she was presenting us with was a collaborative piece. Professor Crigler, two of her colleagues (Matthew Baum, from Harvard University and Marion Just, from Wellesley College) and three of her students (Parker Hevron, Jesse Mills and Jenna Spatz, all from the University of Southern California) worked together on this project. Professor Crigler divided her talk into three parts. First, she set out to stress the role and function that emotions play in political campaigns. Then, she described the experimental study that she, her colleagues and students devised. Finally, she mentioned the implications of the findings for further studies.
- 2 To stress the role that emotions play in political campaigns, Dr. Crigler started out by showing five political ads, all of which contained some degree of emotional appeal. The first was Kennedy's "jingle ad", which was aired during the 1960 presidential election campaign in the United States. The original version was three minutes long, but the one we were shown was edited down to one minute. The most striking features of this ad are its upbeat music, its jingle-like chorus which repeats the word Kennedy no less than 12 times (which, Ann Crigler confessed, you could not get out of your head for days once you heard it), its lyrical *naïveté* ("do you want a man for President [...] who's old enough to know and young enough to do, well it's up to you, it's up to you, it's strictly up to you.") but also the black and white still pictures which portray a myriad of Very Important Persons in the Democratic camp at the time, a variety of men and women of all races, ages and walks of life, and finally a very reassuring picture of John F. Kennedy as family man with his wife Jacqueline and daughter Caroline.

- 3 The optimistic tone of the "Kennedy jingle ad" contrasts with Hubert Humphrey's 1968 "Laughing at Spiro T. Agnew" commercial, which relies on negative campaigning. In this ad, all you can hear is a man's laughter which intensifies as the ad unfolds. The picture presents us with a television set. First, you just see the dials. Then little by little, you discover what's on the screen. It reads "Agnew for Vice-President?" The ad closes with the following phrase: "this would be funny if it weren't so serious..." At this point, the voiceover literally strangles himself with laughter. This kind of negative campaigning was used time and again in the presidential race, notably in 1988 when Dan Quayle ran for Vice-President.
- 4 Reagan's 1984 "It's Morning Again in America" political ad is yet of a different genre. It opens with a sunrise over a harbor, a fishing boat in the foreground and a skyline in the background. The baritone voice over is reassuring, and so is the message: "today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history," "families today [...] buy new homes," "look forward with confidence to the future." All this, the ad seems to suggest, can only be attributed to "the leadership of President Reagan," who made the country "prouder, and stronger, and better." Images of the capitol and of the stars and stripes being flown at full mast reinforce the emotive patriotism present all throughout the commercial.
- 5 The next ad was said to be so controversial at the time that it was only showed once and then pulled. Lyndon B Johnson's 1964 "Daisy" ad portrays a little girl with a daisy in her hand, trying to count to ten by picking the petals. Once she's through (although her command of numbers is still somewhat hesitant), the camera zooms in on her left iris while a man's voice starts a countdown. When the countdown reaches zero, her eye is replaced by a flash and a nuclear mushroom cloud. The voiceover then switches to a remark by Republican candidate (Senator) Barry Goldwater about the possibility of using the nuclear bomb in Vietnam. This ad was meant to inflict damage to the Goldwater camp, and it did.
- 6 Professor Crigler then showed us Reagan's 1984 "Bear in the Wood" ad. This commercial features a brown bear erring in the wood. A voiceover suggests that the bear could be dangerous. In the final scene, a man appears and the bear takes a step back. The ad ends with a picture of Reagan and the slogan-like phrase: "President Reagan: Prepared for Peace." Professor Crigler mentioned that, at the time, few Americans understood that the bear symbolized the Soviet Union. In fact, many mistook the commercial for a National Rifle Association ad.
- 7 The final political commercial we were shown was the "Willie Horton" ad for the Bush campaign in 1988. It reminds the audience that Bush supports the death penalty while his Democratic opponent "allows week-end passes for murderers." The commercial held Michael Dukakis responsible for a criminal's repeated assaults, armed robbery and rape, thus making him appear soft on crime. The racial connotation of the ad is also something to be mentioned.
- 8 According to Ann Crigler, all these ads are a reminder that emotions play a role in how people understand politics. Professor Crigler then explained what the four functions of emotions (expressive, perceptual, appraisal and behavioral) in political campaigns are. Then, she mentioned how past studies were sometimes over-simplistic: although Aristotle opposed emotions of the audience (*pathos*) and patterns of reasoning (*logos*), recent studies show that the rational and the emotional often overlap. In fact, emotions are sometimes rationalized to the point where they are integral in the way

argumentation is developed. Moreover, past research often treated emotions as a single, isolated phenomenon whereas we now know that context matters. What we know little about is how these emotions work on inter-groups.

- 9 This led Professor Crigler to her second point, namely the experiment she conducted with her colleagues and students to address a gap in the current literature. The experiment is based on Eliot Smith and Diane Mackie's Intergroup Emotions Theory. Smith & Mackie stress that emotions are felt on behalf of groups as well as individually, and that different emotions are associated with particular behavioral tendencies. Moreover, there can be unique group "profiles" of emotional tendencies. Based on this theory, which is particularly relevant to elections since political events and ads are largely only indirectly experienced by the public, Crigler *et al* prove that Democrats and Republicans do not respond to the presidential race in the same way: their profiles of emotional tendencies are different. A more detailed analysis shows that when a candidate is ahead or behind in the race for the nomination, reports have a significant impact on the public's favorability toward candidates. This, of course, influences independent voters much more than those who usually follow party lines. The case study used to prove this was the 2008 Obama vs. McCain run-up, in which the Democrats were in a more favorable position than the Republicans. Crigler *et al* had hypothesized that Republicans would respond with anger when they felt they were behind in the race, whereas Democrats would respond with fear in the same scenario. What they found was that Republicans prefer negative messages and that Democrats prefer positive messages.
- 10 Professor Crigler's last point was the closing remarks which addressed findings for future research. She mentioned that emotions are conceived at the individual level, but the aforementioned experiment shows that group identity matters, and that partisanship is group-centric. She stated that the experiment showed that while one group reacted with fear, the other felt anger, and that Republicans were reassured when their candidates attacked, whereas Democrats felt their candidate was out-of-synch with his personality when he did so. All in all, even if this research calls out for more comparative work, Dr. Crigler feels that campaign strategists should pay more attention to group identity.
- 11 A discussion initiated by five detailed questions from respondent Bleuwenn Lechaux (IEP Rennes) ensued.
- 12 The first question dealt with the status of emotions, and with methodological tools for attesting their presence, namely: are there appropriate ways of capturing emotions? The analysis of emotions through objects and through emotionally-charged communication campaigns enables the perception of certain emotions. Campaigners use specific Republican or Democrat symbols that condensate emotions, but they also try to appropriate certain symbols, such as the flag, for instance. So, methodologically, one can study how these actors seek to elicit certain emotions. However, when observing the effects, the emotions supposedly elicited are not necessarily those which are actually felt, nor is the message systematically understood (see for instance Reagan's "Bear in the Woods" ad). In order to grasp these dissonances, one might seek to explore the collective verbalization of emotions, between groups sharing social affinities or not, with a focus group for instance, because political behaviors and emotions are—as Dr. Crigler mentioned—built in relation with each other.

- 13 The second question was about the role of previous political allegiances. In her text, Professor Crigler mentioned the expressive, perceptual/attentional, appraisal and behavioral functions of emotions. Can these functions be compared with each other and is there a hierarchy between them? For instance, it seems that the appraisal function is really prevailing, insofar as not only do prior political beliefs guide the way one feels towards candidates, but it also seems that we select what we see depending on the emotions that we expect to feel, given these political allegiances. There is a concrete relation between emotion and cognition, between emotion and political beliefs. The question was whether emotional effect was more important to wavering voters than to partisans, insofar as Dr. Crigler's and her colleagues' analysis of partisans in the general election showed that the horserace messages did not affect partisans *per se*.<sup>1</sup>
- 14 The third question dealt with the relational dimension of emotions. There is indeed a relation between emotions within a group and its perception of power. In the book *The Affect Effect*, Ann Crigler and her colleagues mentioned that appraisal of hope was associated with uncertainty, and developed in a compensatory process, i.e. feeling both hope for a candidate and anger for another.<sup>2</sup> In the study that she presented during the seminar, Professor Crigler showed that there was a feeling of anger when the in-group was perceived as strong, and a feeling of fear when the in-group was perceived as weak. Analogically, it seems that these two emotions, anger and fear, have various effects in terms of action. This led to two questions. Firstly, Ann Crigler showed that when a group was in a position of strength, as was the case for the Democrats in 2008, they were more likely to feel anger rather than fear when confronting in-group threats. Similarly, in a book dealing with contentious politics, Deborah Gould explored how Act Up members dared to take action precisely when they changed their fear for anger, and how anger was linked to pride.<sup>3</sup> So, are there potentially and effectively mobilizing emotions? James Jasper showed that compassion and pity, through which "one can imagine the plight of others and develop a desire to help them", could elicit support for a cause or a group. He showed that enthusiasm and pride were positive emotions that leaders of mobilizations tried to elicit, and that fear could "paralyze but also be developed into outrage".<sup>4</sup> Nancy Whittier also showed that "some emotions are more intelligible and more likely to promote movement goals or gain support, while others are incomprehensible, unsympathetic, or invisible".<sup>5</sup> The other question is that if fear reinforces weakness and anger reinforces strength, one could think of them as respectively a vicious and virtuous circle. But there may be emotional changes: when does fear switch to anger (or *vice versa*)? If it does, which campaign elements can it be attributed to? Position in the polls and the moments when candidates are threatened by campaign advertising were two answers given by Dr. Crigler.
- 15 The fourth question was about the political division of emotions. In her text, Professor Crigler made a fascinating differentiation between "Democrat" and "Republican" emotions. She mentioned George Lakoff,<sup>6</sup> who has identified core differences between the moral systems underlying liberalism and conservatism and claimed that conservative morality resembled a "strict father" while liberal morality resembled a "nurturing parent". In that regard, emotions do not have an effect *per se*, but these effects depend on whom you address. In that perspective we have to characterize differentiated emotional strategies, which depend on the public they are addressing. As was shown by Jasper:

the process by which protestors appeal to others—either decision makers or potential allies and supporters—necessarily involves language, meanings, and resonance. They must persuade their allies of a common purpose. They must inspire outrage in potential contributors. They must speak a language that decision makers understand. These interactions involve resources and strategy permeated with emotions and meanings.<sup>7</sup>

- 16 Ann Crigler mentioned Ansolabehere's and Iyengar's work<sup>8</sup>. These authors found that Republicans were much more receptive to anger appeals and may feel more anger than Democrats during an election campaign. At the same time, if we transpose this question to the perception of collective action, anger is really associated with leftist demonstrators. Researchers argue that anger traits, as well as other negative emotions, are correlated with political conservatism across cultures. Is there a politically divided use of emotion? Dr. Crigler mentioned that George W. Bush used fear after 9/11 and Obama used hope. So, briefly said, is hope to be associated with the Democrats, and fear with the conservative mindset? Moreover, if we consider that campaigners try to convert the undecided, do campaign strategies also consist in comforting or switching the emotional strategies, for instance, appearing as a strict father to the Democrats, and appearing compassionate for the Republicans?
- 17 The last question broached the idea of emotions in context. Certain emotions are embedded in the specific U.S. context. Reagan's "Morning in America" ad is permeated with hope and with a "feel-good factor." This boils down to asking questions on the generalization of certain types of emotions during the election campaign. For one thing, is there a compensatory relation between hope and fear? For another, given the hope that Obama represents, some voters were unable to imagine anger in his discourses. But is this not linked to the specificity of US campaigns?

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## NOTES

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