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Can Contempt Cost You an Election?

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Geyer, Megan, "Can Contempt Cost You an Election?" (2011). *Honors Capstones*. 261.
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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Can Contempt Cost You an Election?

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With University Honors

Department of

Psychology and Political Science

By

Megan Geyer

DeKalb, Illinois

14 May 2011

University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone Title: (print or type):

Can Contempt Cost You an Election?

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Department of (print or type): Psychology and Political Science

Date of Approval (print or type): 5/13/11

Abstract

Are politicians who show contempt less likely to attract support from voters? In this project we tested this question using a laboratory experiment. 37 students were recruited from undergraduate courses at NIU. Participants viewed video clips of politicians (both signaling contempt and more neutral emotions), respond to a number of survey questions. The emotions signaled in the stimulus videos were FACS coded. Although statistical significance was not achieved, the results were in the hypothesized direction, indicating that politicians were perceived more negatively when contemptuous compared to when facially neutral.

Can Contempt Cost You an Election?

Previous research suggests that people are less likely to support politicians who appear power-hungry, ambitious, or self-interested (Larimer, Hannagan, & Smith 2007). This research does not, however, consider the mechanism by which voters are cued to the self-serving motives of the politician. The emotional expressions of a political candidate may be important in a voter's assessment of motivation. Contempt may be critical in signaling candidates' perceptions of self-interestedness, overt ambition for power, and likelihood of abusing the position of authority. Contempt is a hierarchical emotion, one that asserts the dominance of the expresser and the unworthiness of the receiving object (Ekman, 2007; Haidt, 2003). Thus, it may be that this emotion, when signaled by a politician, is what voters are picking up on and using in making their assessments on whether or not to support that politician. I hypothesize that contemptuous politicians will be viewed more negatively by citizens than their political competitors who do not signal contempt.

Boehm (1999) states that egalitarian societies are able to exist because of antihierarchical feelings. Tradtitionally, political systems have been conceptualized as having three major components, the one (Prince) who is in power, the few upper class politically ambitious individuals (nobility), and those with no political ambition (common people) (Machiavelli, 1515). Boehm's (1999) argument is that the common people avoid being exploited by vigilantly keeping the alpha type group members "under their collective thumbs" (p. 11). The common people can act in a unified way to decisively deal with individuals who threaten their autonomy. In this way, humans have a propensity to elevate leaders perceived to be unambitious with the hope that these individuals will be less likely to abuse their power. This creates an "anti-hierarchy hierarchy," (Boehm, 1999, p. 12). This behavior can be observed during political

revolutions throughout history, and has even been observed in chimpanzee behavior (DeWaal, 2007).

Contempt signals a self-perceived high status of the expresser compared to the receiver, and creates a very clear hierarchy between people. Because of this, I posit that individuals perceiving contempt in another will associate the expression of contempt with an increased likelihood of the expresser to abuse power. In this way, I predict a negative relationship between support of a political candidate and the extent to which they express contempt. It is important to note that the expression of this emotion, or any other emotion, can be entirely involuntary. Further, the perception of contempt by another may be completely unconscious. Though it is experienced and impacts an overall assessment of the person signaling contempt, it may remain completely under the radar of consciousness of both the expresser and perceiver of the emotion.

Contempt is one of the most understudied emotions. Although it has been found to have a universal facial expression and recognition, contempt has been largely left untouched in the literature (Haidt, 2003; Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004). One of the few studies on contempt was conducted by marriage researcher John Gottman. Gottman's (1994) work identified contempt as one of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" along with criticism, defensives, and stonewalling. Each of these variables correlates with future divorce in a marriage. Inasmuch as voters pick up on cues from politicians to discern likelihood of behavior once in office, the dialog of Gottman's married couples provide a model for why contempt is likely to be so detrimental for any kind of interpersonal interaction.

In his studies, Gottman brought married couples to his lab and have them discuss a topic about their marriage. He would then use the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) to code affective aspects of the couple's interaction. SPAFF describes facial expression according to

EMFACS while additionally describing verbal content, voice tone, context, gestures and body movement. He found that wives in nonregulated marriages showed greater disgust and contempt than wives in regulated marriages. Nonregulated marriages were classified as such due to partners displaying more negative than positive Rapid Couples Interaction Scoring System (RCISS) codes. Contempt in husbands correlated with divorce, $r = .23, p < .10$; and contempt in wives correlated with divorce, $r = .32, p < .01$.

According to Ekman (1994), emotions – in contrast to feelings or moods – are quite short lived ranging in duration from a few seconds to a few minutes. In contrast, moods can last hours or days. Ekman (1994) created a list of characteristics that all emotions must have in order to be described as an emotion: "Autonomic appraisal, commonalities in antecedent events, presence in other primates, quick onset, brief duration, unbidden occurrence and distinctive physiology" (p. 18). There are distinctive neural patterns of autonomic nervous system activity for anger, fear and disgust and may be some for sadness (Ekman, 1994).

Cabanac supported the idea that "the first mental event to emerge into consciousness was the ability to experience the sensations of pain and pleasure," (Bekoff, 2002, p. 108). The foundations of human emotion are the feelings of pain and pleasure, but through increased cognitive capacity, humans can better pinpoint more distinctions between emotions of a similar "family." For instance, humans can discern jealousy from sadness and anger, even though elements of both anger and sadness may be present in jealously. Experiencing emotions with precision contributes to fitness because a deeper perception of emotion allows more precision in response to the emotion.

One of the factors that expands emotional depth and range in humans is the capacity to mentally time travel. This ability allows humans to anticipate emotional outcomes. This is no

less the case in political decision making than in interpersonal contexts such as familial relations and workplace interactions. This anticipation of emotional outcomes leads to more effective decision making when compared to the more animal-like decision making in response to the present emotion. Baumeister, DeWall, and Zhang state that "choices that are aimed at increasing positive and decreasing negative future emotions will likely have beneficial effects" (Vohs, Baumeister, & Loewenstein, 2007, p. 23).

People make decisions largely upon what they already know. Gick and Holyoak (1980) found that increased prior knowledge increases the probability of a problem being solved by analogical reasoning and inferences (Galotti, 2008). Emotion is associated with increasing memory vividness (Heuer, 1992), and if emotion increases memory and more memory increases problem solving capabilities, then it would follow that a function of emotion is to assist in decision making. Some evolutionary problems such as who to entrust with power, who to distrust, whose advice to heed or ignore, who will look out for mutual interests had to be answered long before civilized governments. These answers needed to be known in order for an elementary tribe or band of humans to survive.

Accurately perceiving the intentions of others through the emotions they signal would have been advantageous to survival. As such, it is likely that humans have the ability to infer others' emotions largely due to the selection pressures of living in social groups. One might expect that there would be a sensitivity to the perception of contempt because of it hierarchical nature and because of the consequences associated with receiving contempt. Because of the contempt motivates the expresser to treat the receiver with less warmth and respect, receiving contempt often may put the object of contempt at an increased risk for social isolation, and possible denial of access to resources such as food and reproductive opportunities.

Contempt is the most subtle and coldest of the three hostility emotions (contempt, anger, disgust) because of the element of indifference felt towards the object (Rozin et al., 1999). In egalitarian societies, contempt can be an indicator that another person is not competent enough in his or her occupation or level of stature. In democratic societies, there can be upward contempt, which is contempt "of workers for bosses, of the working class for the upper class," etc. (Haidt, 2003). Contempt has been found to correlate with perceived violations to the ethics of community (Rozin et al., 1999). Ethic violations of community involve individuals failing to carry out their duties towards the community, disrespecting authority, dishonoring the group, or disloyalty.

In western cultures, anger is the most prototypical of the CAD (Contempt, Anger, Disgust) family, followed by disgust, and finally contempt (Haidt, 2003). Contempt falls between anger and disgust, but motivates different action tendencies. Anger is an attack motivator. Disgust motivates withdrawal. Contempt instead causes "social-cognitive changes such that the object of contempt will be treated with less warmth, respect, and consideration in future interactions" (Haidt, 2003). It is the difference in treating another person as an object, "it," rather than a person, "I" (Goleman, 2006). Contempt is often associated with an attempt to create a vertical social distance.

Contempt is a punishing emotion. Individuals will go great lengths to punish norm violators, punishing others at their own expense (Fehr & Fishbacher, 2004). When a person violates a norm, others have a greater tendency to believe that he or she is not one of "us." One is put at a disadvantage if his or her group thinks of them as an outsider. Correspondingly, people would increase social distance from that person, as that person is less of a reflection of an average group member, and as such, less of a representation of the "prototype" group members.

The farther the social distance between people corresponds with an increasing likelihood that they will not take care of each other (Shaw & Wong, 1989). Contempt is a way to signal this social distance.

Measuring Emotion

The Facial Action Coding System (FACS) is a well-established measure of facial movement that can code for contempt signaled by politicians (Ekman& Friesen, 1978).

Tomkins and McCarter (1964) found that observers could identify facial poses from photographs that were indicative of specific emotions (Ekman, Sorenson & Friesen, 1969) Although this landmark study indirectly suggested that facial expressions could be used to grasp information about internal emotion states, there was no adequate facial measurement system that could be used to study spontaneous facial expression. Electromyography was first utilized to the study of spontaneous facial expressions in the 1970s (Schwartz, Fair, Salt, Mandel & Klerman, 1976). Observational coding systems were developed shortly after, the most notable of them being the Facial Action Coding System (FACS; Ekman & Friesen, 1978).

The strength of the FACS coding system lies in its objectivity. Instead of researchers subjectively interpreting a face as "sad" or "happy" looking, researchers identify when action units are activated. Action units identify expressions on the face which can be caused by one muscle, an independent action of part of a muscle, and a combination of muscles. For example, AU 9 identifies a "nose wrinkle (levator labii superioris alaque nasi)" (Ekman & Friesen, 1978). There are 44 separate action units (Ekman & Rosenberg, 2005). The use of FACS also has several benefits over facial electromyography (EMG) which involves measuring electric potentials from facial muscles in order to measure muscular contractions. In order to use EMG, electrodes must be placed on the skin of the face of the participant (Ekman & Rosenberg, 2005).

Although EMG can collect data that is not visible to the naked eye, the advantages stop there. Because of the obvious placement of electrodes on the skin it makes the participant aware that their facial movements are being observed, which can be potentially confounding. Also there is the problem of cross talk which is when surrounding muscular contractions send out electrical signals that interfere with the signal of any given muscle group. This can lead to very different interpretations of the data (Ekman & Rosenberg, 2005).

There are two varieties of FACS, basic FACS and Emotion FACS (EMFACS). In FACS, researchers slow down video clips and record every action unit that they perceive. In EMFACS, the researcher codes in real time and only stops to code those action units and action unit combinations that are associated with emotion. EMFACS takes less time to code with and as stated, is a more selectively applied version of FACS. Because of the design of my experiment as explained in the next section, FACS was not required and instead EMFACS was utilized.

Method

Participants

There were 37 participants drawn from undergraduate political science classes. There were 24 females and 13 males. Both conditions were evenly split by gender, in the first condition there were 11 females and 6 males while in the second condition there were 13 females and 7 males. On a liberal-conservative scale, the participants over all were mostly leaning liberal, which is expected in a college student population. There were more conservatives in condition 2 than condition 1, but there is no reason to believe that this would affect the dependent variable. Religious attendance was bi-modal. Most people either went to church weekly or did not attend at all. Twenty-eight out of 37 participants indicated that they had voted in the previous election. Participants indicated that on average they discussed

politics often. This can expected from a population of college, political science students who may be on average, more engaged in politics than a random sample of adults. Party ideology was roughly correlated with political party and was again, leaning democratic.

Procedure

Using MediaLab research software, each participant viewed video clips of politicians signaling contempt and politicians not signaling contempt. The clips were of politicians unlikely to be recognized by the participants (i.e. not high level national officials and not from the State of Illinois). The clips were retrieved from www.youtube.com and http://www.c-spanvideo.org/videoLibrary/. They were each four seconds long and include a politician in a debate setting engaging in either contemptuous or non-contemptuous facial behavior. Before participants view the clips, they answered a set of questions to assess their likelihood of supporting the politicians as well as a number of demographics questions.

Contempt was operationalized according to the criteria of Paul Ekman's Emotional Facial Action Coding System (EMFACS). Contempt is identified by a unilateral 14 (dimpler) (Rosenberg, 2010). In order to establish contempt in the stimulus videos, both myself and a reliability coder FACS coded all the videos.

Results of the experiment were analyzed using SPSS. The dependent variables are support for the politician (coded: 0= not supportive, 1= supportive) and feelings for the candidate (coded: 1=Very Negative, 2=Negative, 3=Slightly Negative, 4=Slightly Positive, 5=Positive, 6=Very Positive) and key independent variable is the contemptuous or non-contemptuous politician. Participants were assigned to one of two groups. The first group viewed politicians who are contemptuous compared to politicians who display more neutral facial expressions. The second group viewed the same politicians that are contemptuous,

however, the clips will show these politicians as more neutral. Again, these clips were shown in comparison to the same neutral politician clips from the first group. Demographic variables are sex, race, income, education level, religiosity, party id, and ideology.

The participants were in two groups, one group will view three contemptuous politicians against three neutral opponents. The other viewed the same politicians, but with clips of the formerly contemptuous politicians in a neutral affective state against the same neutral opponents. There were three clips of politicians showing contempt, however there were a series of dummy clips of politicians in different affective states shown in between the contemptuous politicians. This was be done to mask the dependent variable to the participants. The experimenters chose to present the subjects with three different individuals displaying contempt to lessen the likelihood that a negative reaction to a contemptuous person is due to an unmeasured characteristic about the individual (i.e. attractiveness) and not the contempt expression itself.

Subjects were debriefed and told the nature of the experiment. The entire experiment lasted approximately 10 minutes.

Results

The data was analyzed using an independent samples t-test to compare the mean scores of two groups on the variable of which candidate the participants would vote for of the paired candidates. We also performed Levene's Test statistic to compare the means. The first pair of candidates was a set of dummy candidates. We expected to find no difference in the preference of these two candidates between condition. This expectation was confirmed for Candidate 1 $t(35) = -1.714$, $p < .05$, two-tailed (fail to reject null) and Candidate 2 $t(35) = -.941$, $p < .05$, two-tailed (fail to reject null). Of the pairing of candidates 3 and 4, Candidate 4 was contemptuous.

All further Candidates that were contemptous will be marked with a "C" here forth. We expected there to be a difference in means between voting in condition 1 and condition 2. Our hypothesis was not confirmed, for Candidate 3, $t(35) = -.190$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null), or Candidate 4C $t(35) = -1.339$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null). Candidates 5 and 6 were dummy variables. We expected that voter preference would not vary by condition. This expectation was confirmed for both Candidate 5, $t(35) = -.791$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null), and Candidate 6 $t(35) = 1.000$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null). We expected there to be a difference between Candidate 7C and Candidate 8. Our hypothesis was not confirmed for Candidate 7C $t(35) = 2.021$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null), or Candidate 8 $t(35) = -.527$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null). Candidates 9 and 10 were dummy variables. It was expected that we would find no difference in means,. This expectation was confirmed for both Candidate 9 $t(35) = -.838$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null), and Candidate 10, $t(35) = .809$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null). We hypothesized that there would be a difference between Candidate 11 and Candidate 12C. Our hypothesis was not confirmed for Candidate 11, $t(35) = -1.122$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null), or Candidate 12C $t(35) = -1.140$, p < .05, two-tailed (fail to reject null).

Although statistical significance on the dependent variable of interest was not achieved, it is worth noting that when examining the likert scale question, trials 2 and 6 partially supported the hypothesis (see tables 5 and 17). In both of these trials, the candidate was viewed more negatively in the contemptuous condition, condition 1, compared to the control condition, condition 2. Trial 4 did not support the hypothesis and was, in fact in the opposite direction that had been predicted. Individuals indicated that the candidate was more likable in the contempt versus the control condition.

Discussion

Although statistical significance was not achieved, the data was in the hypothesized direction for two out of three trials of contempt. In both trials, the contemptuous politicians were viewed more negatively in the contempt condition than in the neutral control condition. The direction of the data (see tables 5 and 17) appears to suggest that with a larger sample size it might have been possible to achieve significance.

Interestingly, in trial 4, the outcome was opposite that of the hypothesis. The politician was more well received in the contemptuous condition than in the control neutral condition. A possible reason for this is that although the politician in the clip shows contempt, the contempt is quickly masked by a full symmetrical smile. The participants may have been attending more to the smile than to the fleeting expression of contempt. Even though the results of this trial were not supportive of our hypothesis, these findings open up avenues for possible research into the impact of positive affect display in politics. Positive affect seems to be particularly important because even with our small sample size, we were just shy of statistical significance on this trial.

Anecdotally, during debrief when asked about the nature of the experiment, most people responded to one of our dummy variables which showed an overweight politician compared to an elderly politician. Several participants thought that the dependent variables were age and weight. While running analyses, it appeared that in both conditions the overweight politician was favored by the participants. This suggests that in a college population, age bias may outweigh an obesity bias. Possible future directions for research include exploring both biases more thoroughly and looking for variation of strengths of bias in a population more representative of the American public.

Future research should increase the sample size of this study to confirm findings. As a

direct relationship between perceived contempt and liking is established, studies should aim to increase the external validity by creating a context that is more complex and more similar to the natural environment. Possible variables that might be included are voice of the politician and political party affiliation of the politician.

Contempt is an emotion worthy of investigation. One of the most applied avenues for emotive research is the political arena. This work emphasizes the importance of facial information that candidates convey. What is particularly telling is that participants only had three seconds of video to develop an attitude. We have shown that even in this short amount of time, that information critical to liking attitudes can take hold. It used to be that in politics, facial information would be something that the average voter would not possess. However today, in a world where politics is televised around the clock and campaigns are widely broadcast, facial expressions of the politicians is available to the masses. Politicians that are aware of the facial information that they are projecting might have an advantage over those who do not. The nuanced meanings of their face and how the public responds is deserving of study.

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Appendix

Table 1

Feelings Towards Candidate 1

| | | Condition | | |
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
	Very Negative	0	0	0
Prevcan1	Negative	2	0	2
	Slightly Negative	5	6	11
	Slightly Positive	9	9	18
	Positive	1	4	5
	Very Positive	0	1	1
Total		17	20	37

Table 2

Feelings Towards Candidate 2

| | | Condition | | |
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan2	Very Negative	1	0	1
	Negative	3	1	4
	Slightly Negative	2	7	9
	Slightly Positive	10	8	18
	Positive	0	3	3

	Very Positive	1	1	2
Total		17	20	37

Table 3

Voting Trial 1

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Yes Vote	Candidate 1	10	10	20
	Candidate 2	7	10	17
Total		17	20	37

Table 4

Feelings Towards Candidate 3

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan3	Very Negative	0	1	1
	Negative	1	1	2
	Slightly Negative	2	2	4
	Slightly Positive	11	9	20
	Positive	3	7	10
	Very Positive	17	20	37
Total		17	20	37

Table 5

Feelings Towards Candidate 4 Contemptuous

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan4C	Very Negative	2	0	2
	Negative	1	1	2
	Slightly Negative	6	7	13
	Slightly Positive	7	8	15
	Positive	0	4	4
	Very Positive	1	0	1
Total		17	20	37

Table 6

Voting Trial 2

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Yes Vote	Candidate 4	12	14	26
	Candidate 3	5	6	11
Total		17	20	37

Table 7

Feelings Towards Candidate 5

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan5	Very Negative	0	0	0
	Negative	1	1	2
	Slightly Negative	8	11	19
	Slightly Positive	4	6	10
	Positive	2	1	3
	Very Positive	2	1	3
Total		17	20	37

Table 8

Feelings Towards Candidate 6

		Condition		Total
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan6	Very Negative	0	1	1
	Negative	0	0	0
	Slightly Negative	4	6	10
	Slightly Positive	10	9	19
	Positive	1	4	5
	Very Positive	2	0	2
Total		17	20	37

Table 9

Voting Trial 3

		Condition		Total
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Yes Vote	Candidate 5	5	6	11
	Candidate 6	12	14	26
Total		17	20	37

Table 10

Feelings Towards Candidate 7 (Contemptuous)

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan7C	Very Negative	1	0	1
	Negative	0	4	4
	Slightly Negative	2	7	9
	Slightly Positive	9	6	15
	Positive	3	3	6
	Very Positive	2	0	2
Total		17	20	37

Table 11

Feelings Towards Candidate 8

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan8	Very Negative	0	1	1
	Negative	1	0	1
	Slightly Negative	4	4	8
	Slightly Positive	11	11	22
	Positive	1	4	5
	Very Positive	0	0	0
Total		17	20	37

Table 12

Voting Trial 4

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Yes Vote	Candidate 7C	9	9	18
	Candidate 8	8	11	19
Total		17	20	37

Table 13

Feelings Towards Candidate 9

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan9	Very Negative	1	1	2
	Negative	1	2	3
	Slightly Negative	9	5	14
	Slightly Positive	5	10	15
	Positive	1	2	3
	Very Positive	0	0	0
Total		17	20	37

Table 14

Feelings Towards Candidate 10

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan10	Very Negative	2	0	2
	Negative	2	6	8
	Slightly Negative	6	10	16
	Slightly Positive	5	3	8
	Positive	1	1	2
	Very Positive	1	0	1
Total		17	20	37

Table 15

Voting Trial 5

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Yes Vote	Candidate 9	9	15	24
	Candidate 10	8	5	13
Total		17	20	37

Table 16

Feelings Towards Candidate 11

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan5	Very Negative	0	0	0
	Negative	1	0	1
	Slightly Negative	3	3	6
	Slightly Positive	10	11	21
	Positive	3	6	9
	Very Positive	0	0	0
Total		17	20	37

Table 17

Feelings Towards Candidate 12 Contemtuous

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Prevcan12C	Very Negative	2	0	2
	Negative	3	3	6
	Slightly Negative	7	10	17
	Slightly Positive	5	7	12
	Positive	0	0	0
	Very Positive	0	0	0
Total		17	20	37

Table 18

Voting Trial 6

		Condition		
		Condition 1	Condition2	Total
Yes Vote	Candidate 11	15	18	33
	Candidate 12	2	2	4
Total		17	20	37