

Psychological Determinants of Voting Behaviour: A Study of American Politics

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2026.v14i10.002>

| Received: 27.08.2026 | Accepted: 23.10.2026 | Published: 27.10.2026

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Abstract

Review Article

Emotional factors are widely acknowledged as influential in shaping political choice, yet the specific effects of discrete emotions remain underexplored. This study examines how positive emotions such as enthusiasm and hope, alongside negative emotions including anxiety and anger, contribute to voting behaviour in the United States' general elections. In addition to the emotional dynamics, this study considers the role of gender attitudes and how exposure to conspiracy theories influences voting behaviour and shapes political perceptions. Using campaign advertisements, rhetorical appeals and illustrative examples that are drawn from presidential races, media articles for conspiracy beliefs and gender attitudes, the analysis investigates how political actors strategically evoke psychological responses to influence voters. The findings suggest that emotional mobilisation combined with identity-based and belief-driven factors has become a central feature of contemporary electoral competition. These elements function not only as a core mechanism shaping voter evaluations but also influence the decision-making process in modern American politics.

Keywords: Voting Behaviour, Psychological Determinants, Emotion, Anger, Anxiety, Fear.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of emotions in determining the voter choice has been acknowledged, but as a key determinant of voting behaviour, systematic research is lacking among political scientists to date; its impact is often underestimated. Drew Westen, a professor in the Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry at Emory University, wrote in his book 'The Political Brain' (published in the United States by Public Affairs in 2007) that "voters feel first and think second." It suggests that emotional appeals and the instinctive response to political language are not just a side effect of campaigning; they are the primary drivers of voter preference. Logic is then used to rationalize a decision already made on an emotional level.

Classical theories and models portray voters as rational actors, emphasizing decision making based on rational choice and policy evaluation. For instance, Rational Choice Theory posits that individuals act in their self-interest by assessing available options and supporting policies that offer them the greatest benefits. Accordingly, voters are expected to evaluate alternatives and cast their votes for those that promise the most

personal advantage. But political psychologists for a long time have been dominated by the homo economicus model of political behaviour, which dominates political decision making, which argues that humans are fully rational, possess perfect information and simply analyse the cost-benefit analysis for voting. However, political psychologists developed the Homo Psychologicus model, which argues that humans are bounded-rational actors and do not possess perfect information. Bounded rationality is an emphasis that voters, as well as actors, only make satisfying decisions rather than maximising utility.

The role of emotions in voting behaviour is well supported by evidence from the 1964 United States presidential election. Following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the United States experienced a profound sense of national grief and collective mourning. Scholars note that this emotional climate contributed to widespread public sympathy for Lyndon B. Johnson, who assumed the presidency after Kennedy's death. Studies on retrospective voting and emotional influence suggest that voters often rely on affective cues such as sympathy or anxiety when making electoral decisions,

particularly during periods of national crisis. Thus, the 1964 election serves as a classic example demonstrating how emotional contexts can notably shape voter behaviour beyond purely rational considerations.

Drew Westen stated that [2] “logic is no match for emotion in politics,” emphasizing that emotional attachments often outweigh rational arguments. As he argues, when voters hold strong feelings about an issue, they are unlikely to revise their views based on factual evidence. Instead, they tend to interpret, dismiss, or counter such information in ways that reinforce their preexisting emotions.

Despite these insights, comprehensive research in this area remains limited. Although the growing body of literature increasingly acknowledges the importance of emotional affect in electoral behaviour, empirical studies focusing on specific, discrete emotions are still relatively scarce.

Positive emotions, Such as hope and enthusiasm and negative emotions, such as fear & anger, have not been systematically analysed in relation to voting behaviour. Furthermore, related attitudinal factors, including gender attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, have received comparatively less scholarly attention. This study addresses these gaps by analysing the individual effects of discrete emotions, gender attitudes and conspiracy beliefs on voting behaviour during general elections.

[3] One of the most compelling insights in political psychology is that the choices of voters are often influenced by unconscious cognitive and emotional processes. During the 1970s, psychology had a paradigm shift from behaviourism to cognitivism, which deals with the mental process and tries to answer questions such as how do people process information? How do people categorise new information? How do people make decisions? Since then, a cognitive revolution since then, political psychology borrowed many concepts that are useful to explain how voters think.

The tendency of individuals to seek consistency among their beliefs and attitudes is a central idea in cognitive psychology. [4] Leon Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains that when individuals encounter inconsistencies among their thoughts, beliefs, or actions, they experience psychological discomfort. To alleviate this tension, they tend to modify their attitudes, reinterpret information, or rationalize their behaviour in ways that restore internal consistency.

Similarly, [5] Fritz Heider’s balance theory argues that individuals prefer stable and balanced relationships among their ideas and evaluations of people or issues. When an imbalance occurs, they mentally reorganise their perceptions until balance is achieved.

This process can be compared to a cognitive kaleidoscope where thoughts and interpretations are rotated and rearranged until a coherent pattern emerges.

In the political scenario, these mechanisms influence how voters process campaign messages, evaluate candidates and analyse new information. Rather than approaching political choices neutrally, individuals tend to adjust their understanding in ways that maintain internal consistency with their prior beliefs and an emotional orientation that shapes their voting behaviour.

Popular culture also reflects psychological insight into selective perception. [6] In “The Boxer” song by Simon and Garfunkel, the line “A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest” illustrates how individuals filter information to preserve internal consistency. Confirmation bias reinforces cognitive consistency by encouraging individuals to selectively accept belief-confirming information while dismissing disconfirming evidence.

Political decision-making involves both hot and cold cognition, reflecting the interplay between emotions and reason. Hot cognition refers to mental processes that are influenced by emotion, motivation, arousal, or social context. It involves thinking that is “heated” by feelings, desires, or the presence of rewards and threats whereas, cold cognition is defined as the mental processes that are emotionally neutral, logical, and deliberate. It is the type of thinking one use when we are calm, focused on facts, and not influenced by strong feelings, desires, or social pressures. Hot cognition suggests that affective evaluations are automatically attached to political objects, affecting judgment even before conscious reasoning occurs, whereas cold cognition represents more deliberate information processing.

The role of hot and cold cognition, as well as cognitive shortcuts, can be observed in U.S. presidential elections. During the 2008 campaign, themes of hope and change triggered hot cognition among many voters, shaping affective evaluation before detailed policy consideration. In contrast, some voters engaged in cold cognition by comparing policy platforms on healthcare, taxation or foreign policy before making electoral decisions.

Similarly, cognitive shortcuts were evident in the 2016 election involving Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, where many voters relied on party identification, media cues or candidate image rather than extensive policy analysis. These instances illustrate how emotional response and heuristic processing jointly influence voting behaviour.

The discussion of hot and cold cognition shows that emotions and shortcuts influence voting behaviour, but it treats their influences in a general way. It does not

explain how particular emotions or other attitudes shape behaviour. Research suggests that specific emotions such as enthusiasm, hope, fear, anger or anxiety have distinct effects on voters. In addition to belief systems, like conspiracy beliefs and social attitudes, can also affect how individuals evaluate candidates and political issues. Therefore, this study extends the analysis by examining discrete emotions together with conspiracy beliefs and gender attitudes as factors influencing voting behaviour.

• Anxiety

Unlike positive emotions such as enthusiasm and hope, fear is a negative emotion oriented toward perceived threats and oppositional actors. The mobilizing capacity of threat-related emotions particularly fear and anger has been well established in the study of political behavior. For instance, Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 campaign against Barry Goldwater emphasized potential security risks and exploited voter anxieties that a Goldwater presidency might lead to nuclear

Similar emotional framing appeared in the 2024 U.S. presidential election involving Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, in which immigration became a central campaign issue. ⁷Research analysing online political campaigns indicates that immigration was one of the most frequently invoked issues shaping voters' decisions before the election.

Campaign narratives sometimes referenced high-profile criminal cases to emphasise border security concerns. For instance, political rhetoric highlighted incidents involving victims such as Laken Riley, a 22-year-old nursing student, and Jocelyn Nungaray, a 12-year-old girl who were killed by illegal immigrants from Venezuela in 2024. These cases were used to criticise government policy and reinforce the perception of risk.

While the cases of Laken Riley and Jocelyn Nungaray were used to mobilize voters during the election cycle, the post-election memorialization through federal action serves a distinct rhetorical purpose: legitimising the electoral mandate and institutionalising a policy legacy. ⁸Donald Trump signed the Laken Riley Act as his first official act into law and renamed [9] the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge in honour of Jocelyn Nungaray to Jocelyn Nungaray National Wildlife Refuge.

Afterwards, this naming strategy affects public perception by framing the electoral victory not merely as a political win, but as a moral verdict delivered by the electorate. It suggests that the voters, by electing the candidate, implicitly endorsed the victims' cause. Consequently, the actions are perceived less as partisan legislation and more as the fulfilment of a solemn duty to the deceased. This creates a powerful narrative loop: the tragedy drove the vote, and the vote now justifies the

honour, thereby reinforcing the emotional connection between the electorate and the policy for future cycles.

More importantly, public opinion data shows that immigration ranked as a major national concern for many voters, with surveys reporting it among the most important problems facing the country. [10] Media analysis and commentary likewise suggested the issue could be defined in shaping campaign agendas and voter attention.

The importance of fear in shaping political behaviour has also been noted by David Wilson, professor at the University of California, Berkeley and the dean of the Goldman School of Public Policy. [11] He argues that fear often proves more influential than positive appeals because human cognition exhibits a negativity bias. Individuals are more attentive to threats and risks while taking positive conditions for granted.

• Anger

Anger has increasingly become a prominent feature of presidential races in the United States, where political actors frequently employ rhetoric that attributes blame or highlights grievances against opponents. Such emotional appeals can play a mobilising role by reinforcing partisan identities and motivating electoral participation. Scholars have argued that, unlike anxiety, anger often strengthens commitment to prior preferences and encourages political participation and engagement.

The mobilising role of anger can be observed across multiple presidential races in the USA. [12] In the 2008 United States presidential election between Barack Obama and John McCain, the financial crisis generated widespread anger towards existing economic leadership. Campaign narratives tapped this frustration, encouraging support for reform-oriented alternatives.

Similarly, in the 2016 United States presidential election, the campaign of Donald Trump against Hillary Clinton channelled anti-establishment sentiment by portraying political elites, immigration policies and trade arrangements as harmful to ordinary citizens. Such rhetoric directed voters' anger towards institutions and opponents, contributing to higher participation among dissatisfied constituencies and reinforcing support for disruptive political change.

These cases illustrate how anger can shape voting behaviour by fostering blame attribution, reducing deliberative processing and increasing reliance on heuristic judgments when evaluating political choices.

However, whether fear uniformly mobilises political participation remains debated. Research by [13] Christopher Weber suggests that anxiety may discourage engagement by increasing uncertainty, whereas anger tends to stimulate participation by motivating action

against perceived threats. Thus, the political consequences of negative emotions are not uniform but depend on the specific emotional response activated.

• Enthusiasm and Hope

Enthusiasm is intense and eager enjoyment, interest, or approval. It is a state of vibrant passion that propels a person toward action with energy and excitement whereas, Hope is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes. As we know, fear and anger are powerful vote mobilisers used through campaign ads. Unlike these, enthusiasm energises voters to cast their vote and signals hope for the future. A person who is already in power does not have to persuade voters by using the hope that everything is getting better with the passage of time. There are many instances where this was used during presidential election campaigns in the United States, and it worked.

During the 1984 presidential election campaign, the advertisement [14] "Morning in America" was aired on television, which favoured Ronald Reagan's re-election and resulted in his landslide victory.

To invoke pride in voters, the slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) was used for the first time in 2016 and again in the 2024 elections during Donald Trump's campaign.

As mentioned earlier, to sustain in office, leaders resort to hope and enthusiasm; however, to come into power, they have to rely on hope and enthusiasm both. It can be reiterated by [15] Obama's 2008 election campaign theme "Hope and Change", focusing on the belief that things would get better and society needs change.

After the 1970s decade in America, events like the 1973 oil embargo by Arab countries, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and post-war inflation marked the 1970s as tough for Americans. Due to the involvement of Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal, he resigned from office, and Gerald Ford became the 38th President of the United States and completed the remaining years of Nixon's term. During that period, people were anxious. He released an ad song with the lyrics [16] "I am feeling good about America, I am feeling good about me" to emphasise that everything is going to be fine.

• Conspiracy Beliefs

It is often seen that conspiracy beliefs greatly affect the voter's choice. Conspiracy theories generally originate due to the absence of timely information in case of any mishap or tragedy. In the case of John F. Kennedy's assassination Warren Commission took nearly 10 months to give its report, which was enough for conspiracy theories to take root and solidify. [17] The Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey

Oswald acted alone in the assassination, commonly known as the single bullet theory (magic bullet theory), was hard to believe for people.

[18] According to a 2013 poll by Gallup, only 30% of Americans believed in the single bullet theory. Some even believe that it was carried out by the CIA. This shows distrust in government and its institutions. John F. Kennedy's assassination acted as a basis for erosion of trust in government, which may affect voter attitudes in a complex way.

In the 2020 U.S. election, [19] the QAnon conspiracy theory emerged on an online message board, 4chan, which began in 2017. According to this conspiracy theory, a secret cabal of pedophiles who worship Satan controlled the United States government and controlled the media, Hollywood and politicians.

The only person who can stop them is Donald Trump; this conspiracy theory portrays him as a central figure opposing such forces. The persistence of such narratives illustrates how conspiracy frameworks can influence political interpretation and group identity. Their impact was evident when some supporters rejected electoral outcomes and participated in the January 6th United States Capitol riots.

Conspiracy beliefs tend to endure because they satisfy cognitive and emotional needs, including uncertainty reduction, identity affirmation and attribution of blame. Mechanisms such as confirmation bias, motivated reasoning and selective exposure reinforce prior convictions while filtering contradictory information. Consequently, once internalised, such beliefs are difficult to dislodge and can spread rapidly through social networks and partisan communication environments, shaping political behaviour and perceptions.

Conspiracy beliefs may increase voter turnout by intensifying perceived threats and group identity, yet they can also decrease participation by eroding trust in institutions. Evidence from recent elections in the USA suggests their impact on voting behaviour is mixed rather than uniform.

Gender Attitudes

Gender has always been decisive in electoral choice. Gender spectrum affects the voter's mind and ultimately leads to who participates in elections and how the voting of people occurs. Generally, liberal people do not oppose the non-binary definition of gender, and conservative rightist ideology shows reluctance to choose non-binary gender as representative of them.

In the USA, the first female candidate to run in a presidential election was Victoria Woodhull from the Equal Rights Party in 1872. She did not win but became

the first to run against male contenders. If one looks at two major neighbouring countries of the USA, both have elected women to their highest office. To the north, Canada chose its head of state way back in 1993, when Kim Campbell became the country's first female prime minister, while to the south, Mexico made history in 2024 by electing its first woman president, Claudia Sheinbaum, in its 200 years of history. But the United States, which likes to call itself the world's oldest democracy, has never elected any female to the highest office in its 250 years of history. To understand this, one has to dive deep into different concepts of social psychology.

One of the reasons can be attributed to pluralistic ignorance. While this does not affect all voters, a significant number are impacted. Pluralistic ignorance refers to people having identical beliefs privately but acting in the same way publicly because of fear of being alone. In electoral choice, one voter thinks, "I am okay in casting a vote for a woman for president, but when others are not, why should I waste my vote by giving it to a female candidate? Voter B thinks the same, and so on. So it seems that they are ready to vote for a woman, but because of fear, they join the majority for other reasons, leading to the loss of women in the election.

The role congruity theory of Alice Eagly explains the reason of occurring of stereotypes.²⁰ This theory talks about the traits that are associated with male and female, like people connect traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness for male leadership roles and communal and caring for female gender roles. If these roles do not fit as perceived by society, it leads to stereotypes. Female candidates have to face a double bind. When Hillary Clinton showed assertiveness, she was labelled as aggressive in her campaign by media reports, and when she showed sympathy, she was seen as emotional, not fitting in the role perceived by society for leadership. Hillary Clinton's treatment by the media highlights a profound and unfair paradox in societal perceptions of female leaders: they are often confined to a narrow window of acceptable behaviour where displaying traditionally "masculine" traits (like assertiveness) makes them unlikable, while displaying traditionally "feminine" traits (like sympathy) makes them appear weak or unfit for the job. Ultimately, this suggests that the criteria for leadership are still heavily coded with masculine norms, forcing women to navigate a no-win situation where their actions are judged not by their effectiveness, but by how well they conform to gendered expectations.

Recently, former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama, in an interview with Tracee Ellis Ross, when asked about running for president, Obama said,²¹ "That's why I'm like don't even look at me about running cause you are lying, you're not ready for a

woman. We got a lot of growing up to do, and there are a lot of men who do not feel like that they can be led by a woman, and we know it." In this statement, she expresses her frustration that the societal and political landscape is not yet evolved enough to accept female leadership authentically. The final statement, "we got a lot of growing up to do," serves as a conclusion that the problem is not with the women seeking the office, but with the immaturity of a society that imposes impossible standards on them.

This sparked the debate: Are Americans really not ready for a woman president? [22] According to the General Social Survey (GSS), only 12% Americans believe that men are better suited emotionally for politics than women. But in the 250 years of American history, we have never seen a female president because winning the final election is difficult, starting from the primary elections. In fact, no woman has ever won the presidency from the Republican Party.

Democrats are more likely to favour a female candidate than Republicans. We have seen female presidential candidates from the Democratic Party in 2016 and 2024 as Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris, respectively.

This study has attempted to examine the role of positive and negative emotions on vote choice, specifically investigating how discrete emotions such as fear, anxiety, enthusiasm, and hope shape electoral decisions. It further explored how politicians strategically evoke these emotions, alongside the influence of conspiracy beliefs and gender attitudes on voting behaviour. The findings underscore the complex interplay between emotional dynamics and cognitive factors in shaping political preferences. Future research should extend this work by exploring additional determinants of vote choice such as social influences, economic conditions, or media consumption. It would also be helpful for future studies to use different research methods, such as interviews, experiments, or long-term surveys, to gain a deeper understanding of how emotions and other factors shape voting behaviour. and employing diverse methodological approaches to further validate and expand upon these findings.

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