

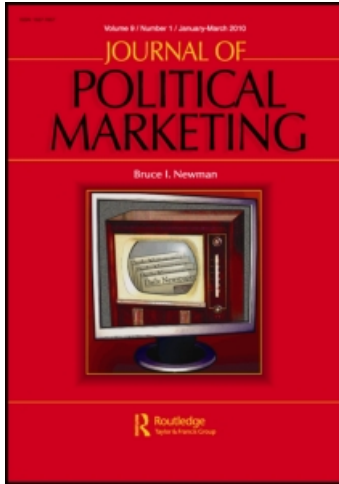
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### Feeling the Issue: How Citizens' Affective Reactions and Leadership Perceptions Shape Policy Evaluations

Tereza Capelos <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, United Kingdom

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## Articles

# Feeling the Issue: How Citizens' Affective Reactions and Leadership Perceptions Shape Policy Evaluations

TEREZA CAPELOS

*University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, United Kingdom*

*This article examines how general feelings toward political actors shape the way citizens process information about policy issues. Images of political actors are prevalent shortcuts on which we rely during political decision making. A few studies go beyond the cognitive nature of these person-oriented heuristics and demonstrate that affective reactions toward a story protagonist generate swings in the evaluations of policy issues. This research borrows from the literature on persuasion, information processing, affective intelligence, and motivated reasoning to measure how affective responses to the image of a politician determine the way citizens evaluate policy proposals. In this study, an experiment is conducted wherein the name of a politician supporting two actual policy proposals is varied and the corresponding subjects' reactions to the policy content is measured. Findings suggest that the images projected by political candidates function as "gut-level" affective (emotional) shortcuts, such that when citizens dislike the source of the policy, they also adjust their policy evaluations downward. There is also evidence of differentiation in the way political images affect policy evaluation on the basis of political knowledge and trust.*

*KEYWORDS* affective heuristics, emotions, personalization, policy evaluations, political image, political knowledge, political trust

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Address correspondence to Tereza Capelos, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU27XH, United Kingdom. E-mail: t.capelos@surrey.ac.uk

## INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL IMAGE AND ISSUE PREFERENCE

Political actors play a pivotal role in directing the way citizens think about politics. They do so through public dialog, political campaigning, and advertising (Alvarez and Brehm, 1995; Page and Shapiro, 1992). Jacobs and Shapiro (1994) show that during political campaigns, competing candidates articulate the criteria by which issue decisions should be made, thus guiding the public's understanding of political issues. Rosen (1973) presents empirical evidence that presidents are very influential in changing the opinion of the public on domestic issues of high salience, while Zaller (1992) examines how political elites guide public opinion on important issues.

A number of studies provide evidence that politicians can also have an indirect impact on the way citizens make up their minds about politics. With the rise of mass media and the emphasis on the "who" rather than on "what," voters rely all the more on the image of politicians to make sense of the political world (Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994). Political images reflect what comes to mind about the reputation of a political actor and have a cognitive and affective component<sup>1</sup> (Capelos, 2005). A political image is formed on the basis of issue positions, partisanship, group-related beliefs, and personal attributes or traits, while its affective content operates as a central building block and carries significant weight (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk, 1986; Kinder, 1986; Barber, 1972; Page 1978).

The affective element of political images is widely appreciated in political marketing. Political slogans and commercials promote competent and likeable political profiles to engage voters, while political strategists adopt look-good and feel-good campaigns. Furthermore, the general decline of party identification and the increasing personalization of politics bring the personalities of political leaders to the forefront of the public arena. Consequently, a candidate's image can play a determining role in the outcome of elections for public office (Wattenberg, 1991; Kinder, 1986; Stokes, 1966; Miller et al., 1986; Pierce, 1993; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar et al., 1984; Zaller, 1992; Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar, 1993; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 1982; Graber, 1980; Nelson and Kinder, 1996).

This article examines the influence of the affective component of political images on the public's perception of policy issues; it borrows from studies on source information used as cognitive heuristics and studies on affective information processing. As early as 1952, Asch pointed to the value of source characteristics and sentence authorship for the interpretation of policy proposals. For instance, Mondak (1993a, 1993b) examined the impact of perceptions of the credibility of the Supreme Court on policy evaluations and showed that they function as significant source cues. Carmines and Kuklinski (1990) found that Senate leaders play the same role in policy evaluations. These studies focus on the cognitive components of political images

but offer valuable insights on heuristic processing and how source information is used as a cue for interpreting political messages.

This article extends this research by going beyond what citizens think, to studying how feelings toward political leaders become a source of information when people evaluate policy proposals. Feeling and thinking in politics are interrelated. In fact, recent neuroscience evidence shows that there can be no decision making without emotions and that affect often operates without conscious awareness (Damasio, 1994; Zajonc, 1984). Particularly in the area of policy perceptions, Kuklinski and Hurley (1994) show that affective reactions to story protagonists can impact how citizens decide on racial policies. If voters do not evaluate policy proposals on the basis of their content alone but they pay attention to the source or to story protagonists, then it is important to measure how their emotional reactions impact their decisions.

This study adds to the political marketing literature because it shows the impact of the image of leaders and elites on policy choices, even when political candidates do not actively seek to shape the political debate. The affective and often latent side of politics has significant implications for democratic politics, when evaluations of a policy derive from evaluations of its advocate. I expect that when citizens like the political actor who advocates a policy, they will react in an enthusiastic way toward the policy, regardless of the policy content. On the other hand, when a disliked politician advocates a particular position, the anxiety, anger, or feeling of betrayal toward the political actor will be transferred to the policy evaluation and affect it negatively, regardless of its cognitive content.

From here, this article is divided into five sections. First, I review the role of candidates as heuristics in political decision making. Second, I discuss the affective nature of these heuristics and review the role of affect in the evaluation of political objects. Third, I examine the weight of positive and negative information in evaluative judgments. Fourth, I note the significance of citizen dispositional differences, political knowledge, and political trust, in the way affective heuristics come into play. Finally, I conclude by reviewing the implications of these findings for the understanding of political decision making.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Paying Attention to the Image: Candidates as Heuristics

Evidence abounds that citizens are not always engaged in thoughtful discussions about politics. Even though they tend to devote a portion of their time to political discussions, they, nonetheless, spend the largest part of their time in their daily activities (Lipmann, 1922). When they do think about politics, they do so in a crude and oversimplified way. Most of the time, they favor considerations that are easily accessible in memory, and more often than

not their judgments seem to be influenced by circumstance rather than by informed and principled political judgment (Lau, Smith, and Fiske, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991). Contrary to pure rational choice theories, which argue that people behave in the political world as well as they do in the economic one, political scientists note that no citizen can process all political messages carefully. Instead, citizens use simple rules of judgment in their political decision making (Downs, 1957; Simon, 1975; Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). In order to reduce information costs and cope with the avalanche of information, citizens categorize the plethora of political messages using heuristics. In this context, the cognitive and affective image conveyed by political leaders is a frequently used heuristic when we make up our minds about politics.

Studies in social and cognitive psychology utilize the principles of attention and salience to explain why cognitive and affective information about others constitutes a salient categorization criterion. Humans are social beings, hardwired to be highly interested in and pay attention to other individuals. This increased motivation to pay attention to our neighbor makes us sensitive to new information that involves persons (Hastie and Park, 1986). In political psychology we note similar findings. It is easier for people to evaluate political objects on the basis of personalities, because citizens apply the same processes in their everyday life. Moreover, it is much simpler to remember a person than to memorize information regarding abstract political programs or ideologies (Kinder, 1986).

Citizens, therefore, tend to employ a variety of person heuristics when evaluating a number of issues. The significant impact of source cues on message interpretation was first explored by Asch (1952). In a series of short experiments, Asch showed that people interpret sentences on the basis of sentence authorship. Characteristically, changing the author changes the interpretations of the message. A few recent studies confirm that when the source is a political personality, readers rely on it to connect, or disconnect, with the story (Zaller, 1992; Mondak, 1993a; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Popkin, 1991). In an experimental study of framing effects, Neely (2003) showed that the presence of a person in an issue frame can affect viewers' perceptions of the issue. So, overall, we see that what people think about the person involved in the story is a strong predictor of their reaction to the issue. Audience members tune their reaction to a policy on the basis of what they know about the person appearing in the story.

### Feeling the Image: The Role of Affect in Political Information Processing

From the aforementioned, we can conclude that the cognitive and affective impressions of the source of any particular information act as shortcuts. They constitute important factors in organizing ideas that give meaning to political

issues and offer citizens a readily comprehensible basis by which to evaluate them. Although some studies see these shortcuts as rational, Kuklinski and Hurley (1994) argue that cue taking is often gut-level, and when that is the case the messenger can overwhelm the interpretation of the message. The scholars demonstrate how affect drives many of the cues citizens use to evaluate political statements. In a social context, it is the emotional reactions to story protagonists that generate swings in evaluations of racial issues among African Americans. Sniderman et al. (1991) examined how people evaluate racial discrimination policies to find that different policies are opposed or embraced depending on the sympathy feelings the beneficiaries of these policies inspire.

Although largely ignored until two decades ago, several scholars have recently focused on the role of affect on the elaboration and organization of political information, showing that issues and politicians are evaluated on the basis of an affective dimension (Lodge and McGraw, 1991; Abelson et al., 1982). Emotions and cognition are no longer seen as antithetical, and several scholars agree that affect organizes the processing of new information. Theories such as “affective intelligence” and “motivated reasoning” elaborate on the role of affect and emotions in the process of political decision making (Marcus, 2000; Lodge and Taber, 2000). According to the hot cognition hypothesis, all social and political concepts are laden with affect as a positive or negative tag that is stored in memory independently of its cognitive content (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau, 1995; Abelson, 1963). When people are asked to evaluate an object, “how do I feel” heuristics are activated, and their affect toward the object comes automatically to mind, influencing the judgment process (Clore and Isbell, 2001). In other words, all political thinking is affectively motivated (Lodge and Taber, 2000).

Affective reactions are roughly classified in three subcategories that differ in terms of their degree of differentiation and endurance: overall evaluations, specific emotions, and moods (Ottati and Wyer, 1993). Here, it is important to note the distinction between overall evaluations and specific emotions. *Overall evaluations* are global attitudes toward an object that originate from general liking or disliking, range from very negative to very positive, and are activated automatically when the object comes to mind. Overall evaluations are relatively enduring, in contrast to *specific emotions*, which are episodic feelings, highly differentiated, and attributed to a specific object. Thus, we experience different types of emotions, such as anger, fear, pride, and enthusiasm, toward specific political actors.

For the purpose of this article, we are concerned with general affective evaluations of politicians reflecting liking or disliking. Such reactions can be generated without much effort and have significant implications in political choices. Candidate personality traits, such as credibility and competence, generate trust and positive feelings toward a political actor (Fenno, 1978; Capelos, 2005). Isbel, Ottati, and Burns (2006) add facial displays and

attractiveness to the list. Abelson et al. (1982) were among the first to demonstrate that emotional responses to political leaders influence their electability, after controlling for traits and party identification effects. Research by Marcus (1988) also shows the dominant role of affective reactions in vote choices, while Sniderman et al. (1991) show that general feelings such as general likes and dislikes are pervasively used by most citizens when they think about politics.

To recap, when citizens evaluate politicians, they hold overall evaluations that are positive or negative. This study is concerned with the extent to which the image of political actors acts as an affective shortcut for citizens who try to make sense of policy proposals. If source characteristics have a significant impact on someone's opinion (Lane and Sears, 1964), then we expect that when citizens read a policy introduced by a politician they support, they give the policy a thumbs up; if the image of the politician brings to mind negative considerations, they give the policy a thumbs down. This is in agreement with Zaller's (1992) point that political issues are perceived by citizens as reinforcing their affective predispositions.

### Not All Affect Weights the Same: The Power of Negativity Bias

In the present study, the main hypothesis revolves around whether simple cues, such as the names of political actors, can carry significant affective appeal, thereby influencing the way citizens think about policy issues. In addition, we are interested in the valence of the affective content of cues and its impact on issue preference. Research on person perception and decision making in psychology and political psychology show that positive and negative information are not of equal weight (Lau, 1986). Rather, rich and consistent negativity effects are evident in impression formation, with negative information having greater influence on image construction than positive information (Holbrook et al., 2001, Klein, 1996, Lau, 1982). Negative information is more salient and memorable due to the higher survival value of avoiding costs rather than favoring gains. Based on the above, I expect a strong disapproving shift in attitudes toward a policy when the source of the information is a political leader who generates unfavorable emotional responses and a weaker shift in favor of a policy when the source of the information generates positive feelings.

### Dispositional Differences: Accounting for Political Knowledge and Political Trust

Having said that, the following question arises: "If the affect generated by the image of a politician influences the way a large number of citizens evaluate political issues, does this hold to the same extent for all citizens?" Studies that examine how voters form opinions about political objects show consistent differences in the determinants of political attitudes. In other words, not

everyone thinks the same way. On the contrary, individual differences in political knowledge, trust in the political system, or demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, and race, are important mediators of political attitudes (Krosnick, 1990; Druckman, 2001; Zaller, 1992; Luskin, 1987).

#### POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICAL AFFECT

Persuasion studies point to variance in political knowledge when it comes to understanding the impact of sources cues on judgments (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). We know that information gathering, encoding, storage, and retrieval processes are influenced by the level of political knowledge of the individual. Empirically, we find a relationship between how much and how a person thinks in terms of the political world (Fiske and Kinder, 1981). Characteristically, agenda-setting studies demonstrate that someone who is frequently discussing politics is less likely to be influenced by media messages than someone who does not know much about politics.

High levels of political knowledge entail the ability to organize and link issues to each other (Conover and Feldman, 1984; Luskin, 1987). In other words, more information is associated with a richer and more complex representational structure, which includes information about the political targets, institutions, policies, and symbols. Moving from top to bottom on this information dimension, the character of the objects that are central is systematically different. They shift from remote and abstract to simple and more "close to home" (Converse, 1964). As ideological constraint decreases with decreasing information, the less knowledgeable are influenced little by specific policy issues and use more easily accessible cues, such as candidate evaluations and party identification.

Based on the above, individuals who know a lot about politics have denser and better organized cognitions about political issues (Fiske and Kinder, 1981). The more closely the expert citizens scrutinize a proposal and the more effort they put in processing its information, the less likely they are to use shortcuts as criteria for supporting or opposing a policy. Also, they are less likely to find any new piece of information very influential for their judgments. On the other hand, novices might be easily swept away by new information, because they are more vulnerable than experts (Iyengar et al., 1982). I expect that when people consider the details of a policy carefully, as in the case of political experts, the impact of the source is smaller than that of the policy itself. On the other hand, citizens who do not engage in high elaboration rely more on political images instead of considering the details of the policy (Fiske and Taylor, 1984).

#### POLITICAL TRUST AND POLITICAL AFFECT

One concept that comes to mind when we examine citizens' reactions toward political leaders is political trust. It indicates the amount of support

for the political system in general but also support for the government and public officials. Political trust is an affective and evaluative orientation that captures citizens' expectations of integrity, public responsibility, and technical competence toward public officials (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000). Measures of political trust are also associated with political capital and confidence in government.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, low political trust suggests poor performance of the political system, and measures of political distrust are often associated with government dissatisfaction and political cynicism (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001).

Political trust is essential for democratic life because it helps preserve the legitimacy of political organizations and actors in general. But it is also particularly interesting for this article, due to its positive relationship with evaluations of strong leadership. Citizens with high levels of political trust have confidence in their political leaders and should rely more heavily on them when making judgments about political issues. Conversely, low levels of political trust should be associated with skepticism toward political leaders and less reliance on their qualities when making sense of the political world.

Being affective as well as evaluative, political trust is also a useful concept in the context of international political events. A number of studies suggest that trust in government rises when perception of external threat increases, especially in international crisis situations (Huddy et al., 2005). Under these circumstances, citizens also report increased policy satisfaction with government performance and strong perceptions of leadership. It is possible, then, to expect more favorable policy evaluations among citizens that report high levels of political trust, as a result of their increased sense of threat in an international political environment. Citizens with low levels of trust might be "cooler" and perhaps more critical evaluators of international policy proposals.

#### POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICAL TRUST: AN UNEXPLORED INTERACTION

Interestingly, although political trust is often correlated with high levels of political interest, is it not synonymous with political knowledge. In fact, education, a strong predictor of political knowledge, is a relatively unimportant predictor of political trust (Rudolf, 2005). To examine the interplay of political knowledge and political trust in the way citizens respond affectively to political images, I examine the policy evaluations of four distinct groups: citizens with high political knowledge and high political trust (the trusting experts), citizens with high political knowledge and low political trust (the cynic experts), citizens with low political knowledge and high political trust (the trusting novices), and citizens with low political knowledge and low political trust (the cynic novices).

This typology is useful for the generation of specific hypotheses regarding each group.<sup>3</sup> The *cynic experts* should show the weakest influence of

favorable political images in their policy evaluations. Instead, they rely more on their strong policy knowledge and produce critical policy evaluations. Positive or negative source affect should be moderated by their expert policy opinion. The *trusting experts* should also demonstrate critical policy ratings based on preexisting knowledge, and their high trust level should moderate the effects of negative source affect. Their evaluations, however, should be more influenced by favorable political images than the first group. The two novice groups should start off with less informed and thus less critical policy evaluations. The *trusting novices* should be more influenced by favorable sources, while the effects of a negative source should be moderated by the higher optimism generated by trust. The *cynic novices* should experience the sharpest decline in their policy evaluations under a negative source.

## METHODOLOGY

### Experimental Design, Procedure, and Materials

In the present study, an experiment was conducted, manipulating the authorship of two foreign policy proposals. The aim was to identify changes in the evaluation of the policy proposals among participants, resulting from changing the name of the advocate of the policy statement. The laboratory is well-suited for investigating the above question, as it permits tight control of the stimulus materials. To add external validity, this study used real-world politicians and actual policy statements instead of fictional characters and bogus policy proposals.

### EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The first manipulation involves varying the leader advocating the policy. The potential sources had to be (a) easily recognized by even the inattentive citizens and (b) evoke opposing emotional reactions. The profiles of presidents George W. Bush and Nelson Mandela match the above criteria. They are both easily recognizable and often generate diametrically different evaluations, especially in international audiences. To separate attitudes toward the proposals per se from attitudes toward the leaders, the experiment includes a control condition where the policy was endorsed by an anonymous politician.

The second manipulation involves the policy. The proposals used were genuine excerpts from original policy speeches, one from President George W. Bush and one from President Nelson Mandela. The first was in reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Originally, it was part of a speech by President George W. Bush during a visit by Ariel Sharon to Washington on April 14, 2004. The second was about drug trafficking and was taken from an address by President Nelson Mandela to the United Nations International drug control program

workshop, delivered on November 14, 1994. Both excerpts were carefully selected to avoid particular references to nationality or political affiliations that would give away the true identity of the political actors.

This resulted in a three [source: Bush/Mandela/anonymous] X two [policy: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bush original)/drug trafficking (Mandela original)] design. This design allows us to isolate and measure general attitudes toward the policy from reactions generated by source effects and to examine the relationship between the feelings toward the source and support for the policy.

#### PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The experiment was conducted in spring 2005 with undergraduate students from political science, psychology, and education at Leiden University, in the Netherlands. Participants were recruited via advertisements, received a small monetary incentive, and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions upon arrival to the computer lab.

Each policy article was approximately 350 words, was formatted as a *New York Times* news article, and took about 2 to 3 minutes to read. The manipulation was introduced by a bold-type sidebar just above the article, which attributed the policy statement either to President Bush, President Mandela, or an anonymous leader. To reinforce the manipulation, the sidebar was accompanied by a small portrait photograph (President Bush, President Mandela, or a microphone for the control). Within each policy, the only part varied was the name of the politician.

Participants completed the experiments in groups of 5 to 7 people in a quiet computer lab, outside of class time. They were told that they were participating in two independent surveys, the first containing demographic and political knowledge questions measuring general political beliefs and the second focusing on how people understand news articles as they appear in print media. This cover story was provided in order to minimize deliberate contamination of issue evaluations (second survey) by participants' impressions of the politicians (first survey).<sup>4</sup>

At first, participants completed a computerized questionnaire that covered a number of socioeconomic and demographic questions, such as sex, age, political orientation, socioeconomic status, as well as a wide range of questions on political knowledge, political trust, media exposure, and political interest. Participants were also asked to provide general evaluations for a number of political actors, as well as ratings on specific trait items and emotion dimensions.<sup>5</sup> In the second survey, participants were introduced to a policy proposal that appeared on the computer screen. They were then asked to recall items regarding what they read and also evaluated the proposal's feasibility by assessing whether it was right or wrong and offering their objective beliefs about the consequences of the policy.

## MEASURES

In this study, the dependent variables include the actual evaluations of the policy proposals. Four items measure approval: agreement or disagreement with the policy statement, assessment of its impact on the resolution of the problem (Israeli-Palestinian conflict or drug trafficking), assessment of the success of its implementation, and whether the position of the political actor was right or wrong. The four items are used as a scale (reliability  $\alpha = .84$ ) and also alone. Eleven items measured affective reactions to the policy: the extent to which the policy made participants feel afraid, angry, bored, confused, disgusted, impressed, irritated, proud, safe, satisfied, and sympathetic. The predictor variables are the experimental conditions (Bush, Mandela, control) and the general feeling thermometers of presidents Bush and Mandela, derived from the first part of the experiment when respondents reported their overall impressions toward the leaders.<sup>6</sup>

The experiment also included 12 factual knowledge items regarding national and international politics, which were added together to create a sum score.<sup>7</sup> The reliability of the knowledge scale is high ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Regarding political trust, participants were asked to indicate agreement on four related items: whether they trust people who run the government; whether elected officials look out for special interests; whether government leaders tell the truth; and whether political candidates are honest.<sup>8</sup> The reliability of the political trust scale is satisfactory ( $\alpha = .69$ ). The scales of political knowledge and political trust were used as continuous explanatory variables to assess whether some citizens are more influenced by their feelings toward political actors in their evaluations of issues than others. The two scales were also used to create dichotomous items for political knowledge and political trust.<sup>9</sup> They were then combined to identify four subsamples of relatively equal size: the trusting experts ( $N=30$ ), the cynic experts ( $N=30$ ), the trusting novices ( $N=21$ ), and the cynic novices ( $N=47$ ).

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

To examine whether citizens evaluate policy issues consistently with their feelings toward the politician who advocates the policy, the participants read policies proposed by political actors with diametrically opposite profiles. The data confirm differences that are statistically and substantively significant: using a scale from 0 to 1, the average overall evaluation of President Nelson Mandela is very positive (.86, with 1 as highest score), and the reputation of President George W. Bush is negative (.29 with 1 as highest score). President Mandela also received consistently positive emotional ratings (.76), while President Bush's ratings on the positive emotion scales were on the whole very low (.22). Conversely, negative feelings toward President Mandela were low (.03) and were high toward President Bush (.64). Regarding specific

**TABLE 1** Experimental Manipulations and General Policy Evaluation

	General policy evaluation
Constant	.55 (.03)
Mandela Condition	.04 (.04)
Bush Condition	-.10* (.04)
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	.09
N	127

\* $p < .01$ .

*Note.* The dependent variable is on a 0–1 scale, with 0 for low evaluation and 1 for high evaluation. Parameter estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients, and standard errors are in parentheses.

emotional reactions, the most positive feeling toward President Mandela was admiration (.85). The main emotional reaction generated by President Bush was negative and reflects irritation (.70). The weakest emotions toward President Bush were pride (.09) and sympathy (.19), while the weakest emotions toward President Mandela were anger, disgust, and irritation, with values very close to the 0 score.<sup>10</sup>

If the main hypothesis holds, we would see positive feelings toward the leader systematically biasing policy evaluations upward and negative feelings systematically biasing policy evaluations downward.<sup>11</sup> And according to the second hypothesis, we would see a negative image being more powerful than a positive image, due to negativity biases. Table 1 displays the test of the first hypothesis, where I compare the impact of a favorable image to an unfavorable image on general policy evaluations. Average policy evaluations are at .55 points. Naming the favorable leader (President Mandela) results in an upward shift on policy evaluations by .04 points, which is, however, not significant compared to the neutral source. When the unfavorable leader is mentioned (President Bush), evaluations of the policy drop significantly lower than the control by .10 points.

To examine the direct effect of feelings toward presidents Bush and Mandela on the policy evaluations, in Table 2 we regress citizens' reported

**TABLE 2** Affective Reactions and General Policy Evaluation

	General policy evaluation
Constant	.54 (.07)
Feelings toward President Mandela	.09 (.09)
Feelings toward President Bush	-.17** (.08)
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	.18
N	65

\* $p < .01$ .

*Note.* The dependent variable is on a 0–1 scale, with 0 for low evaluation and 1 for high evaluation. Parameter estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients, and standard errors are in parentheses.

feelings toward the source, to the policy evaluations.<sup>12</sup> The results show that while support for the policy is again around .54 points, moving from unfavorable to favorable feelings toward President Mandela does not change policy evaluations significantly (.09). On the other hand, moving from liking President Bush to disliking him decreases issue support by .17 points.

Next, the source was varied to see how specific evaluations of the policies changed. Table 3 presents the mean evaluations for the policy when it was advocated by presidents Bush or Mandela or an unknown politician. Again, the interesting finding is that when the policy is attributed to President Bush, evaluations drop significantly compared to the control or the President Mandela condition. More specifically, general evaluations drop from .55 points when the source is unknown to .44 points when the source is President Bush. While participants would favor the policy by .59 points when the source is unknown and would support it by .68 points when the author is President Mandela, under President Bush the policy receives only average ratings (.50). The same policy is seen as having a positive or average impact on the careers of the unknown source (.55) and President Mandela (.48) respectively, but a significantly more negative impact for the career of President Bush (.41).

Emotional reactions toward the policy issues are also important. Table 4 displays the 11 positive and negative emotion items. Consistently, emotional reactions in the Bush condition are more negative, while in the Mandela condition more positive, than the control. The most noticeable changes appear in negative emotions of disgust (from .08 under the Mandela condition, to .14 under the control condition, to .25 under the Bush condition) and irritation (from .13 under President Mandela, to .23 under the control, and .35 under President Bush). Turning to the positive emotions, participants were significantly more satisfied with the policy under the Mandela condition (.37) compared to the Bush condition (.21). Similarly, participants were more sympathetic toward the policy under President Mandela (.46) compared to President Bush (.23). While the policy did not impress participants much

**TABLE 3** Policy General and Specific Evaluations

	Unknown source	President Mandela	President Bush
General evaluation	.55 (.15) <sup>a</sup>	.59 (.17) <sup>a</sup>	.44 (.20) <sup>b</sup>
Favor the policy	.59 (.22) <sup>a</sup>	.68 (.21) <sup>a</sup>	.50 (.23) <sup>b</sup>
Impact on career	.55 (.20) <sup>a</sup>	.48 (.22) <sup>ab</sup>	.41 (.25) <sup>b</sup>
Success of implementation	.48 (.18) <sup>a</sup>	.51 (.21) <sup>a</sup>	.37 (.22) <sup>b</sup>
Good reasons for support	.58 (.21) <sup>ab</sup>	.67 (.21) <sup>b</sup>	.50 (.24) <sup>a</sup>
N	40	41	47

*Note.* All variables are rescaled on a 0–1 scale, with 0 for low ratings on the specific variable and 1 for high ratings. Values are means, and standard deviations are in parentheses. Superscripts (a and b) indicate significant differences at .05 level between same-row means.

**TABLE 4** Emotional Reactions to the Policy

	Unknown, control	Mandela condition	Bush condition
Afraid	.23 (.26) <sup>a</sup>	.12 (.23) <sup>b</sup>	.15 (.22) <sup>b</sup>
Angry	.20 (.29) <sup>a</sup>	.10 (.20) <sup>a</sup>	.25 (.32) <sup>ab</sup>
Confused	.27 (.29) <sup>a</sup>	.20 (.24) <sup>a</sup>	.27 (.28) <sup>a</sup>
Disgusted	.14 (.24) <sup>a</sup>	.08 (.19) <sup>a</sup>	.25 (.32) <sup>b</sup>
Bored	.30 (.28) <sup>a</sup>	.26 (.26) <sup>a</sup>	.36 (.32) <sup>a</sup>
Irritated	.23 (.26) <sup>ab</sup>	.13 (.27) <sup>a</sup>	.35 (.35) <sup>b</sup>
Safe	.18 (.28) <sup>a</sup>	.25 (.29) <sup>a</sup>	.20 (.28) <sup>a</sup>
Satisfied	.25 (.32) <sup>ab</sup>	.37 (.30) <sup>a</sup>	.21 (.24) <sup>b</sup>
Sympathetic	.28 (.34) <sup>a</sup>	.46 (.30) <sup>b</sup>	.23 (.25) <sup>a</sup>
Proud	.16 (.27) <sup>a</sup>	.16 (.30) <sup>a</sup>	.11 (.22) <sup>a</sup>
Impressed	.22 (.27) <sup>ab</sup>	.32 (.28) <sup>a</sup>	.13 (.23) <sup>ab</sup>
N	40	41	47

*Note.* All variables are rescaled on a 0–1 scale, with 0 for low ratings on the specific variable and 1 for high ratings. Values are means, and standard deviations are in parentheses. Superscripts (a and b) indicate significant differences at .05 level between same-row means.

when advocated by President Bush (.13), it had significantly more favorable impact when advocated by President Mandela (.32).

The above analyses show that a negative political image hurts policy evaluations. Table 5 shows that differences between participants in the Mandela and Bush conditions are consistent across the policy evaluation items. More specifically, participants in the Bush condition were .09 points lower in agreement with the policy compared to the control condition. They also argued that the impact of the policy on the politician's career would be .14 points more negative and predicted .10 points less success for the policy implementation. Participants in the Mandela condition were overall more favorable than the control, but the effect of the positive reputation of President Mandela again did not reach statistical significance.

Table 6 shows results for testing the hypotheses regarding political knowledge and political trust. Along with the two dichotomous variables that

**TABLE 5** Experimental Manipulations Impact on Specific Policy Ratings

	Favor	Impact	Success	Reasons
Constant	.59 (.04)	.55 (.04)	.48 (.04)	.58 (.04)
Mandela condition	.09 (.05)	-.07 (.05)	.04 (.05)	.09 (.05)
Bush condition	-.09* (.04)	-.14** (.05)	-.10* (.04)	-.08 (.05)
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.05	.07	.08
N	127	127	127	127

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

*Note.* All variables are rescaled on a 0–1 scale, with 0 for low ratings on the specific variable and 1 for high ratings. Parameter estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients, and standard errors in parentheses.

**TABLE 6** Political Knowledge and Political Trust Impact on Policy Ratings

	General evaluation	Impact	Success
Constant	.55 (.06)	.53 (.07)	.52 (.06)
Mandela condition	.05 (.04)	-.05 (.05)	.05 (.04)
Bush condition	-.09* (.04)	-.13** (.05)	-.09* (.04)
Political knowledge	-.22** (.06)	-.22** (.08)	-.33*** (.07)
Trust in politics	.23* (.09)	.30* (.12)	.26* (.11)
Adj R <sup>2</sup>	.18	.12	.20
N	127	127	127

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Note.* All variables are rescaled on a 0–1 scale, with 0 for low ratings on the specific variable and 1 for high ratings. Parameter estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients, and standard errors are in parentheses.

denote the experimental manipulations of Mandela or Bush, I included the political knowledge and political trust scales as explanatory variables. In agreement with the findings of the previous analyses, participants in the Bush condition evaluated the policy .09 points lower than the control group. They also expected the impact of the policy on the actor's career to be .13 points more negative and were less optimistic about the success of the policy implementation by .09 points.

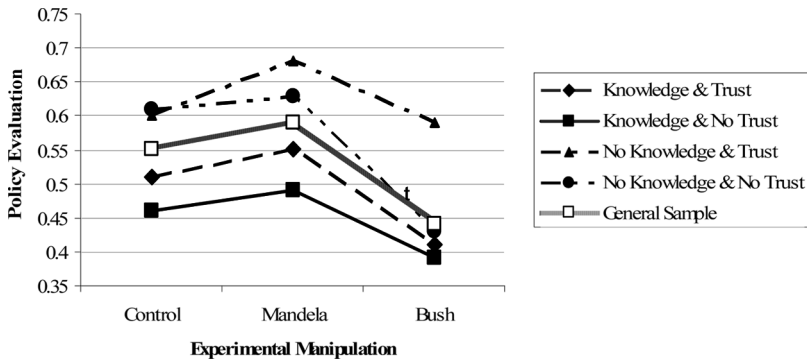
In line with our hypothesis, political knowledge has a significant and negative effect on the evaluation of the issue. Experts evaluated the policy lower by .22 points compared to novices. Experts also found the impact of the policy more harmful (.22 points) and were more doubtful about its success (.33). Turning to political trust, confirming our expectations, it has a significant and positive effect. The participants who trust political institutions more, and are thus less cynical, give a more favorable evaluation of the policies (.23), find their impact more favorable on the image of the political actors (.30 points), and are more optimistic about their success (.26 points).

Turning to the interaction of political knowledge and political trust, we can identify differences in the way the four groups, the trusting experts, the cynic experts, the cynic novices, and the trusting novices, came to their evaluations. Table 7 shows the policy evaluations under each experimental

**TABLE 7** General Policy Ratings for Political Knowledge and Political Trust

	Control condition	Mandela condition	Bush condition	Mean rating
Trusting experts	.51 (.14)	.55 (.23)	.41 (.11)	.49
Cynic experts	.46 (.19)	.49 (.19)	.39 (.19)	.44
Trusting novices	.60 (.13)	.68 (.11)	.59 (.14)	.62
Cynic novices	.61 (.13)	.63 (.11)	.43 (.20)	.55

*Note.* All variables are rescaled on a 0–1 scale, with 0 for low ratings on the specific variable and 1 for high ratings. Values are means, and standard deviations are in parentheses.



**FIGURE 1** General policy ratings by experimental manipulation; compared scores of the political knowledge and political trust groups.

condition and their average for each group, while Figure 1 offers a visual summary of the findings.

In line with our hypothesis, the most negative in their policy evaluations are the cynic experts, with ratings as low as .39 points under the negative affect condition. Their ratings in the control and positive affect conditions increase by only .7 and .10 points, respectively, and their ratings still remain among the lowest, with an average rating of .44 points across the three conditions. The small distance between the control and the positive affect condition (.3 points) indicate the limited role of affect in their evaluations. The relatively close clustering of their responses reflects the consistency in their evaluations due to their increased political knowledge level.

With average evaluations of .49 points, the trusting experts appear a little less negative than their cynic counterparts. Their ratings in the negative affect condition are just .2 points higher than those of the cynic experts, suggesting that negative affect does not play much of a role in their evaluations either. The slightly higher policy rating in the control condition (.51) suggests that political trust inspires some optimism, which is, however, kept under control by their increased policy knowledge. The .4-point difference between the control and Mandela conditions shows that positive affect is not much of a factor in their evaluation.

With overall favorable ratings (.55 for the cynic novices and .62 for the trusting novices) the two novice groups share similarities regarding their policy optimism and differences regarding the impact of affect in their evaluations. Interestingly, the two groups start off at a very similar point in the control conditions, with evaluations around .60 points. Their low political knowledge allows them initially optimistic policy evaluations. For the trusting novices, favorable source images drive policy ratings to .68 points in the Mandela condition. But their cynic counterparts are not as susceptible to positive affect. Their policy ratings increase only by .2 points in the

Mandela condition. On the other hand, negative affect plays a significant role for the evaluations of the cynic novices, reducing policy ratings to .43 points under the Bush condition. This .18-point drop from the control condition brings their evaluations close to ones provided by experts, but for different reasons. Interestingly, negative affect has no impact on the evaluations of the trusting cynics. Their policy ratings under the control and Bush conditions are identical (.60 and .59, respectively), showing that political trust and confidence in political leadership gives the benefit of the doubt even to political actors with unfavorable images, such as President Bush.

Findings indicate that feelings generated by political images can affect citizens' reactions to policy issues. While favorable images can have a modest positive effect, negativity biases prevail, making unfavorable images detrimental for the support of the policies proposed. The analyses also uncovered differences based on political knowledge and political trust. While political knowledge leads to more modest and critical policy evaluations, trust in the political system goes hand in hand with increased support for policies. The interesting variation in the policy ratings among the trusting and the cynics, the novices and the experts, indicates that in policy evaluations, the same words can mean different things depending on who listens.

## DISCUSSION

As with any experiment, this study has certain limitations. First, the external validity of its findings is reduced by the use of student participants. This could be remedied by directing future research to include a non-university sample. A second limitation that characterizes experimental research in general is that the political world is more complex than the experimental environment. To avoid oversimplification of political images and their affective content, this experiment includes actual political actors instead of fictional political profiles. In addition, the policy proposals are actual, instead of bogus. To avoid reducing policy proposals to oversimplified policy sentences, this experiment used long (350 words) policy statements that present the policy in a more complete manner. Despite these measures, there is always the possibility that there are additional factors that affect citizens' opinions for which this study does not account.

Having confirmed the affective impact of political images on policy evaluations, there are several interesting avenues for further research. One is the exploration of specific emotional reactions toward the source, especially negative emotions such as threat, fear, and anger, and their impact on political decision making. For example, research suggests that these emotional categories have a distinct impact on cognitive abilities. Threatening stimuli can inspire learning and information processing, because the surveillance system is activated (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau, 2007).

However, fear prevents cognitive processing of information because anxious subjects focus their attention on the threatening source, blocking out other aspects of the environment (Huddy et al., 2005). Anger, on the other hand, leads to more thinking toward identifying the source of the negativity (Small et al., 2006). Studies have also identified differences in decision making. While fear reduces risk seeking, anger promotes risk-taking behavior. Huddy et al. (2002) show that when experiencing threatening conditions, for example a terrorist attack, citizens are inclined to sacrifice civil liberties. Ethnocentrism is also facilitated by similar feelings of fear or anxiety (Feldman and Stenner, 1997). Finally, differences are noted in the evaluation of future expectations: while anger triggers optimistic beliefs, fear brings greater pessimism (Lerner et al., 2003). It would be interesting to measure in an experimental setting the impact of specific emotional reactions generated by political leaders on learning, information retention, and the evaluation of future outcomes.

A related point is that of salience. In this experiment, we witnessed significant changes in policy ratings by simply manipulating the name of the politician. An extension of this research can measure the impact of affect when participants are induced to concentrate more intensely on the source. Evidence of policy personalization is abundant. News media convey policy information in a style that features leading actors in touching dramas. Heads of governments are portrayed as political stars, and political actors who compete for favorable attention promote personalized politics to show how well they connect with the public (Graber et al., 1998). Graber (1997) notes that in the United States, roughly 25% of political news stories refer to some aspect of the presidency. Similarly, in Germany 30% of the time devoted to political institutions or actors is devoted to personalized stories (Pfetsch, 1996). In an era of widespread personalization, raising the salience of a political personality in a story can increase the role of citizens' affective reactions as determinants of policy evaluations.

A third line of research can test the impact of emotional reactions on a greater range of policy issues. This experiment uses foreign policies, which are generally considered more complex and distant than domestic policies (Rosen, 1973). Studies on persuasion show that opinions get stronger as the issue becomes more relevant. Conversely, when an issue is remote, opinions are weaker. It is possible that the use of leader cues is intensified due to the low salience of the issues at hand. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1981), people might use judgment shortcuts more often when they are not motivated to process the information more carefully. It would be worthwhile to replicate the experiment testing the impact of leadership affect in a domestic policy environment similar to that used by Kuklinski and Hurley (1994) or Sniderman et al. (1991) such as racial issues, cultural integration, public practice of religion, abortion policies, or drinking, smoking, or drug regulation policies.

## Concluding Remarks

The findings of this article show that citizens follow their feelings toward political actors when they evaluate policy issues. By bringing emotionality in the study of policy evaluations, this study complements research that focuses on their cognitive character (Downs, 1957). Inspired by the work of Asch (1952) and Lane and Sears (1964) on the impact of source characteristics and sentence authorship on message interpretation, it shows that changing the proponent of a policy changes the interpretation of the message via affective routes. It also extends previous work that measures the impact of affective reactions to story protagonists or policy beneficiaries (Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991). While these studies focus on racial issues, this article examines policy proposals of broader appeal and focuses on story authorship instead of the characters in the story.

If the evaluation of policy issues is shaped by political signatures, the personalization of political campaigns and issue debates is changing politics as we know it. The findings have significant consequences for political marketing, as they bring political images to the forefront of everyday politics. In general, politicians are driven by two motives: implementing policies and creating a positive image. My results show that the two goals are related. Political images affect public perceptions of policies at the same time that issue preferences affect leader evaluations.

We also see that the manipulation of public opinion can be subtle. It does not require falsification of policy details, elaborate justifications, or extensive debating. Sometimes, the simple endorsement by the right or wrong political leader can determine public preferences. In fact, we also see that positive and negative emotionality does not carry equal weight. The harmful impact of negative feelings is stronger than the beneficial impact of positive feelings. And as emotional reactions are conditional on political knowledge and trust, the understanding of policy decision making requires the careful consideration of not only the political issue itself but also its advocate, his or her emotional profile, and audience characteristics.

Early public opinion studies concluded that most citizens are not very interested in politics (Campbell et al., 1960) and lack information about salient proposals and issues (Converse, 1964; Kinder and Sears, 1983). Public opinion polls back this argument, indicating the lack of information on a majority of political issues among the general public. What we see here is that citizens, although not avidly participating in politics, they express opinions on a diverse array of policies and these opinions rely on their feelings toward their political leaders. Affective cues are an inevitable way for people to connect with political issues. These emotional shortcuts do not create politically inattentive citizens, but might in fact allow the electorate to stay in touch with politics and maintain a general willingness and aptitude to fulfill basic political functions (Mondak, 1993a).

In conclusion, these findings point to the complexity of political decision making. Indeed, the translation of information to opinion is not a transparent process. Political scientists attempt to shed light to the “black box” of opinion formation by exploring the impact of cognitive schemata (Lau et al., 1991), information processing heuristics (Mondak, 1993b), emotions (Marcus and MacKuen, 1993; Lodge and Taber, 2000), political symbols (Kinder and Sears, 1981), frames (Nelson and Kinder, 1996), and metaphors (Lau and Schlesinger, 2005) by demonstrating that the criteria citizens employ for the assessment of policy issues are not easy to capture. This article provides some illumination into this puzzle, but examining the role of political images as affective heuristics in the evaluation of policy proposals.

## NOTES

1. Image is generally understood as a “human construct imposed on an array of perceived attributes predicted by an object, event, or person” (Nimmo and Savage, 1976).

2. High scores on the political trust scale are correlated with an increase in the chance of citizens cooperating with governments, for example, paying taxes or serving in the military, and a decrease in free-riding (Scholtz and Lubell, 1998).

3. For a parallel discussion regarding the relationship between political cynicism and social class, see Demertzis (2006). Reviewing the literature on political sociology, Demertzis argues that cynicism of the elites should be differentiated from the cynicism of the powerless. If economic capital and resources at the social level are matched to informational capital and knowledge resources at the individual level, the parallel between the sociological macro-political argument and the micro-political psychological hypothesis comes to the surface.

4. Not a single participant expressed any skepticism that the two surveys were in fact part of the same experiment.

5. Participants rated Bush and Mandela and two other political actors serving as filler material.

6. Participants also gave specific emotional reactions toward Bush and Mandela. They were asked to note the extent to which each actor made them feel angry, disgusted, impressed, irritated, proud, and sympathetic. These measures are not used in the current article.

7. Each discrete item was weighted equally, and answers were coded 1 for the correct and 0 for the wrong response. Respondents that answered “don’t know” were counted as incorrect responses. The political information items include accuracy of recall items (prime minister of the Netherlands; office of Maria van de Hoeven; party of Joop Cohen; years since Netherlands became a separate state; three parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands; content of article 7 of the Dutch Constitution; the Dutch minister of foreign affairs; the vice president of the United States; the political party that has the most members in the U.S. Senate; number of Dutch members in the European Parliament; identification of a country (among four) that is not a member of the European Union).

8. The political trust items were as follows: You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right; unless we keep a close watch on them, many of our elected officials will look out for special interests rather than for all the people; when our government leaders make statements to the people on television or newspapers, they are usually telling the truth; and quite a few people running our government are not as honest as the voters have the right to expect.

9. To create the dichotomous variables of political knowledge and political trust, the sample was split in half for each of the scales. One half of the respondents who gave the highest scores were coded as “high” on each scale, while the other half was coded as “low.”

10. For Bush, correlations of the negative emotions were between .73 and .80 ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Correlations for positive emotions toward Bush ranged from .34 to .53 ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Positive emotions toward Mandela were between .40 and .66 ( $\alpha = .73$ ). Negative emotion correlations for Mandela were between .29 and .44 ( $\alpha = .64$ ).

11. Because the ratings the policies received did not reveal any significant differences, the analysis performed does not differentiate between the two.

12. Because measures of reactions toward the political actors were recorded before providing participants with the policy statements, we can assume that the direction of causation goes from the political reputations to policy evaluations and not the other way.

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