



Affect and Politics: Exploring the Bidirectional Dynamics, Mechanisms, and Future Directions

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Abstract: *This work examines the intricate relationship between affect and politics, highlighting how emotions are integral to political attitudes, behaviors, and institutional processes. It distinguishes between discrete emotions, moods, and generalized affective states, emphasizing their distinct roles in shaping political cognition and action. The analysis explores bidirectional models that conceptualize affect and political contexts as mutually constitutive through dynamic feedback loops operating across multiple temporal scales. The work identifies significant gaps in current research, including the need for finer differentiation among discrete emotions, longitudinal studies on affective climate formation, cross-cultural comparisons of emotional legitimacy norms, and the impact of digital media on affect transmission. It calls for multi-method approaches combining physiological, linguistic, and ethnographic data to capture the layered nature of political affect. Ethical considerations surrounding the modulation of public emotions are also addressed. Overall, this synthesis advances a comprehensive framework for analyzing how affect shapes and is shaped by political life across individual, collective, institutional, and cultural dimensions.*

Keywords: *Psychology, Affect, Politics, Affective Politics, Emotion.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The interplay between affect and politics can be observed across multiple layers of human interaction and institutional frameworks. Emotions are not peripheral features of political life but are embedded within the processes through which political attitudes form, change, and solidify. They act as structured, socially recognized patterns of response that extend beyond individual perception into collective meaning-making. Fear, anger, enthusiasm, and related affects are often bound by distinct internal “logics,” shaping when and why they arise, as well as their political consequences. These affects influence not only voter behavior in campaigns but also broader ideological divisions within society. This relationship is bidirectional: while emotions shape political beliefs, political contexts can prime or reshape emotional experiences.

For Instance, media ecosystems contribute significantly to this affect-politics feedback loop. Emotionally charged content gains more traction within both traditional media channels and algorithm-driven social platforms (Utych, 2018). The amplified reach of such content intensifies partisan divides by reinforcing preexisting attitudes among highly engaged audiences. Emotional saturation in media consumption fosters attitudinal entrenchment because individuals tend to select information that resonates emotionally with their worldview rather than seeking balanced perspectives. The production of affect is also tied to mechanisms that extend beyond overt political messaging. Economic conditions such as recessions may catalyze mild frustrations into stronger feelings like resentment or fear when interpreted through existing ideological frameworks (Shah, 2024). Similarly, memory work, whether through commemorations or contested historical narratives, functions as a staging ground for emotional alignment (Ahmed, 2014). By circulating particular images or stories in public discourse, actors transform events into “objects” around which collective feeling aggregates. Reactions in democratic processes highlight how fluid emotional judgments can be. Citizens often decide their stance on issues at the very last moment before voting without consistent reliance on predetermined ideological commitments



(Gudavarthy, 2023). This unpredictability emerges from a dynamic negotiation between personal ethics, immediate circumstances, and broader moral considerations. Democracy's openness means that emotions feed unpredictably into decision-making processes that can shift outcomes unexpectedly.

Understanding affective dynamics in politics involves examining both micro-level psychological processes and macro-level cultural formations. Through repeated public performances, such as rallies or protests, these alignments manifest physically while reinforcing ideological cohesion within movements. Spatially and temporally distributed factors add complexity: what triggers strong emotional responses in one era might lose salience later unless reinvigorated by new events framed similarly. Affect operates as both an input into political life and an emergent property shaped by it, a continuous circuit where influence flows in both directions without a clear point of origin. This complexity makes cross-cultural comparisons particularly valuable for pinpointing differences in how these relationships manifest under varying institutional systems (Shah, 2024).

2. Conceptual Foundations of Affect and Politics

2.1 Defining Affect in Political Contexts

Emotions, Moods, and Affective States

Emotions, moods, and broader affective states function as intertwined yet distinct dimensions of human experience, each contributing differently to political cognition and action. Emotions are typically understood as relatively brief, intense responses directed at particular objects or events, accompanied by physiological changes and evaluative appraisals. Their object-directed nature means they often emerge in reaction to specific political stimuli such as campaign speeches, protest actions, or policy announcements.

Moods differ from emotions in duration and specificity; they tend to persist for longer periods and lack a clearly identifiable triggering stimulus. A negative mood induced by external factors, ranging from inclement weather to sporting event outcomes, can unconsciously influence judgments about unrelated political figures. Mood states act as a backdrop for information processing rather than an immediate driver of action toward a specific target. In experimental settings, these diffuse affective conditions not only shape immediate evaluations but can also prime individuals to interpret subsequent social and political stimuli through an affect-congruent lens.

Generalized affective states form an even broader category. This includes ongoing emotional climates shaped by repeated exposure to moods or emotions over time. Within political contexts, media environments rich in affectively charged narratives cultivate persistent affective orientations toward institutions, movements, or social groups. While much research has concentrated on discrete emotional episodes, the sustained background affect can establish long-term attitudinal baselines that condition responses to future stimuli. Affect can be conceptualized as embodied meaning-making embedded within broader social relations (Thompson & Willmott, 2015). Unlike approaches that isolate discrete emotional states from their contexts, this view acknowledges that meaning is constituted within networks of power, cultural norms, and historical memory. These "psychosocial textures" reveal how collective orientations develop not merely from individual emotion but through the shared circulation and reinforcement of affectively charged narratives. The shaping of collective identities also depends on how emotions structure boundaries between self and other.

Feelings are not static possessions; rather they materialize through contact with others' actions and words. In this sense, group-level affects such as anger or pride serve both to unify members internally and differentiate them externally. Moods within such collectives can crystallize into defining features of group ethos when repeatedly reinforced by interactions and symbolic acts. Political discourse frequently employs language without direct references to discrete emotions yet imbued with general affective tone. Words carrying implicit emotional valence can subtly shift attitudes without overtly naming an emotion (Utych, 2018). Such rhetorical strategies demonstrate how generalized affect can be mobilized in ways less explicit but perhaps more enduring than transient bursts of emotion. Cross-modal experiences provide further insight into how these categories operate synergistically. In interactive media environments combining visual, auditory, and haptic feedback, users embody characters whose movements intensify interpersonal affective exchanges (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). These interactions blur distinctions between individual feeling states by embedding them in shared mediated spaces where collective enjoyment or rage becomes palpable across physical distances.

In practical political terms, differentiating between these layers, discrete emotion, mood state, generalized affect, is essential for understanding timing and persistence of effects on public opinion. Campaigns exploiting fear might achieve immediate mobilization through targeted emotional triggers; however persistent negative mood climates foster long-term cynicism toward governance structures (Utych, 2018). Interventions aimed at changing public sentiment must account



for whether they seek short-lived surges tied to events or gradual recalibration of broader emotional climates. Ultimately these distinctions underscore why disentangling cause-effect relationships between politics and affect remains complex. Affect operates simultaneously at conscious and unconscious levels; it is experienced individually while being constituted collectively; it persists across temporal scales from milliseconds to centuries. Appreciating these gradations informs both empirical analysis and theoretical modeling of political behavior within varied sociocultural contexts (Ahmed, 2014; Thompson & Willmott, 2015).

Dimensions of Affect

Assessing the dimensions of affect within political contexts requires a framework that captures its multifaceted structure and the interplay between individual experience, collective meaning, and situational triggers. Affect can be parsed into several analytical dimensions, including valence, arousal, intensity, temporal persistence, and object-directedness. Valence refers to the positive or negative quality of an affective state, while arousal concerns its level of physiological activation. Intensity indicates magnitude of experience, which can vary across individuals depending on both dispositional tendencies and context-specific factors (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). These properties are not independent; high-arousal negative states such as anger may drive behavioral mobilization differently than low-arousal negative states like sadness. The temporal dimension, a factor highlighted in theoretical work, distinguishes transient emotional reactions from persistent moods or enduring affective climates. Short-term emotions often have situationally bound antecedents such as speeches or visual stimuli in media coverage. In contrast, long-term climates develop through repeated exposure to emotionally congruent cues over extended periods (Utych, 2018). Such climates can exert a baseline influence on perception and decision-making even in the absence of new triggering events. Another significant characteristic is object specificity. Some affects like spite target specific individuals or events; others are diffuse, lacking a clear referent. For example, resentment operates as a free-floating affect nurtured by repression and internalization rather than immediate confrontation with an object (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012).

2.2 Defining Politics in the Context of Affective Research

Political Behavior and Decision-Making

Political behavior emerges from the continuous interplay between individual affective states and the socio-political environments in which decisions occur. Emotions directly shape perception, information processing, and the calculus of action, often determining whether individuals politically engage or remain passive. High-arousal emotions such as fear or anger can serve as catalysts for mobilization by heightening perceived stakes and sharpening attentional focus on congruent cues (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). Conversely, low-arousal states like resignation may suppress participation even when attitudes toward specific policies are strong. Importantly, such affect-driven dynamics are not one-directional; political structures and events actively condition which emotions are evoked and legitimized in public discourse. Affective triggers in politics often stem from crafted narratives designed to bundle disparate feelings into coherent public sentiments. This “emotional bundling” operates through symbolic representations that condense complex political realities into emotionally resonant objects (Shah, 2024). An iconic image, for instance, may connect grief with outrage, thereby energizing demands for policy change while reinforcing group identity. These tightly bound emotional configurations can shift voting preferences by reframing issues around moral imperatives rather than purely instrumental considerations. Political elites who master such strategies influence not only immediate reactions but also the longer-term moral landscapes within which decisions are made. Behavioral unpredictability, often remarked upon in democratic contexts, can be understood as an effect of “moral fungibility” (Gudavarthy, 2023).

Voters oscillate between ethical postures depending on situational pressures, moving from compassion to retribution when survival or security feels threatened. This flexibility complicates predictions based solely on stable ideological orientations; emotions interact with fluid moral frames to produce shifting alliances and sudden changes in electoral outcomes. Importantly, this adaptability can be interpreted both as a form of agency, resisting domination by entrenched ideologies, and as a space vulnerable to manipulative rhetoric seeking to “freeze” attitudes into rigid partisan positions. Political decision-making is also marked by the layered interaction of conscious deliberation with unconscious affective processes. Long-term affective climates also condition decision-making. Persistent emotional atmospheres such as sustained resentment over historical injustices remain salient even without ongoing triggering events (Ahmed, 2014). Within such climates, short-term stimuli related to similar themes have disproportionate impact due to their resonance with entrenched feelings. Policy support patterns illustrate this: societies grappling with legacies of injustice show stronger linkages between group-based emotions (for example guilt or moral outrage) and support for reparative measures



than predictions based solely on ideological self-placement would suggest (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021).

The fluidity inherent in these processes means interventions seeking to shape political behavior must address both immediate emotional triggers and the deeper affective atmospheres in which they operate (Gudavarthy, 2023). Strategies focusing narrowly on rational argumentation risk limited effectiveness if they do not engage with existing emotional investments or address structural factors reinforcing those emotions over time. Moreover, decision outcomes frequently emerge from the interaction between rapidly changing mediated contexts, including viral content bursts, and slower-moving cultural narratives embedded across generations (Shah, 2024). Ultimately, political behavior cannot be reduced to linear cause-effect chains whereby discrete issues generate predictable responses. Rather, it is embedded within a recursive system where emotional states influence interpretations of political context even as evolving contexts reshape emotional landscapes through symbolic practices, media structures, and collective memory work (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012). Recognizing this bidirectionality offers a path toward richer models capable of integrating both immediate situational responsiveness and enduring dispositions shaped by historical trajectories and embodied alignments.

Institutional and Structural Contexts

Institutions and structural arrangements shape political life in ways that both channel and constrain affective dynamics. The formal rules, normative orders, and organizational cultures embedded within state apparatuses influence which emotions are legitimized, amplified, or suppressed in public discourse (Shah, 2024). This selective amplification is not incidental but instrumental to governance strategies. For instance, official narratives during crisis events often promote unity-oriented emotions such as pride and solidarity, while marginalizing grief expressions that might fuel dissent. Such affective framing embeds emotional responses within broader projects of nation-building or regime stability. It also delineates emotional boundaries between perceived insiders and outsiders, thereby influencing how citizens orient their bodies and allegiances toward collective symbols. Structural factors also include the macro-political economy of media production, which determines the permeability of institutional narratives to alternative affective framings. Networked platforms reconfigure this terrain by circumventing traditional gatekeepers and enabling rapid circulation of emotive content that may challenge or reinforce dominant institutional positions (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). This interplay produces moments where affect “leaks” outside intended channels, creating tensions between official accounts and grassroots reactions. Such tensions can destabilize established authority if subaltern affective publics succeed in mobilizing counter-narratives with sufficient reach. Political institutions interact with affect not merely through overt communication but via underlying power relations shaping everyday practice. Insights from an affect-based ontology of practice illuminate how organizational structures condition actors’ identifications and dis-identifications (Thompson & Willmott, 2015). Institutional settings, whether legislative chambers or bureaucratic agencies, cultivate specific emotion norms, guidelines about appropriate displays aligned with role expectations. This normalizes certain affective repertoires among political elites while marginalizing others, potentially narrowing the range of emotional expression in policy debates. These patterns feed back into the citizenry by modeling sanctioned ways of feeling about political objects.

Historically rooted structural inequalities further complicate this picture by generating differentiated emotional geographies across social groups. Marginalized communities often inhabit affective climates marked by persistent emotions such as anger or distrust toward state authority, emotions sedimented through repeated experiences of exclusion or violence. Legislative attention to these grievances may be shaped less by policy efficacy than by institutional comfort with the underlying affects; anger might be read as a call for negotiation in some contexts, or as a threat meriting repression in others. At the ideological level, institutionalized power tends to transform complex social phenomena into psychological terms when addressing emotive issues like hate crimes (Ahmed, 2014). Framing structural racism primarily in individual psychological terms obscures its systemic dimensions while reconfiguring structural violence into a matter of personal prejudice. This redirection shapes permissible affective responses: compassion becomes individualized charity rather than collective outrage at institutional injustice. Authoritarian systems illustrate an extreme form of this structural conditioning of emotions.

Emotional appeals are densely integrated into legal structures, education systems, and policy enforcement mechanisms so that alternate affective orientations, particularly those aligned with critique, are delegitimized at both formal and informal levels. Institutional contexts also mediate the translation between fleeting emotional surges and sustained political change. Emotional energy generated in protest movements often dissipates unless channeled into stable organizational forms capable of sustaining engagement over time (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). Conversely, institutions can absorb oppositional affects through procedural mechanisms that diffuse intensity without fundamentally altering existing power distributions. Public hearings or symbolic gestures may offer outlets for expression while leaving underlying



grievances unresolved. The interpretative flexibility inherent in language provides another vector for institutional influence over emotions. Affectively charged vocabulary employed in official texts can activate particular orientations without explicitly naming an emotion (Utych, 2018). Policy documents describing benefits as “earned” versus “granted” implicitly cue pride or gratitude rather than entitlement-based anger. Over time such cues embed themselves within bureaucratic processes so deeply that they function as background conditions for decision-making among both administrators and recipients.

Finally, it is important to recognize how structural context interacts with unconscious processes identified in psychoanalytically informed theories (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012). Institutional symbols, flags, seals, ceremonial rituals, accrue layers of historical association that inspire loyalty or aversion without requiring conscious articulation from those affected. Because these attachments often resist rational persuasion, they exert sustained influence over political alignments regardless of shifting policy content. By integrating these perspectives, it becomes clear that institutions do more than provide procedural order; they operate as active fields structuring the production, circulation, and legitimacy of political affects. They stabilize certain emotional linkages while working to unsettle others through narrative control, performative display norms, legal framing devices, and spatial organization of political interaction spaces. Recognizing this embeddedness helps explain why attempts to shift public sentiment must grapple not only with immediate communication strategies but also with the deeper architectures through which societies manage feeling states across time (Thompson & Willmott, 2015).

3. Theoretical Perspectives on the Affect-Politics Relationship

3.1 Bidirectional Models

Dynamic Interaction Models

Dynamic interaction models conceptualize the relationship between affect and politics as a continuous feedback process in which emotional states and political contexts mutually influence and reshape one another over time. Rather than positing a linear flow from emotion to action or from structural context to feeling, these models emphasize the simultaneity and reciprocity of causation. Emotional reactions to political stimuli feed into behavioral choices, which in turn alter the political environment, thereby generating new emotional responses. This cyclical mechanism produces patterns that are both emergent and historically contingent, as successive iterations of interaction reinforce certain orientations while diminishing others (Shah, 2024). Central to this framework is the recognition that emotions are not static internal states but social phenomena taking shape through repeated contact with others’ symbols, actions, and narratives (Ahmed, 2014). In dynamic models, political events, whether elections, protests, policy changes, or crises, become affective triggers whose meaning is filtered through pre-existing emotional climates.

Theories grounded in historical and cultural sensitivity note how long-standing affective dispositions mediate present-day responses. Persistent resentment stemming from structural inequities, such as unequal access to resources, shapes how new political developments are perceived (Sultana, 2015). In such settings, even relatively minor administrative decisions may ignite disproportionately strong collective reactions because they resonate with entrenched emotional histories. Conversely, shifts in macro-political framing can reconfigure the salience of stored affects: an elite narrative reframing economic hardship as an external imposition rather than domestic failure can transmute diffuse frustration into targeted anger toward out-groups (Gudavarthy, 2023). Dynamic interaction models also account for moments of rupture when established affect-context alignments are disrupted. Psychoanalytically inflected approaches highlight that unconscious attachments can anchor political identifications beyond rational calculation (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012), yet sudden events or symbolic interventions may destabilize these anchors.

Media systems represent a key accelerant within these feedback loops. Affectively charged content spreads through networked publics with speed and reach that conventional models of political communication could not account for (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). In dynamic terms, each act of sharing is simultaneously an expression of personal feeling and an intervention into collective meaning-making; the resulting amplification alters the perceived urgency or legitimacy of issues, prompting further emotional engagement. Episodes like viral protest footage exhibit compressed cycles where emotion-driven mobilization impacts institutional responses within days or even hours, responses which then recalibrate participant emotions and strategies in near real-time. Within institutional contexts, dynamic models acknowledge asymmetries in power over emotional framing (Thompson & Willmott, 2015). State actors often possess greater capacity to disseminate cohesive narratives during crises, privileging certain sentiments, such as unity over dissent, while suppressing oppositional affects through formal discourse controls (Shah, 2024). However, counter-publics can exploit



cracks in this control by reinterpreting official messaging through ironic humor or satirical reframing that reorients collective feeling away from its intended trajectory. An important corollary emerging from these models is that feedback processes occur across multiple temporal scales. At micro-temporal levels, minutes or hours after exposure, emotions influence selective attention and initial judgments about actors or policies (Utych, 2018). At meso-scales, weeks or months, they condition sustained engagement with movements or campaigns depending on whether situational triggers align with prevailing mood climates. At macro-scales extending decades, historically embedded affects reinforce enduring cleavages between communities (Ahmed, 2014).

These models further challenge dichotomies between cognition and emotion by situating information processing within ongoing affective currents rather than outside them (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). Affective evaluations bias data selection; chosen information then feeds into reasoning processes whose conclusions confirm prior moods, a confirmation loop maintaining stability unless sufficiently disrupted by novel inputs interpreted through alternative emotional frames. Consequently, interventions aimed at shifting public opinion must operate simultaneously at cognitive-appraisal levels and within the emotionally charged contexts in which evaluation occurs. Merely presenting factual counterarguments without addressing underlying affective commitments risks limited effect because dynamic reinforcement mechanisms continually regenerate congruent interpretations from discordant facts. Emphasizing bidirectionality also brings into view the transformative potential inherent in public expression of marginalized affects (Reilly et al., 2017). Through their focus on continuous co-constitution of emotion and politics across scales, dynamic interaction models provide an analytic structure attuned to complexity without reducing outcomes solely to strategic manipulation by elites or spontaneous masses' sentiment shifts. They incorporate molecular-level interpersonal exchanges alongside macro-historical forces; they trace causal loops cutting across embodied reactions, mediated representations, institutional regulations, and discursive struggles over legitimacy (Ahmed, 2014.; Shah, 2024). This breadth makes them particularly effective for capturing how transient episodes of outrage evolve, or fail to evolve, into sustained political change under different contextual configurations shaped by media ecologies, state strategies, grassroots innovations, and deep-seated historical narratives alike.

Feedback Loops in Affect and Political Contexts

Feedback loops in affect and political contexts describe iterative cycles in which emotional responses and political developments amplify or reshape one another over time. These loops manifest through complex interactions between individual-level affective processes, collective sentiment dynamics, media circulation, and institutional framing. Initial emotional stimuli, whether triggered by a policy announcement, symbolic act, or crisis, set in motion cognitive and behavioral reactions that contribute to political actions. These actions, when aggregated or mediated through mass communication channels, become part of the environment that feeds back into individual and group emotional states (Shah, 2024). The key feature is reciprocity: emotions mold political contexts that in turn modulate future emotions. At the individual level, high-arousal affects such as anger or enthusiasm can quickly escalate participation rates in mobilizations or electoral campaigns. Once engaged, participants' experiences within these political activities can strengthen their prior emotional orientations, leading to sustained readiness for similar future engagement (Goel & Pandey, 2020). For instance, a protest energized by shared outrage may foster interpersonal bonds grounded not only in ideological agreement but also in the affective enjoyment of collective expression (Ahmed, 2014). These positive feedback mechanisms contribute to more entrenched identity boundaries and an increased likelihood of recurring mobilization when similar triggers appear. Conversely, negative feedback loops arise when certain emotional triggers diminish subsequent motivation. As seen in cases of persistent institutional neglect or failed reform efforts, initial hope can degrade into cynicism if expectations are unmet. This shift recalibrates collective emotion toward withdrawal rather than renewed confrontation. Over time such patterns can stabilize disengagement as a prevailing affective climate within specific constituencies, weakening the capacity for future mass action despite ongoing grievances (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012).

The media environment functions as a significant loop accelerator by amplifying emotionally resonant content at scale (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). Algorithmic curation prioritizes high-engagement posts, often those that elicit strong emotions, which circulate widely and repeatedly re-expose audiences to framing cues aligned with their affective predispositions. Viral visual symbols or narratives act as modular triggers capable of reactivating latent feelings from past events (Ahmed, 2014). Each exposure not only reinforces the emotion but embeds it deeper into the evaluative frames individuals use to process subsequent political information. At collective scales, historical memory shapes feedback intensity and persistence. Emotions connected to past injustices can lie dormant until catalyzed by contemporary analogues, a process particularly evident in communities marked by intergenerational experiences of marginalization



(Sultana, 2015). Here the loop encompasses decades: earlier events shape enduring affective orientations which await activation under specific sociopolitical conditions. This long-wave rhythm complicates attempts at reconciliation because even modest present-day provocations may evoke amplified responses rooted in these deep temporal reservoirs.

Institutional responses play a dual role within these cycles. First, through policy enactments or public messaging they can reinforce certain emotions while seeking to dampen others; second, their very mode of engagement becomes material for further emotional re- action (Thompson & Willmott, 2015). For example, suppression of dissent through coercion often fuels additional resentment and solidarity networks among opposition members, a counterproductive amplification loop for authorities aiming at pacification (Slaby & Bens, 2023). Conversely, strategic incorporation of oppositional concerns into official forums might channel intense affect into forms perceived as less disruptive yet still legitimate. Feedback structures are especially visible during crises where rapid succession between event perception, emotive reaction, and political decision-making accelerates pacing. Emotional surges following dramatic developments, terrorist attacks, environmental disasters, can precipitate swift legislative action framed around these feelings. The new policies then influence citizens' sense of security or vulnerability, setting conditions for future reactions when related issues emerge. As cycles repeat under compressed timelines they risk prioritizing short-term emotion management over considered deliberation (Shah, 2024).

Public articulation of marginalized emotions like shame turning into indignation provides opportunities for reframing group identity from passive victimhood toward active agency (Reilly et al., 2017). If reinforced through community recognition and material gains these altered orientations can realign feedback patterns toward sustained empowerment instead of cyclical demoralization. Ultimately these interlocking circuits show that affective life in politics is neither linear nor self-contained but animated by constant reciprocal mediation between subjective feeling and structured context. Whether sustaining movements through repeated empowerment surges or eroding capacity via frustration spirals, feedback loops define much of the durability and directionality characterizing political affect systems. The challenge lies in mapping them precisely enough to identify leverage points where adaptive reconfiguration might produce more equitable and constructive trajectories without simply replacing one entrenched loop with another equally rigid structure.

3.2 Alternative Theoretical Approaches

Social Constructivist Perspectives

Social constructivist perspectives conceptualize affect not as a fixed psychological property but as something generated, circulated, and transformed through social interaction, cultural meanings, and communicative practices. This view foregrounds the idea that emotions are produced within historically situated discourses and power arrangements, rather than existing purely as internal states. The social environment provides the symbolic repertoires through which individuals make sense of their feelings and through which these feelings become publicly legible. In this way, affect is deeply embedded in the interpretive structures of collective life, where it both reflects and helps to shape shared normative frameworks. From a constructivist view, the political salience of emotions arises from their ability to align individuals with particular communities and causes via shared symbols and narratives. Affect functions as an adhesive that binds members to a collective identity by producing what Ahmed terms “surfaces” of association between people and political objects (Ahmed, 2014). These surfaces are not simply symbolic, they orient bodies in specific ways toward others, either as allies or adversaries. This process is inherently relational: feelings such as fear or pride gain meaning because they circulate within networks that attribute them to particular sources or threats. Without such circulating frames, emotional responses would remain idiosyncratic rather than coalescing into coordinated political orientations. One implication of this perspective is that political actors actively seek to shape these affective economies by embedding strategic framings within everyday discourse. Institutional messaging often reframes issues to normalize certain emotional responses while rendering others inappropriate or illegitimate (Shah, 2024).

Communities differ not only in the intensity of felt emotion but also in the legitimacy accorded to their expressions. Marginalized groups may experience structural delegitimation of anger or resentment toward institutions, instead being encouraged to express gratitude or resignation (Slaby & Bens, 2023). This asymmetry reflects broader patterns of affective governmentality where some emotions are cultivated as civic virtues while others are stigmatized as socially disruptive (Harmat, 2023). Such selective endorsement channels political mobilization along lines favorable to prevailing power structures. The circulation of affect within networked publics further illustrates constructivist claims. Digital platforms are not neutral spaces for expression; they afford modes of visibility that can amplify certain narratives over others, shaping the tempo and scale at which emotions become politically consequential (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). Affective messages, memes, slogans, viral videos, act as modular carriers of sentiment that link dispersed individuals into an imagined



collective. Here the construction is twofold: technological infrastructures structure patterns of encounter with emotive material, while interpretive communities attach locally meaningful readings to otherwise generic formats.

The socio-historical grounding central to constructivism also demands attention to how legacies of past events modulate contemporary emotional landscapes (Sultana, 2015). Collective memory does not merely recall earlier experiences; it transforms them into affective resources available for present-day politics. Narratives about historical injustices may be reframed across generations in ways that shift prevailing group emotions, for instance from shame toward indignation, altering both identity politics and participatory repertoires. These shifts underscore how emotion functions dynamically within ongoing struggles over meaning and recognition. Social constructivism additionally interrogates the micropolitics of communicative acts through which affects are reproduced or resisted. Seemingly banal interactions, editorials, letters to the editor, encode classed and racialized distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate subjects by situating them within prevailing moral orders (Reilly et al., 2017). By emphasizing construction rather than essentialism in emotional life, this perspective complicates binary models separating emotion from cognition.

Affect is neither purely automatic nor wholly deliberate; instead, it emerges through patterned engagement with cultural symbols mediated by interpretive schemas (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012). These schemas evolve alongside wider discursive formations so that what counts as an appropriate affective reaction shifts over time along with transformations in political culture. Within organizational contexts such as bureaucracies or political parties, social constructivist analysis draws on ideas like Butler's notion of passionate attachment (Kenny et al., 2011). This approach suggests that dependencies on institutional structures simultaneously enable personal stability and enact forms of subordination. Emotional allegiance to an institution, even when consciously recognized as constraining, can persist because it is woven into personal narratives of belonging and purpose sanctioned by dominant discourses. Constructivism also accommodates the interpretation that technological mediation has intensified reflexivity about emotion itself. Advances in sentiment analysis and affective computing represent attempts to codify human emotions into measurable formats (Bösel & Wiemer 2020), transforming qualitative feeling-states into quantifiable data points useful for governance or marketing purposes.

Finally, adopting this perspective urges critical reflection on research practices themselves. Measurements used to capture political emotion draw on vocabulary shaped by cultural conventions (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021); they risk reproducing existing biases if uncritically applied across contexts where divergent affective repertoires prevail due to distinct historical trajectories or power relations. Reflexivity here means acknowledging that our tools both reveal and constitute aspects of emotional life depending on their cultural fit and interpretive assumptions. In synthesizing these insights, the social constructivist framework offers a nuanced account whereby emotions gain political relevance through their embeddedness in shared meaning systems shaped by historical contingencies, institutional arrangements, media ecologies, and interpersonal exchanges (Ahmed, 2014.; Shah, 2024). It resists reduction either to private experience or instrumental manipulation alone; instead, it situates affect within a tapestry of symbolic practices whose configurations continually reshape both expressive possibilities and the structural conditions under which those expressions resonate politically.

Biopsychological Models

Biopsychological models approach affect in politics by integrating neurobiological, physiological, and cognitive mechanisms to explain how emotions influence political attitudes and behaviors, and how political contexts modulate these emotional responses. They emphasize the embodiment of affect, grounding emotional experience in measurable biological processes such as autonomic arousal, hormonal responses, and neural activation patterns (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). This conceptualization positions emotion as neither purely subjective nor solely socially constructed but as a set of coordinated changes in physiology, cognition, and behavior triggered by situational appraisals. From this perspective, affect is often operationalized through parameters including valence, arousal, and motivational direction. The Affect Infusion Model (AIM) suggests that decision-making varies according to the complexity of tasks: when information processing is relatively simple, individuals are more likely to employ affective states as heuristic shortcuts. In politically mediated environments where decisions involve low-effort judgments, such as snap impressions of candidates based on televised debates, this reliance on implicit affective cues becomes particularly pronounced. Conversely, when political decisions require greater elaboration or involve high-stakes considerations, emotional influences may be integrated into more controlled appraisal processes rather than directly determining outcomes.

Within biopsychological accounts, the role of language as an affective cue is central. Words with strong negative



affective associations have been shown to bias evaluations toward more negative assessments of policies or actors even when factual information remains constant (Utych, 2018). This aligns with neurocognitive evidence suggesting that emotionally charged lexicon can activate amygdala-mediated threat detection systems before higher-order deliberation occurs. When such language is repeated across media contexts, as occurs via networked sharing, these associative links strengthen through mechanisms akin to Hebbian learning, embedding specific evaluative orientations into long-term memory structures. One important feature emphasized in psychoanalytic-informed biopsychological models is the contingency between drives (energized motivational states) and their objects (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012). This separation explains why political symbols, campaign imagery, flags, even architectural settings, can acquire emotional salience independent of their functional relevance. Neural representations of these objects accrue “affective tags” through repeated pairings with arousal-inducing circumstances. In practice, these tags create enduring dispositions toward certain leaders or movements that persist despite contradictory evidence.

Another physiological mechanism integral to biopsychological models relates to arousal regulation over time. High-arousal affects such as anger or enthusiasm tend to mobilize immediate action tendencies, approach for enthusiasm, confront for anger, thereby influencing turnout rates or protest participation (Shah, 2024). However, if these states remain unreinforced by environmental cues or perceived efficacy over prolonged periods, physiological habituation may lead to attenuated responsiveness. This accounts for cycles where initial surges in political mobilization dissipate unless sustained by reinforcing stimuli within the socio-political environment. The intersection between stress physiology and affective politics also garners attention here. Perceptions of crisis, whether constructed through security narratives (Ahmed, 2014) or ecological degradation scenarios (Sultana, 2015), activate hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis responses that heighten vigilance and narrow attentional focus onto salient threats.

Drawing from Spinozist and Butlerian traditions on passionate attachment (Kenny et al., 2011), biopsychological approaches suggest that stable identification with political communities fulfils deep-seated needs for recognition encoded within neural self-representation networks. Disruption of these attachments, through perceived betrayal by ingroup leaders or loss of symbolic markers, elicits defensive responses comparable to social pain reactions mediated by anterior cingulate cortex activation. Thus shifts in allegiance occur not merely through rational preference change but as embodied responses to perceived relational ruptures within political identity structures. For research purposes this suggests combining objective measures like galvanic skin response with contextually sensitive self-reports that capture subjective interpretation alongside raw arousal indices. Further refinement arises from incorporating insights into helplessness as a political affect rooted in ontological insecurity (Safatle, 2022). Extended inability to effect change despite persistent physiological readiness may lead to allostatic overload, a state where regulatory systems wear down, precipitating disengagement behaviors akin to learned helplessness paradigms in experimental psychology. Such affects have long-term depressive effects on civic participation unless counteracted by interventions offering credible pathways to efficacy restoration. Media technologies introduce additional layers into biopsychological considerations by altering sensory pathways through which emotive material is encountered (Bösel & Wiemer, 2020).

4. Mechanisms Linking Affect and Politics

4.1 Cognitive Pathways

Cognitive pathways form a central channel through which affect exerts influence on political thinking and behavior, and they operate in reciprocal fashion such that political contexts also shape the cognitive processing of emotion-eliciting information. At a basic level, affective states modulate attention allocation, determining which political cues capture focus and the depth with which they are processed (Utych, 2018). High-arousal negative states, such as anger or fear, often narrow attention onto threat-related or antagonistic information while filtering out incongruent perspectives. Positive states like enthusiasm can broaden attentional scope, enhancing receptivity to new ideas but may also lead to less critical scrutiny of congruent information. This selective focus occurs rapidly, with emotionally salient stimuli eliciting pre-conscious orienting responses before deliberative analysis begins (Ahmed, 2014).

Memory processes are heavily involved in these pathways. Affective valence acts as an organizational principle for encoding and retrieval: events experienced within a certain emotional frame are more readily recalled when the same affect is reactivated, a phenomenon known as mood-congruent memory. Unconscious cognitive processing further complicates these pathways. Psychoanalytic perspectives note that affective impulses may be misattributed to different political objects than their original source (Ahmed, 2014). For instance, diffuse frustration stemming from economic insecurity might be displaced onto scapegoated out-groups through elite cueing strategies. This displacement bypasses explicit reasoning yet structures conscious attitudes via implicit association networks. Once established, these



unconscious linkages bias attention toward confirming information and away from falsifying evidence, a dynamic that contributes to durable yet potentially maladaptive political orientations (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012). At the group level, shared cognitive pathways emerge through collective narrative framing and synchronized attentional focus during mediated events (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). Live coverage of protests or crises not only disseminates information but also orchestrates simultaneous emotional arousal across dispersed audiences. This synchrony enhances social identification processes by aligning viewers' cognitive-emotional states with those portrayed on screen and with each other. In such moments, individual appraisals are influenced by perceived normative reactions within the imagined audience community, an effect magnified by interactive media where visible metrics like "likes" act as cues for consensus feeling (Roelvink, 2024).

Finally, cross-temporal feedback between cognition and affect ensures that once established, politically relevant emotional schemas exert inertia on perception itself: individuals attend preferentially to stimuli fitting their dominant schema while discounting alternative views at early perceptual stages (Utych, 2018). This filtering process fortifies ideological divides by curating one's informational environment along affectively congruent lines, a self-reinforcing cycle hard to break without interventions targeting both affect induction conditions and underlying cognitive processing habits simultaneously. By mapping these intertwined mechanisms, it becomes evident how deeply affect infuses political thought via structured yet flexible cognitive channels shaped continuously by context-specific cues and broader societal narratives.

4.2 Social and Intergroup Processes

Affect shapes intergroup dynamics by influencing not only how individuals perceive and engage with members of other groups, but also the ways in which collective identities are maintained, redefined, or contested in political contexts. These processes operate through both explicit emotion expression and more diffuse affective climates that structure long-term orientations toward in-groups and out-groups. Emotional experiences at the intergroup level are often tied to power asymmetries, as hierarchies determine which emotions are permissible for public expression and which are suppressed or delegitimized (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). For instance, research on gender relations indicates that although women report experiencing anger about sexism, instrumental concerns such as perceived costs of confrontation inhibit open displays of that emotion, a phenomenon termed the "anger gap." Such regulation reflects broader social norms embedded within unequal structures that influence the circulation and visibility of emotions between groups. In asymmetrically powered contexts, group-level emotional climates can become entrenched, sustaining cycles of distrust or resentment. Historical grievances often feed into these climates; unresolved injustices perpetuate recurring affective states like moral outrage or shame across generations. When triggered by contemporary events or policy debates, these affects guide group-based political behavior such as protest mobilization or voting patterns aligned with identity defense (Ahmed 2014). Importantly, affect here is not simply reactive; it structures ongoing expectations regarding intergroup contact. Groups holding a latent sense of injury may interpret ambiguous actions from others through mistrustful lenses, thereby reinforcing separation even absent overt hostility (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012).

Empathy functions as a countervailing mechanism capable of reframing entrenched antagonisms under certain conditions. Studies have demonstrated that interventions aimed at generating targeted empathy, such as narratives humanizing an out-group, can lead to support for reconciliation-oriented policies in post-conflict settings like Sri Lanka. This indicates that affective shifts at the interpersonal level can scale upward into altered group-level orientations when strategically directed and reinforced by relevant cultural narratives. Similarly, nostalgia framed around shared histories of coexistence has been shown to increase openness toward out-groups by embedding positive affect within collective memory; this resonates particularly when that nostalgia is tied to lived examples of cooperation rather than abstract ideals (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). The transmission of these emotions increasingly occurs through digitally networked publics where symbolic markers act as rallying points for identification (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). Social media affordances enable rapid diffusion of affect-laden content, hashtags, images, slogans, that compactly encode group stances. These messages not only communicate information but also signal emotional alignment, fostering solidarity among dispersed actors who interpret participation in these rituals as part of their political identity.

At a micro-interactional level, the social constructivist view suggests that bodily orientations toward others, expressed through gestures, tone, or spatial arrangements, materialize affective boundaries between groups (Ahmed, 2014). Performances of recoil associated with disgust language physically enact alienation from an out-group even when no direct threat exists. Such embodied expressions reinforce symbolic divisions and are learned through participation in shared cultural contexts where they acquire taken-for-granted legitimacy as "appropriate" responses to difference. Conversely, rituals incorporating shared actions across identity lines can recalibrate these embodied schemas toward affiliation rather than separation. Shifts in dominant intergroup affects often depend on moments where marginalized



emotions become publicly legitimated (Reilly et al., 2017). Expressions once stigmatized, such as indignation over systemic discrimination, can be reframed within movements to replace internalized shame with assertive pride or anger positioned as morally justified. This transformation requires both localized meaning work within communities and amplification through wider publics so that re-signified affects enter mainstream discourse. Absent such scaling-up, rearticulated emotions risk containment within subcultures without altering broader intergroup dynamics. Complexity arises when members navigate multiple intersecting identities influencing their emotional positioning relative to varied groups (Shah, 2024). Individuals embedded in overlapping in-groups may experience cross-cutting loyalties that attenuate extreme affects toward any single out-group by exposing them to divergent narratives across networks. Alternatively, intersectional marginalization can concentrate grievance by layering multiple sources of perceived injustice into a unified oppositional orientation toward dominant groups. The resultant affective stance manifests differently than single-axis models predict, requiring nuanced approaches attuned to contextual interplay between structural position and experiential history (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012). Together these dynamics illustrate that affect operates not only within individual intra-psychic spaces but is embedded in sustained relational patterns structuring intergroup political life through an interplay of historical memory, mediated circulation, institutional norms, and embodied practice.

5. Knowledge Gaps and Future Directions

Current theoretical and empirical work has established the centrality of affect in mediating political behavior, yet several substantial gaps remain. These stem largely from the challenge of integrating multiple explanatory levels, neurobiological, psychological, institutional, and cultural, into coherent models that can explain both stability and change in the affect-politics nexus. While there is considerable evidence that discrete emotions such as fear, anger, and enthusiasm exert distinct influences on political attitudes and decision-making processes, many studies flatten these into broad positive- negative valence categories (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). This risks obscuring mechanisms specific to particular affects; for example, fear appears to facilitate vigilant information search whereas anger promotes certainty-driven responses (Shah, 2024). Clarifying such distinctions is critical for developing targeted interventions that aim either to amplify constructive engagement or mitigate maladaptive polarization.

Another gap lies in the limited understanding of how transient emotional reactions scale into durable affective climates. Short-term surges in mobilization following crisis events are well-documented, yet the conditions under which these surges transform into enduring orientations remain contested (Glaser & Salovey, 1998). Existing dynamic interaction and feedback loop models emphasize recursive reinforcement across media, interpersonal networks, and institutional framing (Ahmed, 2014), but longitudinal empirical data capturing these transitions across multiple temporal scales are sparse. Without finer-grained temporal mapping, it becomes difficult to differentiate between fleeting expressive acts amplified algorithmically and sustained affective dispositions capable of influencing policy trajectories over decades.

The role of unconscious or displaced affect presents another underexplored frontier. Psychoanalytically attuned accounts suggest that political attachments may be anchored less in explicit ideological commitments than in historically sedimented identifications and repressed associations (Crociani-Windland & et al, 2012). However, measuring such latent structures poses methodological challenges. Advances in implicit association testing combined with narrative elicitation may offer one path forward here, allowing researchers to trace how diffuse frustrations become symbolically attached to specific actors or groups despite negligible direct causal links. Integrating these methods with physiological indices like galvanic skin response could cross-validate findings by linking reported associations to embodied arousal patterns (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). There is also a notable absence of comparative research across cultural contexts regarding legitimacy norms governing emotional expression. Much existing literature assumes Western liberal-democratic baselines for public emotion display rules; yet as shown in work on institutional conditioning of affect (Thompson & Willmott, 2015), regimes vary widely in which emotions they privilege or suppress. Authoritarian systems often encode pride and fear into national identity repertoires while pathologizing dissent-oriented emotions such as outrage or grief (Slaby & Bens, 2023).

Future directions should include cross-regime comparisons that examine how such institutionalized repertoires structure both domestic dissent possibilities and international image management. Digital mediation represents an area where technological affordances are outpacing current theoretical incorporation. Although networked publics' role in amplifying emotionally resonant narratives is well acknowledged (Glaser & Salovey, 1998), less is known about how interface design features, algorithmic curation speed, reaction metrics, alter the micro dynamics of affect transmission within politically active clusters. Research could focus on experimental manipulation of platform variables to assess



downstream effects on emotional persistence, content framing interpretations, and cross-group contact quality (Utych, 2018). Additionally, the intersection of multimodal input, visual iconography paired with auditory cues, warrants exploration given evidence on cross-modal summation effects on attentional capture and emotional intensity. Intergroup processes invite further scrutiny regarding how intersectionality shapes composite emotional orientations toward multiple out-groups simultaneously (Shah, 2024). Individuals belonging to several marginalized categories may synthesize grievances across axes into unified mobilizing emotions qualitatively distinct from those modeled in single-axis frameworks. Ethnographic methodologies combined with computational text analysis of community-generated discourse could illuminate how such composite affects are articulated, circulated, and translated into political strategies.

Methodologically, there is a pressing need for instruments capable of capturing both explicit self-reports sensitive to context-specific emotion vocabularies and implicit measures resilient to social desirability pressures (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). Current reliance on decontextualized survey batteries risks missing culturally embedded emotion repertoires or misinterpreting silence as absence rather than strategic withholding conditioned by power asymmetries (Ahmed, 2014). Furthermore, integrating psychophysiological data streams with qualitative contextualization would enrich interpretive accuracy when parsing similar biometric readings arising from culturally divergent emotional expressions. Finally, future research must grapple with normative questions concerning the deliberate modulation of public affect. Insights from cognitive appraisal theory indicate that re-framing can shift not just opinion content but underlying appraisal-emotion linkages (Shah, 2024). The ethical dimensions of deploying such strategies, especially within asymmetrical power relations between state actors and citizens, remain insufficiently interrogated. Comparative case studies examining outcomes where emotional reframing was used toward inclusive versus exclusionary ends could inform guidelines balancing efficacy with democratic integrity. By addressing these gaps, in specificity across discrete affects, temporal scaling mechanisms, unconscious attachments, regime-sensitive legitimacy norms, technologically mediated dynamics, intersectional intergroup affects, transformation of marginalized emotions, geopolitically informed spillovers, multimodal measurement integration, and ethical reframing strategies, the field will move closer to producing comprehensive models that reflect the full complexity outlined in Section 4.2. Such advances would not only deepen theoretical precision but enhance practical capacity to foster more equitable political environments while mitigating emotionally driven destabilization risks.

6. Conclusion

The intricate relationship between affect and politics emerges as a dynamic, bidirectional process where emotions and political contexts continuously shape and reshape each other across multiple levels and temporal scales. Emotions are deeply embedded within political life, influencing individual attitudes, collective identities, and institutional practices. They operate not merely as transient reactions but as sustained affective climates that can persist across generations, shaped by historical memory, social structures, and mediated communication environments. This ongoing interplay highlights the necessity of integrating psychological, sociocultural, and institutional perspectives to capture the full spectrum of affective political phenomena.

Distinct emotional states such as fear, anger, and enthusiasm exert differentiated effects on political cognition and behavior, modulating attention, memory, and decision-making processes in ways that can either mobilize or demobilize political engagement. These affective influences are further complicated by unconscious attachments and displaced sentiments that anchor political loyalties beyond explicit reasoning. The role of language and symbolic framing is crucial, as affective cues embedded in discourse shape appraisal patterns and reinforce ideological divides. Media ecosystems and digital platforms amplify these dynamics by accelerating the circulation of emotionally charged content, which in turn feeds back into collective sentiment and political action.

Institutional and structural contexts play a significant role in regulating which emotions are legitimized or suppressed, thereby shaping public discourse and political participation. Power asymmetries influence emotional expression norms, often marginalizing dissenting affects while promoting those aligned with dominant narratives. This selective amplification affects intergroup relations, where affective climates sustain or challenge boundaries between communities. Interventions that generate empathy or reframe marginalized emotions can alter these patterns, but such transformations require both localized meaning work and broader public recognition to achieve lasting impact.

Despite advances in theoretical modeling and empirical research, substantial gaps remain. There is a need for greater specificity in distinguishing the effects of discrete emotions, as well as for longitudinal studies that trace how short-term emotional surges evolve into enduring affective orientations. Methodological innovations combining physiological measures, implicit testing, and qualitative approaches are essential to capture unconscious affective processes and culturally embedded emotional repertoires. Comparative analyses across political regimes and cultural contexts can



illuminate how institutionalized emotion norms shape political behavior and dissent possibilities. Furthermore, the influence of technological mediation on affect transmission and the intersectionality of intergroup emotions warrant deeper investigation.

Ethical considerations surrounding the deliberate modulation of public affect through reframing strategies also demand attention, particularly given asymmetrical power relations between authorities and citizens. Exploring cases where emotional appeals have been employed for inclusive versus exclusionary ends can inform normative guidelines that balance effectiveness with democratic values. Advancing research in these directions promises to enrich theoretical frameworks and enhance practical approaches to managing affective dynamics in political life. By embracing the multifaceted, re- cursive nature of emotion-politics interactions, scholars and practitioners can better address challenges related to polarization, mobilization, and social cohesion, ultimately contributing to more equitable and responsive political environments.

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