
PROPOSING EMOTION AS A DIMENSION OF AFFECTIVE AGENDA SETTING: SEPARATING AFFECT INTO TWO COMPONENTS AND COMPARING THEIR SECOND-LEVEL EFFECTS

By Renita Coleman and H. Denis Wu

This study expands the theory of second-level agenda setting to include emotion as affect and seeks to understand its valence. Three important findings emerged; first, the media's emotional-affective agenda corresponds with the public's emotional impressions of candidates; second, negative emotions are more powerful than positive emotions even when the topic is not a negative "problem"; and third, agenda-setting effects are greater on the audiences' emotions, defined as feelings, than on their cognitive assessments of character traits, the most common way affect is measured in agenda-setting studies.



Ever since Mathew Brady made the photograph that Abraham Lincoln said won him the presidency,¹ politicians have believed that visual images are capable of producing powerful emotional responses in voters. Agenda-setting theory has recognized the importance of these perceptions; the second level emphasizes affective attributes and tone as being just as important as the cognitive level transfer of object salience.² First-level agenda setting focuses on the amount of coverage of an issue, exploring the media role in deciding what issues the public will be aware of. Second-level agenda setting focuses on how the issue is defined, or how the media also convey affective attributes of issues.³

However, research into the second, or affective, level has virtually ignored one important component of affect—emotions or feelings experienced by the public. Psychologists routinely include anger, fear, sadness, happiness, hope, and pride, among other emotions, in their definition of affect.⁴ Yet, agenda-setting research has tended to overlook this dimension in favor of evaluations of character traits (e.g., integrity, honesty, leadership), framing of issues (e.g., human interest, economic consequences, conflict), or valence (e.g., positive, negative, neutral tone). While these are indeed components of affect, we argue they represent a more cognitive conceptualization and overlook the visceral side of affect—feelings and emotions. This study proposes that communication

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scholars define affect too narrowly; that psychology's conceptualization of emotions and feelings also should be explored as part of affective agenda setting. We test this theoretical proposition by exploring whether media portrayals of candidates can set the agenda for viewers' emotional responses. We use nonverbal communication because it is well established that the nonverbal channel is an excellent conveyor of affective information, especially emotions.⁵ If viewers' emotions are indeed correlated with media portrayals, then emotion should be included in the definition of affect for second-level agenda setting.

A second purpose of this research is to compare the strength of the two dimensions of affect to see whether effects are greater on the audience's emotions or their cognitive assessments of traits. A third question explores the difference between positive and negative emotional valence. Much research has shown that negative emotions are more powerful than positive ones.⁶ Miller⁷ posits that is partly because the dependent variable is framed as a problem (e.g., the "most important problem") that cues people to think of negative things; thus, negative emotions result. This study controls for that by studying political candidates, who are neither issues nor problems and not inherently positive or negative.

This study expands the theory of second-level agenda setting to include emotion as affect and seeks to understand its strength and valence using the 2004 presidential candidates' nonverbal emotional behavior and survey data, correlating the media's emotional-affective⁸ agenda with audiences' emotional-affective attitudes toward the candidates.

Literature Review

Agenda Setting. Hundreds of studies have explored agenda-setting theory. At first, only issues were studied; then the focus shifted to "objects."⁹ The interest is on *how* media describe things, not *what* they emphasize. Just as in first-level research, second-level findings show that attributes emphasized in news coverage become the attributes emphasized by voters.

One of the main dimensions of the second level is the affective element, which considers emotional tone and captures the impact of attributes such as candidate appearance and personality.¹⁰ Proponents of the affective dimension say media portrayals of candidates influence the public in ways that are not just cognitive, and puts emphasis on candidate image, saying that affective agenda setting works when candidates' attributes are described in positive, negative, or neutral terms.¹¹

Although affective agenda setting claims to include emotion, empirical research has not caught up to affect as defined by psychologists, which includes "all emotions, moods, feelings, and drives."¹² Affect is operationally defined by asking respondents to assess how much they *felt* a certain emotion such as anger, fear, sadness, happiness, and pride, among others.¹³ These discrete emotion models are most suitable for understanding persuasion,¹⁴ which is appropriate in studying how media indirectly influence people to adopt their agenda.

Few agenda-setting studies have examined emotion from the respondent's perspective,¹⁵ and those that do conflate emotions and trait

evaluations.¹⁶ Although not focused on agenda setting, one study which illustrates the distinction between affect as emotion and as evaluation of traits is Bucy's¹⁷ analysis of how appropriate and inappropriate nonverbal communication of political leaders is perceived by audiences. He is careful to separate emotion from trait evaluations such as integrity, competence, leadership, and empathy. This is consistent with findings about traits and emotions that show they are structured differently.¹⁸ "Emotional experiences fundamentally represent information about the self, which is typically more nuanced, complex, and contradictory than evaluations of others."¹⁹ Emotions reflect the internal state of the respondent, while trait evaluations are directed toward an external person and entail "some degree of deliberation in relation to an object of interest."²⁰ This deliberation or careful, rational, and logical processing of information points to trait evaluations as being a different kind of affect than emotions, which are immediate and fast-acting, unconscious, and sometimes irrational.²¹ The separation of emotion and trait evaluations is important for a complete understanding of affective agenda setting. This study will compare the emotional dimension of affect with the cognitive dimension in order to see if emotional displays of political candidates can have agenda-setting effects on the emotions of audiences separately from trait evaluations. Following previous studies,²² this research examines visual information—*affect-laden nonverbal communication*. Research shows that the emotional displays of candidates will be inferred and adopted by viewers and offers a congruent comparison with viewers' emotions.

The closest study to this one²³ clearly showed that visual images conveyed an affective agenda that was transferred to the audience. That second-level analysis found significant correlations between television's affective framing of George Bush and Al Gore and the public's affective impressions of them. Evaluations of the candidates' personalities and people's emotions toward them were significantly correlated with exposure to media portrayals of the candidates' nonverbal behavior. However, that study collapsed two measures of affect—one that captured emotions of the viewer (feeling angry, proud, hopeful, afraid), and one that reflected viewers' cognitive assessments of candidates' character traits (dishonest, out of touch with ordinary people, moral, really cares about people like you, knowledgeable, provides strong leadership, intelligent). This study will determine whether the incorporation of emotion into second-level agenda setting and its separation from trait evaluations is a productive addition.

One other study related to the goal of this one, although focused on first-level effects, concluded that viewers' emotions did indeed mediate judgments of importance of crime.²⁴ That study questioned whether issues, with their implied negative emphasis as problems, made a difference in emotional valence.

Given these findings and theoretical understandings, this study proposes the basic assumption of agenda setting, that there is a transfer of the media's affective agenda to the public, then adds to that by separating the affective agenda into two components, emotions and cogni-

tive evaluations. Next this study asks a research question about the relative strength of these two components:

H1: There will be significant correlations between the public's affective emotions toward the candidates and exposure to media images of the candidates' nonverbal expressions of emotion.

H2: There will be significant correlations between the public's cognitive evaluations of character traits of the candidates and exposure to media images of the candidates' nonverbal expressions of emotion.

RQ1: Which of the two affective dimensions has a stronger agenda-setting effect, emotions or cognitive evaluations of character traits?

Affect is complicated, with negative and positive emotions forming two separate dimensions rather than being opposite ends of one continuum.²⁵ Negative emotions have a more complex structure than positive emotions, and there may not always be a correlation between the two.²⁶ There also is considerable evidence of a negativity bias,²⁷ where negative information is given more weight than positive information. It is thought to stem from the tendency for people to expect positive information, making negative information more surprising or threatening, and enhancing processing.²⁸

Furthermore, there is some evidence in verbal agenda-setting studies that negative information plays a more important role than positive information. For example, positive coverage of a nation had no influence on public perceptions, but negative coverage led audiences to think more negatively about the country.²⁹ In another study, negative coverage of the economy was a significant predictor of consumer expectations about the future of the economy, but positive news was not.³⁰ It is also known that people rely on negative information more than positive information in forming impressions of others.³¹

Research that connects candidates' nonverbal behavior with voters' affective impressions of the candidates' personal qualities forms an important, although indirect, link.³² This study makes an explicit connection between candidates' nonverbal behavior and voters' emotional-affective impressions.

The Theory of Affective Intelligence. These findings on negative affect play an important role in a relatively new theory that links affect to political judgment: the theory of affective intelligence,³³ which argues that emotions are critical in getting people to pay attention to politics, and that people use emotions, particularly negative ones, to think deeply about their political views. Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen³⁴ conclude that "emotions enhance citizen rationality," noting that this is the opposite of conventional thinking that says emotions cloud judgment, causing people to act irrationally rather than leading them to more thoughtful decision

making. They support their theory with numerous studies over fifteen years showing specific negative emotions led to arousal, which stimulated cognition that resulted in considered judgment. One such study found effects based on candidates' personal qualities. The authors did not include visual images in their studies, but acknowledge that emotions expressed nonverbally may lead to arousal.³⁵

Based on these theories and evidence of the power of negative information which posits that negative affect induces deep thinking that should lead to second-level agenda-setting effects, we make the following negativity bias prediction:

H3: Second-level agenda-setting effects will be stronger for the negative emotional dimension than the positive in response to candidates' nonverbal expressions of emotion.

As with most agenda-setting research, this study is in two parts: a content analysis and public opinion survey.

Method

Content Analysis. Three networks and three major cable channels were analyzed—the evening news programs of ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. The cable shows chosen were comparable to the network's evening news in format, length, and airtime. All the newscasts were recorded in the twelve weeks between Labor Day and election day 2004. Dates in the sample period were randomly drawn until two constructed weeks were chosen, producing 711 candidate visuals.

The unit of analysis was a shot, defined as a fragment of visual material that contains no editing cuts.³⁶ Only shots that lasted four seconds were coded to increase accuracy; typically, nonverbal behavior measures of five seconds have a nearly perfect rate.³⁷ Coded items included date, TV channel, candidate, and seven-point semantic differential scales ranging from complete absence to frequent presence for eye contact, body lean, and distance from the audience. These three measures operationalized the immediacy index, considered one of the three primary dimensions of nonverbal behavior.³⁸ Past studies have found that speakers who conveyed positive impressions made frequent and longer eye contact, leaned back less, and adopted closer or more conversational distances to their audiences—that is, they were more "immediate."³⁹ Nonverbal immediacy behaviors are well known to impact affective or emotional responses.⁴⁰ Among other influences, they positively affect pleasure, arousal, and dominance,⁴¹ and are linked to caring and satisfying relationships.⁴² Smiling, making eye contact, and a relaxed posture help reduce perceived psychological distance and have been shown to be positively associated with affinity for others,⁴³ stimulating perceptions of physical and psychological closeness.⁴⁴

One undergraduate and one adult coded all visuals after approximately forty hours of training. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Scott's *pi* for nominal variables and Cohen's *kappa* for interval

variables; both correct for chance agreement. Agreement was eye contact = .923; body lean = .911; and audience distance = .984. Cronbach's *alphas* for the Bush and Kerry immediacy indices were .68 and .69, respectively.⁴⁵

Survey. The survey was conducted by a non-profit, university-associated polling center on residents of two adjacent metropolitan areas in the South in the week before the 2004 election. This metropolitan area also corresponds to two major media markets of the state, where all three networks have local affiliates and three cable news channels are widely available. Random-digit dialing was used to reach eligible participants over age 21. Six-hundred-and-fifteen people completed the survey for a 41% completion rate.⁴⁶

Twenty survey questions corresponded to the emotional dimension of second-level agenda setting. Respondents were asked to assess each on a 5-point Likert scale. A set of ten questions for each candidate mirrored the wording of emotion measures: "How often has the candidate made you feel..." Five negative adjectives at the end were "angry," "afraid," "irritated," "unsafe," and "alienated"; the five positive counterparts were "proud," "hopeful," "optimistic," "secure," and "included." The 5-point response scales for the five positive emotion questions were summed to form an interval index for each candidate; the same was done for the five negative emotion questions. Indices for both candidates showed strong Cronbach's *alphas*: Bush negative emotion = .947; Bush positive emotion = .965; Kerry negative emotion = .952; Kerry positive emotion = .959.

Twenty-four questions corresponded to cognitive evaluation of traits; a set of twelve for each candidate used the same scale as above: "Please tell me whether the words or phrases describe (candidate): moral, really cares about people like you, knowledgeable, provides strong leadership, honest, competent, experienced, charismatic, has good speaking ability, intelligence, consistent, and compassionate." Other than "consistent," added by the researchers in response to Kerry's flip-flop image, all other questions were from the National Election Study or past campaign literature.⁴⁷ The 5-point response scales also were summed and divided by the number of questions to form interval indices: alpha for Bush traits = .975, for Kerry traits = .963.

News use was measured with a 7-point interval question that asked how many days a week respondents watched national TV news, which is a valid and reliable measure of media exposure.⁴⁸ We used it to create a weighted variable that represents survey respondents' potential exposure to the valenced media portrayals of the candidates. It was created by multiplying each respondent's amount of news use (0 to 7 days) by the mean immediacy score of each candidate's nonverbal behavior from the content data; this yielded scores for each respondent's exposure to positive Bush content, negative Bush content, positive Kerry content, and negative Kerry content, as well as each valence of Bush traits and Kerry traits. We correlated the exposure of each candidate's nonverbal behaviors (the content data) with the public's attitudes (survey data) toward their affective attributes. The new exposure variables were added into the survey dataset in order to correlate them with the public's affective attitudes. This afforded an individual-level analysis rather than the aggregate level in most

TABLE 1

Partial Correlations for Bush and Kerry between Public Affective Attitudes and Exposure to Media Content of Their Nonverbal Behaviors Controlling for Party ID

Media Content	Affective Attitudes		
	Positive Emotion	Negative Emotion	Character Traits
Kerry	-.035	.116**	.037
Bush	.001	.102*	-.016

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

agenda-setting studies. This procedure was created by the researchers and used in one previously published study.⁴⁹ Partial correlations controlled for respondents' party identification—well known to correlate with candidate choice—to avoid spurious correlations. Other control variables used in partial correlations included age, education, and gender.

Results

The mean nonverbal immediacy score for Bush was 13.49 (sd = 2.82), and 13.8 (sd = 2.60) for Kerry; this was not a statistically significant difference. In the survey, respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 90 with 47.53 as the mean; 75% were white, 20% African American, 2% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. Women made up 63% of the sample. Forty-one percent were Republicans, with 33% Democrats and 21% Independents.

Hypotheses. H1: There will be significant correlations between the public's emotions toward the candidates and exposure to media images of the candidates' nonverbal expressions of emotion.

The agenda-setting hypothesis was partially supported (see Table 1). There was a significant correlation between media portrayals and the public's negative emotions toward Bush ($r = .102, p < .05, n = 604$) and negative emotions toward Kerry ($r = .116, p < .01, n = 595$), controlling for party identification, but there was no significant correlation between exposure to media visuals and positive emotions toward either candidate (Bush $r = .001, p = .978, n = 604$; Kerry $r = -.035, p = .390, n = 595$). Partial correlations using age, education, and gender as controls also showed this same pattern of results.

H2: There will be significant correlations between the public's cognitive evaluations of character traits of the candidates and exposure to media images of the candidates' nonverbal expressions of emotion.

This hypothesis was not confirmed. There were no significant correlations between exposure to media visuals and the public's evaluation of character traits for Bush ($r = -.016, p = .686, n = 602$) or for Kerry ($r = .037, p = .366, n = 596$) when controlling for party ID. Age, education, and gender controls produced similar non-significant results. There were no significant correlations between media visuals of the candi-

dates' nonverbal behavior and the public's evaluation of their character traits for either Bush or Kerry.

RQ1: Which of the two affective dimensions has a stronger agenda-setting effect, emotions or cognitive evaluations of character traits?

These data clearly show the stronger agenda-setting effect was exerted by the emotional component of affect, but only on the negative dimension. Negative emotions for both Kerry and Bush showed the only significant agenda-setting effect. Positive emotions and the cognitive dimension of assessment of character traits showed no agenda-setting effect whatsoever.

H3: Second-level agenda-setting effects will be stronger for the negative emotional dimension than the positive in response to candidates' nonverbal expressions of emotion.

This hypothesis of a negativity bias was supported; in fact, it was so strong that it was answered by the analysis of **H1**. There was a significant correlation between exposure to media portrayals and the public's negative emotions for both Bush and Kerry when controlling for party identification, age, education, and gender, but no significant correlation at all on the positive emotion dimension. This result shows that the negativity hypothesis is supported even when the target of the public's emotions is not an inherently negative "problem," but is, in this case, people.

Discussion

This research shows that visual displays in TV news have a significant relationship to the public's emotions about the candidates, but only on the negative dimension. Significant correlations between the public's perceptions and their exposure to media portrayals of Bush and Kerry found an agenda-setting effect for negative emotions. This is congruent with the negativity bias in the theory of affective intelligence,⁵⁰ which maintains that negative emotion causes voters to think more deeply about their political views, which leads to more thoughtful decisions. The public's negative feelings toward Bush and Kerry were significantly correlated with their exposure to media portrayals of the candidates' nonverbal behavior. We predicted stronger effects on the negative dimension because of deeper cognitive processing, but found effects *only* on that dimension. Because negative nonverbal behavior violates the expectation that a candidate would always put his or her "best foot forward" and exhibit positive expressions, it gets noticed. This added attention may cause viewers to think about the visuals and process them more carefully. Perhaps it is these unexpected images portraying a candidate negatively that stimulate deeper scrutiny of the affective messages.

One surprising finding was the non-significant agenda-setting influence of the candidates' nonverbal behavior on viewers' cognitive evaluations of character traits. When we separated the typical operationalization of affect into its two components, the cognitive dimension was much less effective at transferring the media's agenda than was the emotional dimension. This demonstrates why it is important to understand affect as two distinct dimensions—emotions or feelings and evaluations of character traits. First, they are processed differently in the brain

—trait evaluations are deliberate or careful, rational, and logical; emotions are immediate, fast-acting, and unconscious. Emotions reflect the internal state of the person, while trait evaluations are directed toward another. Feeling angry, proud, hopeful, or afraid in response to a political candidate is different from thinking that candidate is dishonest, out of touch with ordinary people, moral, or a strong leader. This differential processing may be the key to understanding this finding. Emotional displays of candidates would be processed in the affective mode, which also is where viewers would process their own emotions. However, assessments of character traits would be processed in the cognitive mode. This finding deserves further study. There is robust evidence that verbal content does indeed transfer the media's agenda of character traits, whereas in this study, visual content did not. It could be that congruence between type of data and processing is important to affective agenda-setting effects. This type of question can best be answered using experimental designs, which also are the most robust way to link agenda-setting effects to causation and rule out other influences. Furthermore, future studies also should consider the impact of visual images in digital and interactive media. We assume the effects would be similar to those of television, but given their increased reliance on visual information, new media visuals may be even more powerful in transferring emotional salience to their users.

This study provides a theoretical linkage to explain the effects of visual information on affective agenda setting—that of emotion. The theory of affective intelligence⁵¹ connects affective information processing with political judgment and accords special weight to negative information. This study provides empirical evidence for these theoretical linkages and makes explicit the connection between visual processing and affective attitude formation via emotions about political candidates. It has expanded the indicators associated with agenda setting and integrated psychological information processing theories with theories of political communication.

Clearly, there is more to the affective framing of candidates in TV news than the elements examined in studies to date, most of which look at cognitive evaluations of character traits, and then only through the verbal component of news coverage. This is one of the first studies to examine emotion as conveyed in visual images and find it to be a mechanism for affective agenda setting. Furthermore, it unconfounds emotion, or feelings, and cognitive evaluations as affect. Rather than relying solely on verbal content for a cognitive appraisal of candidates' character traits, voters also use their visceral feelings and emotions—anger, fear, pride, etc.—as a means for determining their affective agenda. They derive those feelings and emotions through visual images of the candidates' own emotional displays, not just through written or spoken content about a candidate's character traits. Cognitive evaluations through verbal content are no doubt a necessary condition for agenda setting, but this study shows that visceral feelings as conveyed through

Conclusion

visual images are as well. There is merit in pursuing explanations for affective agenda setting in the visual images and viewers' emotions.

NOTES

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3. Julie Yioutas and Ivana Segvic, "Revisiting the Clinton/Lewinsky Scandal: The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 (autumn 2003): 567-82.

4. For example, see Joanne M. Miller, "Examining the Mediators of Agenda Setting: A New Experimental Paradigm Reveals the Role of Emotions," *Political Psychology* 28 (December 2007): 689-717.

5. Paul Ekman, Wallace V. Friesen, and Phoebe Ellsworth, *Emotion in the Human Face* (NY: Pergamon, 1972).

6. Miller, "Examining the Mediators"; George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

7. Miller, "Examining the Mediators."

8. We define the term "affect" broadly to include personality and character trait evaluations as well as emotion and emotional tone or valence. Affect is the overarching construct with emotion a concept subsumed under it. We use "emotional-affective" to specify the emotional portion.

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Models," *Human Communication Research* 27 (January 2001): 38-68.

15. For an exception, see Miller, "Examining the Mediators."

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19. Bucy, "Emotional and Evaluative Consequences," 195.

20. Bucy, "Emotional and Evaluative Consequences," 196.

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22. Coleman and Banning, "Network TV News' Affective Framing"; Pfau et al., "The Role and Impact of Affect."

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45. The alphas are 1/100th and 2/100ths from the recommended alpha of .70 (Robert F. DeVellis, *Scale Development: Theory and Applications* [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003], but have been used in other studies with reliability coefficients of .80 (Burgoon, Birk, and Pfau, "Nonverbal Behaviors"). Alpha values are a function of the number of items in the scale and it may take fourteen items to show acceptable reliability (DeVellis, *Scale Development*). The scale as originally developed only includes four items. That these measures have been shown to have higher alpha levels in other studies (Burgoon, Birk, and Pfau, "Nonverbal Behaviors") increased our confidence in the internal consistency of the scale, and we decided to accept the slightly lower alpha values.

46. By some standards, our response rate may be considered low; however, it is now the consensus that there are few significant differences in estimates between surveys with high and low response rates. See "Response Rates: An Overview" at http://www.aapor.org/Response_

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