Article

Individual differences in affective agenda setting: A cross-sectional analysis of three U.S. presidential elections

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Abstract

Much is known about how individual differences such as age and education affect the news media's ability to transfer its agenda of issues to the public, but little is known about them at the affective level of agenda setting. Evidence shows individual differences may work differently with affect, thus this study examined demographics that predict adopting the news media's affective agenda. Using data from the U.S. Presidential campaigns in 2008, 2012 and 2016, it found that, indeed, demographics do not all work the same for affect as issues. Unlike with issue agenda setting, education showed no effect at all, while the young were more likely to adopt the news media's affective agenda than older age groups. As expected, Democrats and Republicans were more likely to adopt the news media's affective agenda of their own candidates, but Independents were not. As with first-level agenda setting, there was no effect of gender.

In 2016, the 'Bernie Mania' phenomenon gripped college campuses across the nation. Something similar happened in 2008. Two senators who ran for president – Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders – one young, one old, inspired passionate support and an

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almost cult-like following. It was primarily younger voters who were affected (Blake, 2016; Von Drehle, 2008). Why did this enthusiasm grip the young and not others? This, we submit, is an example of affective agenda setting at work on one demographic, where the mediated portrayal of a candidate conveys affective attributes that resonate with some but not others. This phenomenon is not limited to age (e.g. Philpot et al., 2009), leading us to suggest that other demographics also can play a role.

The two levels of agenda setting are based on different premises – cognition predominates for the first level where the agenda of salient issues is transferred from the news media to the public; while a combination of affective and cognitive processing directs the second level (Camaj, 2014), where affect[1] about objects and people in the news is transferred. It should not be assumed that key variables work the same for both, as has been shown with need for orientation; while cognitive assessments of relevance and uncertainty about issues influence people's adopting the news media's issue agenda, they do not influence the attribute agenda (Matthes, 2008). This paper fills a gap by examining whether affective agenda setting works differently on people of different ages, genders, political parties and education levels in three U.S. Presidential elections. It extends theory by exploring audience characteristics that predict affective agenda setting while controlling for news use and improves our broader understanding.

Demographics are classic covariates in agenda-setting research; however, many studies use them without justification. Covariates should be chosen for theoretical reasons or their relationship to the outcome measure. Failure to do so does not advance our understanding of theory. Deciding which variables to control should not be 'mindless' (Shoemaker et al., 2004: 83). 'If we are building theory, we need to identify the variables we think are connected, define them, and show why we think they are connected' (Shoemaker et al., 2004: 102). Parsing out third variables allows a more accurate picture of effects, helps us interpret relationships, and rules out plausible alternative explanations (Shoemaker et al., 2004), but using too many covariates can actually decrease power, resulting in incorrect conclusions, or inflating the importance of some variables (Oliver and Krakowiak, 2009). Thus, this study provides researchers with evidence for these decisions, leading to more rigorous research.

The purpose of this paper is to identify demographics predictive of affective agenda-setting effects in the political environment to fine-tune the theory and allow researchers to control only variables that matter. Our interest here is not in how demographics drive news use, but how they predict affective agenda setting above and beyond news use. The need to consider the role of individual differences in media effects has been a mantra of scholars for some time (Hill, 1985; Wanta, 1997a). As recently as 2014, scholars were still lamenting the lack of research on individual differences in agenda setting (Doorn, 2014), especially for the affective level, considering that audience traits predict many emotional reactions to news (Oliver and Krakowiak, 2009). Work so far focuses primarily on first-level effects; we know what makes people adopt the news media's agenda of issues (reviewed below), but less is known about what makes audiences feel the same way about people and issues as the news portrays them. Because research has shown that affective effects can be stronger than issue effects (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004), it is important to understand demographics as predictors of the affective level.

Agenda setting is critical in any democracy as it drives citizens' attention to society's most important issues – the first level of agenda setting. At the second level, character traits and the tone that citizens ascribe to public office seekers correlate with those attributed to them by the news media (McCombs et al., 2000). If one candidate is repeatedly portrayed as untrustworthy and another as a good leader, leading audiences to assess them in the same way, then affective agenda setting has occurred. This can be crucial as character assessments can determine electability. This study defines affective agenda setting as the transfer of the news media's portrayal of candidates' character traits – known as the substantive dimension of affective agenda setting – and their positive, negative, or neutral tone – the affective dimension – to the public (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001). It examines age, gender, education and partisanship as predictors of the media's affective agendas of presidential candidates using media content and opinion surveys from presidential elections in 2008, 2012 and 2016 to replicate and extend findings. The contextual differences of the elections provide a more rigorous test of findings than a single election.

The main justification for differences in issue agenda setting is news use (McCombs, 2004). Differences in amount and type of news consumption among demographic groups are also used to explain affective agenda setting. How much and what kind of news one uses is directly related to agenda setting; the more news a person is exposed to, the greater the transfer of both the news media's affective and issue agendas.[2] Thus, we control for news use in these studies in order to clearly see the effects of the demographic variables. News use alone is insufficient to explain agenda-setting effects, however; with affective effects in particular, there exist many other possible theoretical processes, including differences in information processing, person perception, emotion, selective perception, need to evaluate and involvement. This study investigates the demographics – age, partisanship, gender and education – that predict affective agenda setting. Additionally, this paper aims to develop a theoretical basis for researchers to employ demographic covariates.

Theoretical mechanisms

The affective level of agenda setting focuses on the properties, qualities and characteristics of issues, objects, or people in the news, as well as the tone used to describe them. The theoretical mechanism for this level of agenda setting differs from the issue level in that it influences people's perceptions in ways that are not only cognitive, but also emotional (Kiousis et al., 1999). Affect has been shown to be largely involuntary and automatic, and primarily processed via the peripheral route, in contrast with judgments of issue importance that are processed primarily by the central route (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). People mainly use facts to understand issues (Zaller, 1992), whereas they organise information about people in a different way that focuses on traits (Newman and Uleman, 1989). As Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) point out, 'Explanatory models that assume a common processing style and, therefore, media effect for information about people and issues in the news must somehow reconcile these and other differences in the ways people think about people and things (p. 17)'. Originally, theorising about the affective agenda pertained only to cognitive effects, with the transfer of attribute salience related

to learning about the candidates; however, people also adopt the news media's agenda regarding candidates' character traits via the feelings and emotions they experience from portrayals of the candidates. Agenda setting works at the affective level not only by transferring salience but also by transferring the news media's affective portrayals of the candidates' character traits and tone. Research has expanded the theory to show emotion is a mechanism for affective agenda setting (Miller, 2007). People's affective impressions are not created by emotion alone; rather, emotional responses lead to arousal, which stimulates cognition and subsequently leads to thoughtful judgment (Marcus et al., 2000). It has been demonstrated that emotions exert a more powerful affective agenda-setting effect than cognitions (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004). For this reason, among others outlined below, we argue that the demographics that predict affective agenda setting may work differently than for issue agenda setting.

Individual differences

What kinds and how much news people consume provide the basis for deducing agenda-setting effects. News use is highly related to individual differences (Wanta, 1997a), which include age, gender, education and partisanship, among others. Yet, little is known about how these factors predict the agenda-setting process at the affective level. Furthermore, affective agenda setting should theoretically be due to more than simply news exposure. The following is a systematic review of each demographic variable, starting with news use differences and followed by other theoretical linkages that may explain affective differences.

Education

About the only demographic variable that routinely shows much difference on issue agenda setting is education, with the higher educated more likely to adopt the news media's agenda because of greater news use. Both Hill (1985) and Wanta (1997a) found that people with some college show greater issue agenda-setting effects. Others found those with a high school education are less affected than those with college degrees (Tipton et al., 1975). More recently, Shehata (2010) found education was not a contingent factor in a Swedish election; however, another study in Sweden (Shehata and Stromback, 2013) found higher education levels were predictive of agenda setting susceptibility on specific issues.

Cognitive processing differences due to education levels may help explain agenda-setting effects. These explanations focus on memory, attention, interest, processing efficiency and content complexity. For example, less educated people pay less attention to news media messages than higher educated people (Weenig and Midden, 1997), and find public affairs information less interesting (Ettema and Kline, 1977). The higher educated remember more and use more elaborate processing (Park and Kosicki, 1995). Those with lower levels of education learn more from emotional and personalised information (Bas and Grabe, 2013). In addition to encoding information more accurately and better remembering it, higher educated people enjoy news stories more and find them more arousing – both affective processes (Grabe et al., 2000). With these exceptions, we found

few studies that identified affective differences due to education. Little in these mostly cognitive explanations suggests affective differences based on education. Where there is more logic is in a concept called need to evaluate (NE), which measures the extent to which people spontaneously assess other people, things and experiences as either good or bad (Bizer et al., 2004). NE has been shown to regulate the processes by which people form impressions of candidates, accounting for differences in both automatic and controlled processing. People with high NE are more likely to use both their emotions and cognitive evaluations of candidates. NE is correlated with education; people higher in NE have more education (Bizer et al., 2004).

These theoretical explanations point to conflicting outcomes regarding affective agenda-setting effects. On one hand, if greater news use affects the transfer of affective information, then the educated should be more likely to adopt the news media agenda of candidate character traits. However, if the greater need to evaluate of the higher educated leads to more sophisticated information processing and critical thinking learned via education, then they may *not* be more likely to adopt the news media's affective agendas, but the lower educated may be because affective information such as character traits is the kind of emotional and personalised information that affects them more. This study seeks to determine if differences exist, not to uncover root causes of those differences, which could be many. Because of conflicting evidence, we ask a research question:

RQ1: Will education level be positively associated with affective agenda setting?

Age

Much evidence shows that news use varies by age (Pew Research Center, 2007). Older people are significantly more likely to use TV, newspapers and magazines (Lauf, 2001), while younger people are more likely to use social media and the Internet (Lauf, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2007). One of the first studies specifically focused on the effects of age on issue agenda setting showed that 18- to 34-year-olds used traditional news media such as TV and newspapers significantly less than those older than 34; however, this did not eliminate the agenda-setting effect (Coleman and McCombs, 2007). That study focused on the first-level agenda, concluding that there was a high degree of consensus across generations regarding important issues. A follow-up study using data from 1960 to 2004 expanded the scope of age and came to a similar conclusion (Lee and Coleman, 2013). The findings point to a relatively homogeneous agenda among the generations and through the life cycle; differential news use was not implicated.

Age is one of the standard demographics used as statistical controls in communication research because so many outcomes are a function of one's place in the life cycle (student, parent, etc.), the cohort one belongs to (Millennials, Baby Boomers, etc.), or the time span of a person's life (Chaffee, 1991). One theoretical process that could explain age effects on affective agenda setting may be personalisation and emotion in news (Mujia and Bachmann, 2018), with personalisation defined as a focus on private and personal affairs, and emotion defined as the depiction of mood states such as empathy and sadness, bringing a sense of intimacy and emotional convergences between

audiences and people in the news. In one study, emotional and personalised news stories lead to better recall among viewers ages 18 to 29 (Mujia and Bachmann, 2018). Different processing strategies by different age groups may be responsible; empathy with characters in the news promotes information processing for the young. As there is increasing personalisation in political news (Lo and Cheng, 2017) linked to the use of images and their capacity to promote emotional engagement and personalisation (Mujia and Bachmann, 2018), it is plausible that personalised and emotional news could generate greater affective agenda-setting effects on the young. Finally, it is well known among neuroscientists that brain development is not complete until at least age 25 and possibly into the 30s. The prefrontal cortex, where logic and calculated assessments occur, is the last to develop. Teens and young adults are more likely to make judgments based on emotions than logic because they are still processing information through the amygdala (Grady, 1988). Again, our purpose is to see if age, which is linked to these processes, has a differential effect. We see plausibility in explanations of brain development and the personalised nature of affective information in political news influencing young people's candidate assessments, thus we predict:

H1: Being young will be positively associated with affective agenda setting.

Gender

Unlike with age, research has not found much difference between men and women in how much news they use, but the topics and tone differ (Stone, 1987). Women prefer soft (Nguyen, 2012) and positive news, whereas men seek out negative news (Kamhawi and Grabe, 2008). Wanta (1997a) says gender effects should be less obvious because of the similarity between genders in amount of news use, but speculates men should be more likely to experience agenda-setting effects because they read hard news more. One study did find that gender had an effect on issue agenda setting (Fahmy and Johnson, 2007). Women's fear of victimisation may have played a role in this study of the anthrax attacks. We note that fear is an affective process, which may point to greater affective agenda-setting effects by gender.

Gender differences do consistently appear in other theoretical processes that may be related to affective information processing. For example, women have significantly lower need to evaluate (Bizer et al., 2004). However, in other studies relevant to affect formation, women recall and recognise faces and expressions better (van Driel, Grabe, Bas, et al., 2016), and are better at evaluating and appraising others – known as person perception – based on facial expressions (Buck, 1976). Women also are better at recognising their own and others' emotions (Donges et al., 2012).

These studies suggest gender-based differences. One explanation is that females are socialised to focus on emotional and social interactions more than males (McClure, 2000). This is rooted in evolutionary explanations of the traditional role of women as caretakers, making it more important that they accurately interpret subtle facial expressions of infants (Babchuk et al., 1985).

Women also have been shown to pay more attention to information related to others and use more comprehensive processing strategies for it (Meyers-Levy, 1989). The vast

majority of nonverbal communication studies show gender effects, with women outperforming men (Hall, 1984). However, these studies examine nonverbal behaviour in interpersonal contexts; ours examines verbal descriptions of character traits in mediated news environments. As we are hesitant to extrapolate these findings, we instead ask a question:

RQ2: Will gender be positively associated with affective agenda setting?

Partisanship

Whether one is a Republican, Democrat or something else strongly influences his or her political behaviour and attitudes (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008), thus partisanship is typically controlled. The explanation for why agenda setting is influenced by partisanship lies in selective exposure, the idea that people seek out news that conforms to their existing views and avoid news that does not (Mutz and Martin, 2001). Partisanship affects not only selective exposure, but also selective perception (Taber and Lodge, 2006), which, in turn affects affective agenda setting. Those with more polarised political views will be less likely to seek out mainstream news media, viewing it as biased against them (Eveland et al., 2003). The mechanism behind partisans' selectively exposing themselves to congruent ideological news involves attention and interest, and the need for orientation (NFO), which is comprised of relevance and uncertainty (Weaver, 1980).

This is one area where research on a demographic variable *has* been conducted with affective agenda setting, and media use is not always the primary explanation. Hyun and Moon (2016) examined the candidates' affective attributes in the 2012 election and found that partisanship was the strongest predictor of agenda setting, saying that, 'effects of TV news programs rely on viewers' susceptibility to the effects of the affective dimension present in specific programs, rather than on simple exposure to those programs' (p. 510). Another possible explanation for why partisanship should have affective agenda-setting effects is based in need to evaluate. Republicans had higher NE than those of other political parties (Bizer et al., 2004). Those higher in NE were more likely to use party identification to assess candidates, and high NE people were more likely to use their own issue stance to evaluate candidates (Bizer et al., 2004). In another study, strong partisans showed the strongest affective agenda-setting effects (Camaj, 2014). Thus, there is evidence to predict:

H2: Being a Democrat or Republican will be positively associated with affective agenda setting.

Many of these studies' conclusions about individual differences and their effects on issue agenda setting based on differences in news use were done roughly 20 years ago; news usage patterns have changed along with platforms. In addition, few of these studies examined affective effects, which may be different from issue effects. Because much research has indicated that demographics do matter and that agenda setting does not

work the same for all (McCombs, 2004), here we use data from the 2008, 2012 and 2016 U.S. Presidential elections to investigate individual differences and candidate character traits, controlling for news use.

Methods

These three election studies use the conventional agenda-setting framework of a content analysis paired with a public opinion survey. The content analyses were used to determine the news media's affective agendas; the surveys were conducted to determine if the news media transferred those agendas to the public. All procedures and measures are the same unless noted.

Content analyses

For the 2008 and 2012 elections, news content was gathered from Labour Day to Election Day. Because the start of campaigning has begun earlier and earlier, for 2016, coding was done between September 2015 and Election Day 2016. In 2008 and 2012, three constructed weeks were used; four in 2016, because of the longer time span (Riffe et al., 1993). Dates were randomly sampled, so results are generalisable.

We analyse TV news because most people still got their news from this medium during this time period. As of 2016, 57% of Americans got their news from local, network or cable television (Mitchell et al., 2016). It was even higher in the earlier years of this study – in 2008 70% of people got their campaign news from television (Pew Research Center, 2008). While this is a significant decline, 31% of Americans often get their news from two or more types of sources, and television is still the primary source (Shearer and Gottfried, 2017).

We attempted to use the same news shows in all three elections; however, show changes led to some differences. We used Fox News' *Fox Report with Shepard Smith* in 2008 and 2012; in 2016, Bret Bair had replaced Smith, so we used Fox's *Special Report with Bret Baier*. Show line-up also differed slightly on CNN; in 2008 we used *Anderson Cooper 360*, while in 2012 and 2016 we used *The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer* because it aired at the same time as the previous show. For the traditional networks, we used NBC *Nightly News* to represent all three because of the high degree of redundancy (Hyun and Moon, 2016).[3]

Coding categories

We measured the candidates' character traits, which are some of the most prominent attributes emphasised by the news media (McCombs et al., 1997). The same traits were asked about in the surveys. We chose six traits routinely measured in large studies such as ANES. Tone was measured by coding traits as negative, neutral or positive (−1, 0, +1). All traits were combined for each candidate, resulting in indexes ranging from −1 to +1.

Traits were: Moral, caring, knowledgeable, good leader, honest and intelligent. Coders also used synonyms for each of the categories from the Merriam-Webster dictionary and thesaurus.com. Two coders coded 20% of the same stories for reliability. Krippendorf's alphas were 1.0 for all categories in 2008 except .95 for McCain caring and leadership; 1.0 for all categories in 2012; in 2016, alphas ranged from .722 to .866.

Public opinion surveys

For two of the elections, we used custom online surveys in order to question respondents about their news use by individual channels; in one election year, we used ANES, which does not allow this breakdown. With this study so focused on individual differences, having this level of detail was important for as many of our election years as possible. We used ANES because we also were attempting a conceptual replication rather than an exact replication because we were interested in extending knowledge and theory by deliberately varying the operationalisation of some variables, context and other features in order to test theory to see if it holds up under different conditions. Thus, in 2008, a custom online survey was administered through a university research center using a panel of registered voters stratified to be representative of the population 1 week before the election from a random sample of 304 respondents who mirrored the demographics of U.S. voters in a Roper exit poll.[4] Character traits were the same as in the content analysis, using a 7-point scale asking how well each trait described the candidate (1 = not well to 7 = extremely well) (Cronbach's alphas = McCain .933; Obama .947). We asked respondents which network they mostly got their news from and only used those who answered one of the news outlets we coded; we asked how many days per week they watched.

In 2012, we used the American National Election Studies online survey in order to have a large, national sample – 5914 respondents – randomly sampled and generalisable to the population. Character traits were scored on 4-point scales (1 = not well at all to 4 = extremely well), with negatively worded questions reverse coded (Cronbach's alphas: Romney .934, Obama .950). ANES did not break news use down by channel, so we used the question, 'How many days per week do you watch TV news?'

In 2016, a custom survey with participants recruited from Survey Sampling International's panel of online respondents for a stratified sample representative of the U.S. population took place from Oct. 24, 2016 until Election Day and resulted in 1323. Character traits were measured on 7-point scales (Cronbach's alphas Trump = .977; Clinton = .971). We asked how many days per week respondents watched news on each of the outlets coded, then summed and averaged their responses. Following other scholars (Boomgarden, et al., 2011), a matching procedure created a measure of *affective exposure*, which accounts for the character trait agenda in news content as well as each respondent's amount of news use. The measure multiplied each respondent's usage from the survey by the mean character trait score for each candidate derived from the content analysis. If a person reports watching 1 day a week, their trait assessment score of the candidates is weighted less than a person who watches 7 days a week. This was done in all surveys, resulting in individual-level data rather than the aggregate-level data usually found, allowing for a more powerful analysis (Moon, 2011). Because agenda-setting studies assess effects by seeing how closely the news agenda matches the public agenda in various ways, not just by rank ordering things of importance (Edy and Meirick, 2007), we first regressed the affective exposure score for each respondent in order to control for news use, and then regressed their demographics on their assessment of the candidate's traits to see which variables were predictive of adopting the media's affective agendas.

In all three surveys, we collected the demographics of interest in this study: Age (18–34, 35–54 and 55+), gender (1=male), highest level of education (high school or less, some college or bachelor's degree, some graduate school or degree) and partisanship (Republican, Democrat, Independent).

Results

The content analyses showed there was a news media agenda that was significantly different for the two candidates for all elections. In 2008, Obama was portrayed as having significantly more positive character traits than McCain ($t=-2.106$, $df=416$, $p<0.05$; Obama $M=.010$, $SD=.077$; McCain $M=.002$, $SD=.048$). In 2012, Obama was again portrayed significantly more positively than Romney ($t=-2.287$, $df=253$, $p<0.05$. Obama $M=.014$, $SD=.057$; Romney $M=.006$, $SD=.031$). In 2016, although both candidates were portrayed negatively overall, Clinton was portrayed significantly less negatively than Trump ($t=-2.652$, $df=292$, $p<0.01$. Clinton $M=-.0467$, $SD=.10091$; Trump $M=-.026$, $SD=.097$).

To test hypotheses and answer research questions, we used OLS regression with each respondent's assessment of the candidate's character traits as the DV; IVs were the affective exposure score for each respondent, entered first in the regression to control for news use, and the dummy variables of the demographics age, gender, education and party ID as predictors. We did a model for each candidate in each election.

As expected, watching TV news was a significant predictor of affective agenda setting; affective exposure significantly predicted adopting the media's agenda of candidate character traits for all but two candidates, McCain in 2008 and Clinton in 2016 (see Table 1). Having controlled for exposure to affective news, we see that it alone was not enough to explain adoption of the news media's affective agendas.

The first research question asked if education is a significant predictor of affective agenda setting and finds it is not. We found only one significant predictor among the three education levels; those with some graduate school or degree were significantly more likely to adopt the media's affective agendas for Obama in 2012 and Clinton in 2016. We do not consider this enough evidence to support the conclusion that education predicts affective agenda setting.

H1 predicted that being 18 to 34 years old is positively associated with the news media's ability to transfer their agenda of candidate traits. This hypothesis was supported; in two of the three elections, the young were significantly likely to adopt the news media's affective agendas for one candidate. In 2008 and 2012, it was media portrayals of Obama that were adopted by the young; they were unaffected by the traits in the news of McCain and Romney, as they were for Clinton and Trump in 2016 (see Table 1).

RQ2, which asks if gender is positively associated with affective agenda setting, finds that it is not; no consistent pattern emerged. In one election, it was women who were significantly more likely to adopt the news media's affective agendas (for Obama in 2012), but in another it was men (for Trump in 2016). (see Table 1).

The final hypothesis, H2, predicts significant affective effects for Democrats and Republicans. This was supported. In all three elections, there was evidence of partisans

Table 1. Regressions predicting candidate attributes by respondents' demographics.

	2008 (n = 285)		2012 (n = 5772)		2016 (n = 1299)	
	Obama	McCain	Obama	Romney	Clinton	Trump
Affective exposure	.185***	−.025	.094***	.056***	.038	.082*
Age						
18–34	.294**	−.236	.099**	.021	−.263	−.257
35–54	.249	−.227	.105*	.074	−.241	.244
55+	.203	−.145	.059	.164***	−.255	−.259
Gender (1 = male)	.016	−.012	−.038***	.013	−.038	.074*
Education						
High school	−.328	.096	.021	−.014	.017	.019
College	−.379	.206	.047	.063	.054	−.407
Graduate	−.287	.141	.075*	.054	.075*	−.006
Party ID						
Republican	−.358***	.320**	−.179*	.574***	−.166*	.372***
Democrat	.296***	−.308**	.533***	−.078	.469***	−.240**
Independent	−.138	.062	.051	.071	.073	.080
Adj. R^2	.368	.307	.465	.435	.307	.316

Numbers in cells are standardised coefficients.
$*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.$

adopting the news media's affective agendas. Democrats were significantly more likely to adopt the news media agenda for the Democratic candidate, and Republicans were significantly more likely to adopt the news media agenda for the Republican. In addition, Republicans were significantly less likely to adopt the news media's affective agendas for the Democrat, while Democrats were significantly less likely to adopt the news media's affective agendas for the Republican in two elections (the exception was Romney in 2012, which showed no significance). Independents showed no agenda-setting influences for any candidate in any election (see Table 1).

Discussion

As we hypothesised, this study shows that some of the individual differences that make people more likely to adopt the news media's agenda of issues do not work the same for the agenda of affect, in this case, the character traits of presidential candidates. In fact, only one variable – gender – shows the same influence on the affective agendas of political candidates that it does on issue agendas in other studies, which is to say it has no effect at all. Gender showed no consistent effect in this study of affective agenda setting, nor has it in other studies of issue agenda setting. While gender differences exist in a myriad of phenomena, it seems news media agenda setting of either level is not one of them. Whether the processes theorised to be responsible for gender differences in other outcomes – person perception, need to evaluate, etc. – even out for men and women, or

some other mechanism is responsible, being male or female just does not matter when it comes to the influence of the news media's agenda of either issues or affect.

The most surprising finding from this study – and the one most strikingly opposite of results with issue agenda setting – is that education shows no effect for affect the way it does for issues. In studies on the news media's ability to transfer salient issues to the public, a consistent finding is that the more education a person has, the greater the likelihood of adopting the news media's agenda. Yet, that is not the case when it comes to the media's ability to transfer salient character traits in the political context. Education neither leads one to be more likely to adopt the news media's agenda, nor less likely. We surmise that this could be because education is primarily a rational affair, designed to improve memory, attention and the ability to process complex information, thus there is little reason to think that acquiring these skills changes how one assesses affective information such as another person's character traits, which is not always a completely rational endeavour. Even the concept of need to evaluate is based mostly in rational reasoning as it works by leading the higher educated to use critical thinking skills learned through education. We see education as working similarly to that of need for orientation, a concept derived from cognitive theories of motivation (Matthes, 2005). While cognitive concepts are proven predictors of issue agenda setting, they fall short in explaining affective outcomes, which are not purely cognitive but a combination of two domains – thinking and feeling.

Perhaps the most interesting result in this study, which also is counter to findings for issue agenda setting, is that of age. Although it was once conventional wisdom to think that the young must be less affected by issue agenda setting by virtue of their lesser use of traditional news media, that was not borne out by research; in two studies, there was a high degree of consensus across generations regarding the important issues (Coleman and McCombs, 2007; Lee and Coleman, 2013). Agenda setting at the issues level worked the same for the young as it did for the middle aged and the old. Even if the young are watching political comedies and using the Internet more than other age groups, research has shown those news outlets likely have the same affective agendas as traditional news media, thus, using different news sources would not diminish the magnitude of affective effects. No one to our knowledge has suggested that youth makes one more likely to adopt the news media's affective agendas, yet that turns out to be the case in this study. In two of three elections, being 18 to 34 does appear to make one more likely to adopt the news media's agenda when it comes to candidate character traits. As we saw with Obama mania and the 'Bernie Bros', young voters especially were attracted to two particular candidates. Although talk abounds of these candidates' appeal to youth based on issues – their socialist values, support of women and minorities, or policies on student loans, for example – as this study shows, there are also character traits conveyed by the news media that resonate with these young voters more than older voters. The importance of personalities – Bernie Sanders as relatable or genuine (Gabbatt, 2015), and Obama as someone to have a beer with (Morales, 2008) – should not be discounted. Explanations for why affective attributes are more influential on the young than policies and issues may be found in neuroscience. Until at least age 25 and some say even into the 30s, the brain is not fully matured. Young people are making decisions using more of their emotional brains – the amygdala – than their rational

brains – the prefrontal cortex. Logical judgment, making calculated assessments, thinking ahead, setting goals and evaluating others and ourselves, all improves with age. Recent research has even found evidence for brain structure to explain partisanship – conservatives are more likely to have an enlarged amygdala while liberals have a larger anterior cingulate cortex, where the detection and judgment of conflict and error occurs (Amodio, 2007; Kanai et al., 2011).

This leads us to our next intriguing finding, which is how partisanship predicts resistance to the news media's affective agendas when it comes to the opposition party's candidate. In all three elections, Democrats showed no affective agenda-setting effect for the Republican candidates, and Republicans showed no effects for the Democrats. However, Independents demonstrated no significant affective agenda-setting effects for any candidate in all three elections. Thus, we conclude that partisanship plays a pivotal role in the processing of affective information; it may help audiences guard against the news media's agenda setting for the opposition candidate. Not having a horse in the race can make one even less susceptible to the news media's affective agendas, helping explain and justify why campaigns especially target undecided and independent voters.

Conclusion

Like others before us who have called for more research into individual differences in agenda setting, we also say there is merit in studying demographics. They do not all work the same for the affective agenda as for issues. Optimally, affective agenda-setting research that does not involve random assignment or a representative or random sample should control for the variables found likely to be differentially affected, including age and political party. However, it may not be necessary for these studies to include gender and education as controls, thus reducing power, as those variables show no effects in this study.

The finding of the effects of age is the unique contribution of this research. This demographic variable has repeatedly shown no effects on the issues agenda, yet it was a good predictor of adopting the media's affect agenda in two out of three elections in this study. Affect is more potent than issues for the young, who showed more likelihood of adopting the news media's affective agendas than the middle aged and older groups. This effect of age isn't ubiquitous; it doesn't occur automatically and in every situation for young voters – for example, in the 2016 election, young voters did not adopt the media's affective agendas for either Clinton or Trump; however, their preferred candidate, Bernie Sanders, was not a nominee. We believe there is likely some interaction between candidate personality and issue stance that attracts the young to particular candidates, although these results point to affective explanations as more powerful predictors for the young than issues.

As it has in other studies, partisanship helps people guard against influences of the news media's affective agendas. This study drilled more deeply into the effects of partisanship on affect and found that affiliation with a political party confers a protective effect against the news media's portrayal of the opposition party's candidate. Independents, who did not have a candidate in the running in any of these elections, were the least

susceptible to news media portrayals of both candidates' character traits. Identifying with a political party may serve as a contingent condition for affective agenda setting to occur.

These theoretical ideas should be incorporated into the theory as predictors of affective agenda setting. These results apply to the U.S. political setting, thus more research should be conducted in other political systems. Replication in different settings than political campaigns would help us understand if there are idiosyncratic context effects as well. No doubt other individual differences may also matter to affective agenda setting; however, the demographic differences examined here are easy to measure and available in most secondary datasets. With the evidence from this study, researchers in affective agenda setting in political settings can justify the use of age and party ID as control variables and feel more confident in not including gender and education.

As with all research, this study has limitations. We did not take into account social media or blogs, and differences in affective agenda setting between traditional and social media have been documented (Ceron, 2014); we were interested in a comparison across time from 2008 when social media was in its infancy. We also urge caution in generalising from the small sample sizes for 2008 and 2016. Among the strengths of this study is that it includes an over-time analysis and individual level data. It also uses original data in two elections and confirms the findings with a larger, randomly sampled secondary data source in a third. In sum, this represents a strong foundation for important theoretical additions to the theory of affective agenda setting, and practical applications for journalists, citizens and scholars.

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Notes

1. Affect is how people represent the value of things as good or bad and includes preferences, emotions and moods (McDermott, 2004).
2. What drives people to use media as well as the attitudes and feelings that people bring to their media use influences the effects news media coverage has on them (Wanta, 1997). There is a large body of literature on this, including the uses and gratifications perspective.
3. In 2008 and 2012 we content analysed all Big Three networks but did not find significant differences. Because of this, we coded only NBC for 2016 and used only NBC in all three years in order to have direct comparisons.
4. Contact authors for poll comparisons.

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