Anxious Politics

Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World

Emotions matter in politics – enthusiastic supporters return politicians to office, angry citizens march in the streets, a fearful public demands protection from the government. *Anxious Politics* explores the emotional life of politics, with particular emphasis on how political anxieties affect public life. When the world is scary, when politics is passionate, when the citizenry is anxious, does this politics resemble politics under more serene conditions? If politicians use threatening appeals to persuade citizens, how does the public respond?

Anxious Politics argues that political anxiety triggers engagement in politics in ways that are potentially both promising and damaging for democracy. Using four substantive policy areas (public health, immigration, terrorism, and climate change), the book seeks to demonstrate that anxiety affects how we consume political news, who we trust, and what policies we support. Anxiety about politics triggers coping strategies in the political world, where these strategies are often shaped by partisan agendas.

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Anxious Politics

Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World

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To Mike, Jonah, Ethan, Josh, and Will – five charming men who elicit positively valenced emotions

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Acknowledgments

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clearly needed more studies and more articles: was this the case only for certain people? How did this work in other policy areas? What were the consequences for public opinion?

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Prologue

> *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.*
>
> Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933)

"THE MOST FEARED DISEASE"

In summer 1916, the United States experienced its first major outbreak of polio, a viral disease that mainly affected children, leaving survivors with paralysis and wasted limbs. Concentrated around New York City, the outbreak would claim 27,000 lives before running its course. As historian David Oshinsky noted, polio was

> the most feared disease of the middle part of the 20th century. It was a children's disease; there was no prevention; there was no cure; every child everywhere was at risk. And what this really meant was that parents were absolutely frantic. And what they tried to do was to protect their children the best way they could. (Dentzer 2005)

Anxiety surrounding the disease led to demand for public policies to combat the outbreak along with private behaviors to avoid contraction. With the cause of the disease shrouded in mystery, the public initially blamed Italian immigrants for the 1916 outbreak, focusing on their hygiene. Anxious parents cautioned their children not go swimming in pools or lakes (Youngdahl 2012). Armed police patrolled roads and rails around New York to ensure that travelers could prove their children were polio-free (Oshinsky 2006, 20–22).

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In the wake of these disease outbreaks, politicians advocated public health policies to protect the public from polio. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who himself was afflicted with the disease, launched a campaign against polio through the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. The campaign, more commonly known as the March of Dimes, called for citizens to send their dimes directly to the president. In 1938, that effort would yield more than two and half million dimes in addition to bills and checks. Such was the popular nature of the fight against polio that politicians of both parties sought to be associated with it. For example, in 1954, Republican vice-presidential candidate Richard Nixon was famously photographed pumping gas in a fundraising effort for the fight, "Fill 'Er Up for Polio" (Oshinsky 2006). In 1955, those efforts bore fruit, and a vaccine was created that was rolled out nationwide by the Eisenhower administration to rid the United States of this deadly disease.

AN IMMIGRANT THREAT?

Some threats like polio imminently endanger the lives of citizens, triggering visceral reactions on the part of the public and generating bipartisan support for action. Other threats emerge in a more politically charged environment in which partisans of different political parties may see an issue like immigration differently. They may even differ on whether immigration is a threat. In the mid-2000s, immigration was a contentious political issue in the United States, particularly in Western states like Arizona and California where demographic change and cross-border migration began to stoke fears among some. One response to this potential threat came from groups such as the Minuteman Project, who led vigilante border enforcement efforts. Others, like Ray Ybarra of the ACLU, were more afraid of overzealous efforts. Describing the Minuteman, Ybarra said: "I don't think these guys are all evil racists or anything. I just think the fact they see every migrant coming across as an object and as something to fear that is going to ruin our society is scary" (Wood 2005).

Although immigration reform failed at the federal level in 2007, at the state level, restrictive immigration policies gained traction. Advocates of these policies argued that they were necessary to protect both public safety and the economic structure of the United States. In 2009, Republican Secretary of State Jan Brewer succeeded Democrat Janet Napolitano as governor of Arizona. Virtually unknown outside of Arizona, Brewer shored up her support in the party by promoting highly

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restrictive immigration policies. In April 2010, those efforts culminated in SB 1070, a bill that would require police officers to request the immigration papers of anyone they thought might be in the country illegally (Allan 2010). Using threatening language, Brewer justified support for that bill by tying immigrants to drug trafficking: "They're coming here, and they're bringing drugs. And they're doing drophouses, and they're extorting people, and they're terrorizing families" (Rough 2010). Other politicians cautioned that the law itself was a threat. President Obama decried the Arizona law for potentially undermining "basic notions of fairness that we cherish as Americans, as well as the trust between police and our communities that is so crucial to keeping us safe" (Archibold 2010).

Immigration dominated the headlines again in the summer of 2014, as tens of thousands of children, many of them unaccompanied, crossed from Mexico into the United States illegally, most of them originating from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Kuhnhenn 2014). The influx of immigrants was widely covered in the news, with the surge driven in part by drug violence in Central America alongside a misinformation campaign from human traffickers that the Obama administration was accepting Central American minors. Many Americans took to the streets in rallies and protests, with some advocating stronger borders and others hoping for a humanitarian response and a resolution to the wider immigration problem. President Obama asked for $3.7 billion to deal with the problem, while other politicians tried to position themselves as "tough" on immigration. In July 2014, Texas governor Rick Perry ordered 1,000 National Guard troops to defend the border, arguing, "Drug cartels, human traffickers, and individuals are exploiting this tragedy for their own criminal opportunities. . . . I will not stand idly by while our citizens are under assault, and little children from Central America are detained in squalor"[1] (Fernandez and Shear 2014). The American public remains decidedly anxious about immigration.

* * * * *

As these vignettes illustrate, whether the issue is an infectious disease like polio or new immigrants, American life is often threatening. Crisis, threat, and worry are relatively common phenomena in the American landscape.

[1] Prior to this event, Governor Perry was perhaps best known nationally for his failed 2012 presidential run. He was widely criticized for his support of in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants and his comments regarding those who didn't agree with him on the issue: "I don't think you have a heart."

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In the past century alone, the country experienced numerous occasions of peril – the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, World War II, the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, gas shortages, the Iran hostage crisis, the Oklahoma City bombing, September 11, and the 2008 economic collapse. On these occasions, the public turned to the government for guidance about how best to protect and preserve the United States and its people. Contemporary American life is no exception to this pattern. Immigrants stealing American jobs, swine flu sickening thousands, floods and storms brought on by global warming, and terrorists plotting to kill innocents are just some of the many purported dangers of modern American existence. Politicians and the news media regularly sound warnings about threats to the nation and citizens' lives and safety. Candidates running for office and elected leaders warn the public of risks to health, safety, and security. It is difficult to turn on a news channel without hearing about the latest virus, food, political regime, or ideology that is an imminent threat to one's life and the security of the nation. The mass media disproportionately cover threatening issues such as crime and terrorism (Iyengar 1991), and, even within newscasts, the media focus prominently on the most threatening aspects of stories and spend far less time providing reassuring information to the public (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011).

What are the consequences for an American public besieged with emotional appeals, evocative imagery, and threatening news? In this book, we explore how political anxiety shapes how the American public engages with politics. Political thinkers and democratic theorists express concern that the anxiety created by contemporary politics may undercut citizens' abilities to make rational political choices (Edelman 1985; Hamilton, Jay, and Madison 1961). Yet recent research from political science and psychology paints a more hopeful picture of anxiety, suggesting that political fears may lead to more knowledgeable and trusting citizens (Brader 2006; Garsten 2006; Marcus 2002; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; McDermott 2004; Neuman et al. 2007).

Anxiety signals to individuals that a threat is present in the environment that is personally relevant to them and motivates a desire and need for protection. Our fundamental argument is that political anxiety shapes how individual citizens interact with politics by affecting how they search for information, who they trust in times of crises, and their political attitudes. By political anxiety, we mean simply anxiety felt on the individual level about political issues. People vary in what makes them anxious – one person's threat can be another person's hope. The

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problems causing anxiety might exceed individual or community coping capacity, and anxious people often want government intervention to protect them from harm. The uncertainty and negative feelings that accompany anxiety are unpleasant, and individuals are motivated to regulate this emotion through strategies that restore a sense of security and affective balance. Citizens cope with this anxiety in a number of ways that we trace through the book. Coping mechanisms can take on a variety of forms, including bolstering self-esteem or putting more trust in neighbors and friends. We expect, though, that when anxiety comes from the world of politics, ultimately, the resolution of anxiety comes from political rather than private behaviors and attitudes.

Our focus in this book is on a variety of anxieties that motivate citizens to engage with the political world. Throughout this book, we explore how the public's anxieties about immigration, public health, terrorism, and climate change shape our current politics. Some political anxieties, like the fear of infectious disease, originate from the fear of illness and physical violence and need no framing from elites to frighten the public. Other anxieties, like fears about immigration and climate change, are what we called *framed threats*, those related to uncertainty over one's place in society, the quality of that society, or the economic health of the country, and require more explanation from elites about why the public should be worried. Americans made anxious by elites, events, and issues seek protection from threats to their lives, livelihoods, planet, and culture by seeking information, putting their trust in select political institutions and leaders, and supporting policies framed as protective.

Anxiety might cause us to engage in politics, but it can also alter the shape of that engagement. Our research reconciles the generally normatively positive portrayal of anxiety in political psychology with the strategic uses of threatening appeals by political elites. Anxious citizens learn, trust, and hold political attitudes. Campaigns can take advantage of an anxious politics, and even help to create it because there are systematic ways in which these processes occur. In an anxious politics, we learn threatening information, we trust certain expert or relevant figures at the expense of others, and we hold political attitudes that are framed as protective.

Political anxiety occurs in a partisan world. Politicians compete over the emotional agenda, telling the public what to be anxious about, as well as what policies will ultimately alleviate their anxiety. Politicians have an incentive to both make the public anxious and to tap into their anxiety on policies where their party is perceived as having expertise and the most

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effective solutions. Republicans generally benefit when the public worries about the ill effects of immigration, future terrorism, or crime, whereas Democrats are more trusted when the public is concerned about the environment or education. Partisanship and other political identities can act as a bulwark against anxiety's persuasive power, though. Elites are not equally successful at making all citizens anxious, particularly about framed threats. Scaring the public may help a politician persuade partisans across the political spectrum to elect him or support her favored policy when threats are new, uncertain, and not yet associated with only one political party. Yet repeated use of threatening appeals may lessen the effectiveness, both because the public begins to tune out warnings for threats that may not occur (i.e., the Chicken Little phenomenon) and because the anxious appeal becomes associated with one political party. When the sky does not fall or when anxiety seems overtly partisan, sections of the public may refuse to become anxious. During times of crisis, though, anxiety can lead citizens to set aside partisanship and their own policy predispositions and follow political leaders who they normally would not, thus making an anxious politics very appealing to political elites.

Partisan politics shape not only who becomes anxious but also what types of solutions anxious citizens support. When an issue is closely associated with a political party (e.g., immigration for Republicans and climate change for Democrats), partisanship can shape the ways that anxious people engage in politics. Anxious people seek out threatening news, but partisanship affects who remembers that news. Anxious people put their trust in relevant, expert figures, but on partisan issues, anxious people trust the political party seen as more effective on that issue. Finally, anxious people are drawn to policies that protect them from threat, and parties compete to offer protection.

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