

*Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*

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Albertson and Gadarian's book, *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*, arrives at an especially appropriate moment in time. Americans (not to mention citizens in other nations) are feeling tremendous anxiety about a range of phenomena largely beyond their control—globalization, terrorism, economic inequality, and climate change, among others.

Yet, this book is not only relevant to politics today. Albertson and Gadarian have convinced me that anxiety is much more fundamental to politics and to governing than many of us think. After all, democratic government is first and foremost a means of solving collective problems. And anxiety is *the* emotion that arises to alert us that we face a problem in our environment. Honest politicians will offer responsible solutions to legitimate anxieties. Self-serving ones will try to manipulate anxiety, by drumming it up when it is not warranted and by offering themselves and their policies as solutions, even when the opposition has the better candidate and plan.

Albertson and Gadarian are admittedly not the first empirical political scientists to write on anxiety and politics. Numerous articles and several books have preceded them, including Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen's *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (2000) and Brader's *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds* (2006). However, as they demonstrate, there is a great deal more to say on the topic.

While many previous emotions and politics researchers have focused on elections and candidate selection, Albertson and Gadarian focus their attention on beliefs and attitudes relevant to public policy and the institutional actors entrusted to carry out those policies. The authors discuss seven original empirical studies (six experiments and one survey) that between them cover four anxiety-provoking themes: public health concerns (H1N1 and small pox), terrorism, immigration, and climate change. Albertson and Gadarian are interested in the effects of anxiety about these topics on three related outcomes: (1) relevant learning; (2) trust in government actors; and (3) policy attitudes.

Albertson and Gadarian find that anxiety matters—often quite a bit—in each of these domains. But the causal influence of anxiety that they uncover is not simple or uniform. In my view, Albertson and Gadarian's key contribution is their repeated demonstration that the role of anxiety in politics is quite complicated, depending on the issue area, the political context, and the qualities of any given citizen. In short, they advance theory on their topic by filling in crucial details as to the how, the when, and the why of emotional influences on political opinion and behavior.

Albertson and Gadarian begin with a simple idea that is underappreciated by some: not all threats are created equal. Some threats—such as public health threats—affect people similarly, regardless of party or ideology. Other threats—what the authors call “framed threats”—affect people differently, depending on political (and perhaps other) factors. Contemporary examples of framed threats include immigration and climate change. In these cases, partisans on one side of the aisle tend to be more concerned about the threat than others, and, not coincidentally, politicians on that same side of the aisle tend to be more focused on the problem than others.

Further complexity is introduced in each of the three main empirical chapters (Chapters 3, 4, and 5). In Chapter 3, the authors tackle perhaps the most studied topic in emotions and politics: the relationship between anxiety and learning. On balance, previous research in the field has suggested that the effect of anxiety on citizen knowledge and (relatedly) decision-making is positive because anxiety encourages people to take in contemporary information, i.e., to learn. While Albertson and Gadarian also find that anxiety increases information seeking, they point out that not all learning is helpful to decision-making. Anxiety encourages people to seek out threat-relevant information—and often this is information that simply describes the threat in greater detail (without explaining how a person might cope with a threat). Where threatening information is in abundance, the result can be a self-defeating anxiety loop, where anxiety leads to biased information search and still more anxiety.

In Chapter 4, Albertson and Gadarian take on the subject of trust in government institutions and leaders. Here, they point to some previous research in political psychology that suggests that the effects of anxiety on trust for leaders is diffuse, with established authorities all benefitting from a scared public. Again, the authors helpfully complicate this notion. First, it matters whether a threat arises from outside the government (such as a public health threat) or from inside the government, where it can be argued that government ineptitude has played a role. Second, with some exceptions, people who are anxious increase their trust in individuals and institutions who appear to have relevant expertise, and in political parties who have demonstrated “issue ownership” over particular policy areas.

Finally, in Chapter 5, the authors examine the important subject of attitude change. Some previous researchers have argued that anxiety is a “conservative” emotion, nearly always increasing support for policy positions on the right of the ideological spectrum. Albertson and Gadarian disagree. As they argue, anxiety creates a desire for protection, and it is not always conservative policy that best provides that protection. The most obvious case is climate change: anxiety about this phenomenon increases a preference for “liberal” policy solutions, including among Republicans.

Throughout the book, the authors demonstrate these patterns with careful empirical work. The key experiments are unusually well-designed and appropriately vary in the way anxiety is evoked. In some experiments, the authors use “bottom up” emotion primes that involve people listing their worries about a topic, such as immigration. With such a design, there is a concern that any experimental effect will stem from more cognitive than emotional elements; however, the authors take several steps to guard against this, such as asking the control group to list their thoughts (in general) about immigration and, importantly, measuring all participants’ emotions following the experimental stimuli (which allows the authors to test whether the experimental effects are mediated by measured anxiety). In two other experiments, following Brader (2006), the authors compare the effects of an anti-immigration ad with scary imagery and music to a similar ad with neutral imagery and music. Throughout, the study designs and the accompanying analyses are both sophisticated and well-explained, making this book an outstanding one for graduate courses, particularly those emphasizing experimental design.

In terms of the empirics, the only general limitation I noted stems from the fact that the authors cover an unusual number of studies (seven) in a usual-length book (250+ pages). Because of this, the authors can’t always dig into the details, including noting and discussing some unexpected relationships (e.g., why do people trust Oprah more when they’re anxious about their health?!) and clarifying some methodological decisions (e.g., why was a survey chosen rather than an experiment to examine the climate change case?). Of course, there is also an obvious upside to the authors’ efficient presentation

of their theory and strong base of empirical support—reading *Anxious Politics* cover-to-cover is an excellent time investment.

I also would have enjoyed a few more concluding pages building on some of the normative concerns the authors raise in Chapter 1. While anxiety may do more good than harm, it leaves citizens vulnerable to manipulation by savvy politicians, interest groups, and a media motivated by profit to get us to listen, read, watch, and click. What can we do to guard against this? Albertson and Gadarian have me *worried* about anxiety and—as they would have predicted—I am eager for a policy solution. I anxiously await a book, perhaps their next one, describing how politics can manage the ordinary anxieties of their citizens as well as how we might better manage the extraordinary ones of our time.