AdSAM® EMOTIONAL RESPONSE RESEARCH, PUBLISHED ARTICLE:
EMOTIONS DRIVE ELECTION BEHAVIOR

The Gainesville Sun

The Emotional Election

By *Dr. Jon Morris and Peter Licari*

Early in the presidential campaign, while late-night comedians eviscerated Donald Trump's bid as "all flair and no substance," it did not seem to matter to voters. "Substance" is only one part of the equation. How people feel plays a huge role in how they respond to the candidates and their policies.

In fact, our previous work in emotional responses to communication showed that emotions are twice as good as raw facts in predicting behavioral outcomes. So in order to really understand people's support (or disdain) for the candidates this election year, you have to understand people's emotional responses.

During the presidential campaign, we conducted three online surveys aimed at measuring and understanding the emotional responses to Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and key issues facing the country. The composition of all three surveys were matched to those of likely voters. For some additional context, the first survey was administered immediately prior to the first debate and the second began collection before the second debate and finished a couple of

days after. The third was administered Nov. 1 and 2.

Clearly, there were a lot of feelings at play during the campaign, and not particularly positive ones either. A FiveThirtyEight analysis in May argued that Trump and Clinton were the least positive candidates for as long as reliable polling has existed in the United States. Period. Gallup surveys on candidate favorability tended to also paint relatively unflattering paintings of candidate support.

This assertion is supported by our results as well. On a 9-point scale, measuring Appeal using a non-verbal measure of emotion, and with 1 being the strongest feelings of negativity and 9 being the strongest feelings of positivity, Trump scored an average of 3.5 on the first wave, 3.3 on the second and 3.6 on the third. Clinton was viewed with (statistically) greater positivity-- but was still viewed in a more negative light. She scored a 3.8 on the first survey, 4.4 on the second and 4.1 on the third.

So do these scores mean that people felt near equal levels of disapproval (verging on opprobrium) for both candidates? That this is really a case of people largely voting emotionally for

the "lesser of two evils" or against a candidate as opposed to for one?

Not exactly. Or, at the least, this data is not sufficient to determine so conclusively. Although favorability is often a really strong proxy for emotion, that single way of understanding how people feel fails to get at the emotional undercurrents driving this election.

Depending on who you ask, there are a number of different dimensions needed to accurately describe emotion. We use AdSAM® (a visual measurement system used in both academic and private sector research that converts responses into descriptions of emotion), which consists of three dimensions: Appeal, Engagement and Empowerment. Appeal describes how positively or negatively you feel towards a subject; it's the most common way that surveys conceptualize emotion. Engagement pertains to how captivated you are and how invested you feel. Empowerment relates back to the concept of locus of control—how in control we feel regarding the situation being presented.

When we look at the election using these three measures, we get a much richer understanding of how people

are feeling. Last year, in an article in The Conversation, we showed that Trump by converting fear into anger translates into an increase in Empowerment. Our ongoing research in this area shows that, anger produces more behavioral action than fear. His appeal in the primaries came not from defusing negative emotions, but in translating them on a different emotional axis, increasing the Empowerment. That made people feel more in control in an uncertain world.

The emotional foundation of the country ostensibly seemed primed and ready for the continuation of this strategy. By and large, people found themselves feeling unhappy or dissatisfied with the state of many political issues. Using the same three-dimensional scale on a range of issues including Black Lives Matter, The Affordable Care Act, Gun Control, Education, Economic Outlook, Immigration and the Islamic State, we found that the electorate as a whole was largely suspicious, troubled, irritated or fearful. The most Appealing and Engaging out of the 30 total items we measured were Prospects of a Female President, Legal Abortion (A Woman's Right to Choose), Universal Healthcare and Employment Potential.

In the general election, Trump's strategy was not paying off nearly as well—at least until the last week of the campaign. An emotional response measurement taken on Nov. 1 and Nov. 2, showed that the FBI letter and Trump's effort to discredit Clinton had an effect, particularly among the 45-to-54 demographic. Except for this age group, in the latest measurement taken just seven days before the election, showed that the negativity generated by Trump, in contrast, was much more likely to result in feelings of alarm, fear or terror. That is not to say that Trump didn't generate any skepticism or ebullience as opposed to fear or

that Clinton did not generate alarm of her own. Rather, on the whole, our respondents, except for those 45–54, were much more likely to feel alarmed towards Trump than Clinton.

Feeling of "Alarmed" based on age groups
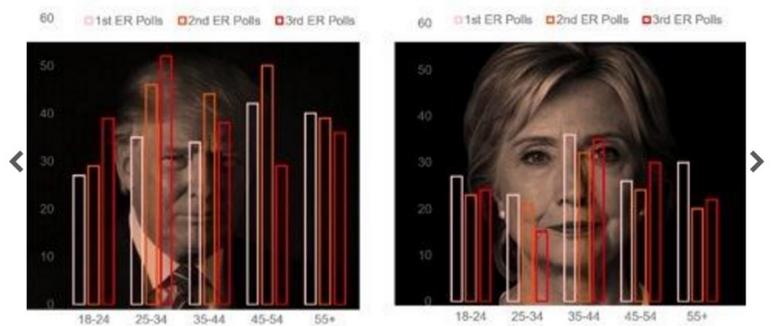
In the third survey, 39 percent of those 18–24 (29 percent in the first survey and 27 percent in the second) were alarmed about Trump while 24 percent (27 percent in the first survey and 23 percent in the second) feel that way about Clinton. This is the closest gap that existed on this metric. Although more individuals in the 35–44 age demographic felt alarmed about Clinton than Trump in the first wave (36 percent vs 34 percent), the difference reversed dramatically after the second debate, but became almost even again during the last week before the election.

One of the questions we had going into the study was how much of this election was about the people affirming "the lesser of two evils." So we asked our respondents if they saw themselves as voting for someone as opposed to voting against someone. Across all surveys, roughly 54 percent of respondents said that they were voting against one as opposed to for the other.

We were wondering what kinds of emotions were driving these feelings. Was it in how far both candidates are from

how respondents would ideally like to feel about the candidates? Was it in how people felt about the Republican and Democratic parties? Is it in how people were emotionally responding to the candidates' policy outlines? Or is their just a general sense of cynicism in the United States?

By and large, we find that people's attitudes toward the candidates' policies had some of the strongest effects and these results followed the pattern that one would typically expect. If a respondent felt more positively about these policy ideas, they were more likely to indicate that they are voting for a candidate. That is not to say that this large proportion of people voting against is not a part of the times. At the same time, there is indeed a general sense of cynicism pervading the electorate which was influencing these rates, too.

However, after having controlled for all of these variables, we found something rather interesting. Our results show that Trump's distance from the ideal was not significantly related to people's decision to vote for a candidate. But Clinton's was. In fact, the further Clinton is from the ideal, the more likely an individual is to report voting against her. There is a similar story to be found in the results of party identification; people's feelings towards the Republican Party weren't significant but those towards the Democrats were. The more negatively people felt towards the Democrats, the more likely it was that they would indicate that they were voting for the Republican candidate.

Although it is too early to draw any more definitive conclusions from our research, we are able to make a solid inference at what these results are saying. Our results suggest that Democrats who found themselves emotionally disconnected from many of Clinton's policies were indicating

that they were voting against Trump when they were voting for her. On the other hand, Republicans who claimed to be voting against someone were basing their decision on the difference they feel towards Clinton compared to how they would like to feel about an ideal candidate.

All of the controversies surrounding Trump and his political stances made it difficult for Republicans as a whole to say that they were voting for him. Instead, they may have relied on their distance from "the partisan other," the Democratic Party, in motivating their decisions to affirm him. It may be a contest where one part of the electorate was rallying against an ideological out-group as opposed to feeling enthusiasm for their candidate.

That is not to say that there was absolutely zero enthusiasm towards either candidate. Quite the contrary, a sizable plurality of people do harbor favorable positions towards the candidates.

The demographics of the enthused shifted in the course of the election, but they ended up nearly even proportions claiming to be enthused. But Clinton's most difficult categories tended to be with youngest voters and 45–54 year olds. In fact, prior to the first debate, no respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 gave responses consistent with enthusiasm for Clinton. The second debate did seem to change a few partisan hearts and minds; a great deal of the younger and oldest respondents indicated that they were enthusiastic about Clinton. Most of the consistently appealing responses for Trump arose from the 45-to-54 group while Clinton was stronger in appeal among all other age groups, particularly the 25–34 and 55+ demographics.

Feeling of "Enthusiastic" toward the candidates by age groups
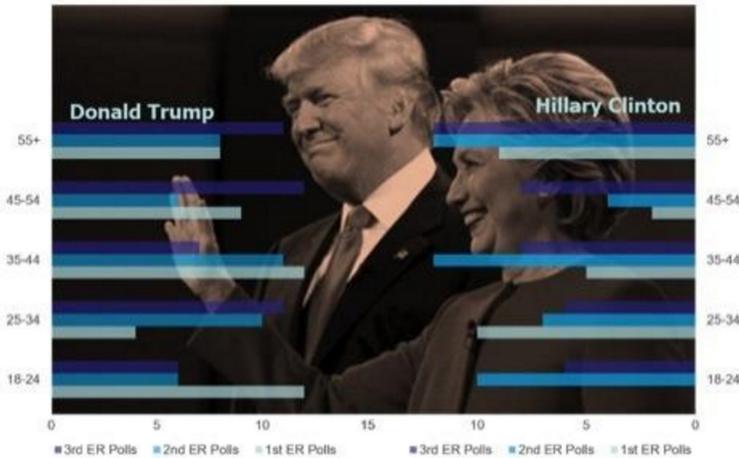
By and large, across all age groups, in the last week before the election, Clinton was seen as more appealing and engaging (in a positive sense) than Trump and this seems to be what propelled her to collect almost three million more votes than Trump. If we consider this strength in tandem with the other emotions that we observed, anxiety, fear and alarm, this gap in the popular vote makes even more sense.

Although Clinton was generating more positive and engaging emotions overall than Trump, the percent who found either one Appealing—in any age group—never exceeds 39 percent. This is a fact that may be lost when we only look at common measures of emotional support, but emerges from a more multifaceted approach that measures emotion. It is only in doing so that we can really come to appreciate what can only be described as an exceptionally emotional election. If emotion and behavior are as strongly linked as we have shown in study after study, and if Clinton won the popular vote as well as having the higher affect score in our measurement by a similar percentage, then not finding the right elector- states to motivate, clearly made it Clinton's race to lose.

Jon Morris, Ph.D., is professor of Advertising at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications. Peter Licari is a doctoral student at the University of Florida Department of Political Science.