



Kent Academic Repository

von Mohr, Mariana and Tsakiris, Manos (2026) *Political Emotions Shape Preferences for Leaders' Facial Traits: Anger Favors Dominance, Fear Favors Trustworthiness.* Cognition and Emotion . ISSN 0269-9931. (In press)

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/116419/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2026.2739925>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

Additional information

For the purpose of open access, the author(s) has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising.

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

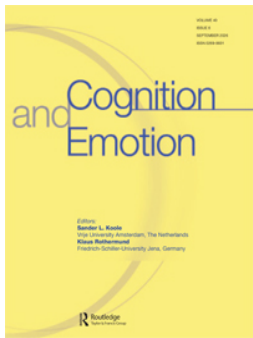
If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).



Political emotions shape preferences for leaders' facial traits: anger favours dominance, fear favours trustworthiness

Mariana Von Mohr & Manos Tsakiris

To cite this article: Mariana Von Mohr & Manos Tsakiris (10 Oct 2026): Political emotions shape preferences for leaders' facial traits: anger favours dominance, fear favours trustworthiness, *Cognition and Emotion*, DOI: [10.1080/02699931.2026.2739925](https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2026.2739925)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2026.2739925>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 10 Oct 2026.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 30



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Political emotions shape preferences for leaders' facial traits: anger favours dominance, fear favours trustworthiness

Mariana Von Mohr ^{a,b,c} and Manos Tsakiris^{a,b}

^aCentre for the Politics of Feelings, School of Advanced Study, University of London, London, UK; ^bDepartment of Psychology, Royal Holloway University of London, London, UK; ^cSchool of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

ABSTRACT

Political emotions may shape not only which issues citizens prioritise, but also which social traits they value in leaders. Here we tested whether anger and fear elicited by real political issues differentially influence preferences for political leaders' facial traits. A balanced sample of U.S. Republicans and Democrats identified the political issue that made them most angry or most afraid and then chose which leader would best address that issue using computer-generated faces varying in dominance and trustworthiness. Participants chose a more dominant and less trustworthy-looking leader more often when angry (49.5 percent) than when fearful (46.5 percent). Mechanistically, anger shifted choices toward more dominant-looking leaders by increasing reliance on dominance cues and reducing reliance on trustworthiness cues, whereas fear selectively increased reliance on trustworthiness cues. These findings show that issue-linked political emotions exert distinct influences on leader evaluation with implications for democratic decision-making and electoral choices.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 January 2026
Revised 10 July 2026
Accepted 22 September 2026

KEYWORDS

Emotions; fear; anger;
political leaders; politics

Humans make rapid trait inferences from faces, judging a range of attributes such as trustworthiness, competence, dominance and likeability (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008; Sutherland et al., 2015). These first impressions influence real-world behaviour, including voting choices (Laustsen & Petersen, 2016; Little et al., 2007; Olivola et al., 2012; Todorov Alexander et al., 2005). Prior work shows that under threat or conflict contexts, people prefer dominant-looking leaders, whereas trustworthiness is preferred in cooperative or peacetime contexts (Ferguson et al., 2019; Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). These findings are often interpreted within evolutionary accounts of leadership, which propose that dominant leaders are favoured when groups face intergroup conflict because dominance signals the capacity to confront or overpower rival groups, whereas in cooperative environments

traits signalling benevolence and reliability, such as trustworthiness, become more valuable (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). Political ideology also moderates these preferences: conservatives favour more dominant-looking leaders, while liberals favour more trustworthy-looking ones (Ambroziak et al., 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021; Laustsen & Petersen, 2016, 2017; Von Mohr et al., 2025). One possibility is that these context and ideology dependent shifts in leader preferences are partly driven by the emotional states that political situations evoke. Political issues and events can elicit emotions such as anger and fear which may in turn shape how citizens evaluate leaders.

What remains unclear is if and how discrete political emotions influence the perceptual cues citizens rely on when evaluating leaders' facial traits. Existing work suggests that emotional reactions to conflict

CONTACT Mariana Von  mariana.vonmohr@rhul.ac.uk  Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX, UK

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2026.2739925>.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

play an important role in shaping leadership preferences, as threatening political situations can elicit different emotional responses, including anger and fear, which may have distinct behavioural implications. In this context, studies show that anger or other aggressive emotions increase preferences for dominant-looking leaders, whereas fear-related emotions can reduce such preferences. For example, research conducted during the Crimea crisis of 2014 found that individuals who experienced anger or hatred were more likely to prefer dominant leaders, whereas individuals reporting fear or anxiety became less likely to prefer such leaders (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). More recent evidence collected during the Russian invasion of Ukraine similarly shows that aggressive emotional reactions to war predict preferences for dominant leaders, whereas fearful reactions do not (Laustsen et al., 2025). While these findings suggest that different emotions shape preferences for dominant-looking leaders in distinct ways, it remains unclear how emotions influence the perceptual cues citizens rely on when evaluating leaders in everyday political contexts. Indeed, most existing studies examine emotional reactions in contexts of intergroup conflict, war or geopolitical crisis, yet much less is known about whether similar emotional dynamics influence leader evaluation in everyday political contexts, where citizens respond to political issues that affect their daily lives. This matters because these negative emotions are defining features of contemporary politics and have intensified in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2023). Moreover, political emotions are not only directed toward parties or candidates, they also arise in response to specific policy issues such as immigration, climate change, economic conditions, or public safety (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Brader et al., 2008; Myers et al., 2023; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014). Understanding how emotions elicited by such everyday political concerns influence the perceptual cues people rely on when evaluating potential leaders is therefore an important step in explaining how emotions shape political decision-making.

In addition to being widespread reactions to contemporary politics, fear and anger are also powerful drivers of motivation and action. Fear and anger are closely connected in that fear can trigger anger, and both are high-arousal negative emotions that activate the body's stress response. Despite this overlap, they are often described as opposing forces within the fight-or-flight response (Plutchik, 1980) and their

biological profiles diverge in systematic ways (Moons et al., 2010), consistent with functional accounts of emotion. Anger mobilises the organism preparing the body for confrontation, whereas fear is associated with physiological changes that promote vigilance and withdrawal (Moons et al., 2010). These functional distinctions are also reflected in subjective experience: fear is typically characterised by vulnerability and lack of control, while anger arises in response to perceived threat or injustice and can generate a sense of empowerment (Lerner & Keltner, 2001).

In political contexts, fear is thought to promote caution, information seeking and reliance on protective figures, whereas anger promotes confrontation and support for more assertive responses (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Marcus et al., 2000). Theories of affective intelligence similarly propose that fear or anxiety signals uncertainty and motivates individuals to seek safety and reassurance, whereas anger promotes confidence and encourages assertive action (Marcus et al., 2000). Anger is also associated with clear blame attribution toward responsible actors, which can motivate punitive responses toward those perceived to have caused harm (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Nabi, 2003; Roseman et al., 1994). Yet, political discussion often overlooks that these emotions may produce opposite political preferences: fear tends to reduce support for far-right or aggressive options, while anger strengthens support for more assertive alternatives (Marcus, 2019; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Recent work has begun to extend this pattern beyond conflict contexts, showing that anger increases preference for dominant-looking leaders (Ambroziak et al., 2022), while fear's influence on leader-face preference remains less well tested. One possibility is that when individuals feel afraid or vulnerable, they may prioritise leaders who signal protection and reliability rather than confrontation, which may be conveyed by cues of trustworthiness (i.e. someone likely to "take care" of them). Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how different negative emotions can shape behaviours central to democracy, such as the leader who is chosen.

We therefore tested whether anger-eliciting political issues increase preference for more dominant and less trustworthy-looking leaders, and whether fear-eliciting issues shift preference toward more trustworthy and less dominant-looking leaders. We focused on trustworthiness and dominance because they

approximate the two fundamental dimensions of social face evaluation, valence and dominance (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008), from which many other trait impressions, including competence, are derived. This distinction also aligns with broader models of social evaluation beyond face perception, which suggest that people evaluate individuals and groups along dimensions reflecting social intentions, such as warmth or trustworthiness, and capacity or agency, such as competence, power, or dominance (Abele et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2007). Trustworthiness reflects inferences about a person's intentions, such as whether they are cooperative or harmful, whereas dominance reflects perceived capacity to enact those intentions, such as strength or the ability to punish, sanction, or deter opponents. Because anger is associated with blame attribution and punitive responses toward responsible actors, it may prioritise leaders who signal the capacity to confront political issues and act decisively against those perceived to be responsible, reflected in cues of dominance (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Nabi, 2003; Roseman et al., 1994). Fear, by contrast, arises in contexts of uncertainty and low control and motivates protection seeking and reassurance (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Marcus et al., 2000; Moons et al., 2010). In such contexts, citizens may prioritise leaders who appear reliable and benevolent, conveyed by cues of trustworthiness.

To do this, we used an issue-based paradigm in which participants selected the real political issue that made them most angry or most afraid before completing a leader choice task with faces systematically varied on dominance and trustworthiness. This approach allows us to link emotion-specific political concerns to downstream leader preferences and to examine whether anger and fear differentially shape leader evaluation. Following prior work using this task (Ambroziak et al., 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021; Safra et al., 2017; Von Mohr et al., 2025), we first derived a participant-level summary index reflecting the overall tendency to prefer dominant-looking leaders characterised by higher dominance and lower trustworthy facial traits. Because this summary measure combines the influence of both cues, a higher probability of choosing a dominant-looking leader could reflect increased reliance on dominance cues, decreased reliance on trustworthiness cues, or both. We therefore complemented this with trial-level analyses testing whether anger and fear altered reliance on dominance and trustworthiness cues separately.

Given the established link between ideology and leader-face preference (Ambroziak et al., 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021; Laustsen & Petersen, 2016, 2017; Von Mohr et al., 2025), and the greater likelihood of political anger among conservative Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2023), we also examined whether the effect of emotion on leader-face preference varies by party affiliation.

Method

Participants

We recruited 201 participants, half of whom reported being Democrat supporters or Democrat leaning and the other half Republican or Republican leaning. The sample size was calculated using the *simr* package in R to calculate simulation-based power analyses. Based on an effect size ($d_z = 0.43$) from prior work on leader choice and visceral feelings (Tsakiris et al., 2021), 184 participants would provide 85% power to detect an effect of emotion. To account for an expected 10% exclusion rate due to failed attention and manipulation checks (Tsakiris et al., 2021; Von Mohr et al., 2025), we increased the target sample to 200 (201 collected by Prolific). This study was approved by the Royal Holloway Research Ethics Committee, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. 4 participants were removed from analyses as they did not pass 3 or more out of the 5 attention checks throughout the study. This resulted in a total sample size of 197 participants. See Supplementary Materials Table S1 for Demographics.

Design

The study employed a within-subjects design to examine how anger and fear influence political leader preferences based on facial traits. Each participant completed two counterbalanced blocks: one in which they chose a political issue that made them feel most angry, and another in which they chose a political issue that made them feel most afraid. In each block, participants selected a relevant political issue, rated the intensity of their emotional response, and completed a leader choice task in which they were asked to choose the leader who would be most capable of addressing the policy issue they had previously chosen. See Figure 1 for a Schematic representation of the anger and fear block.

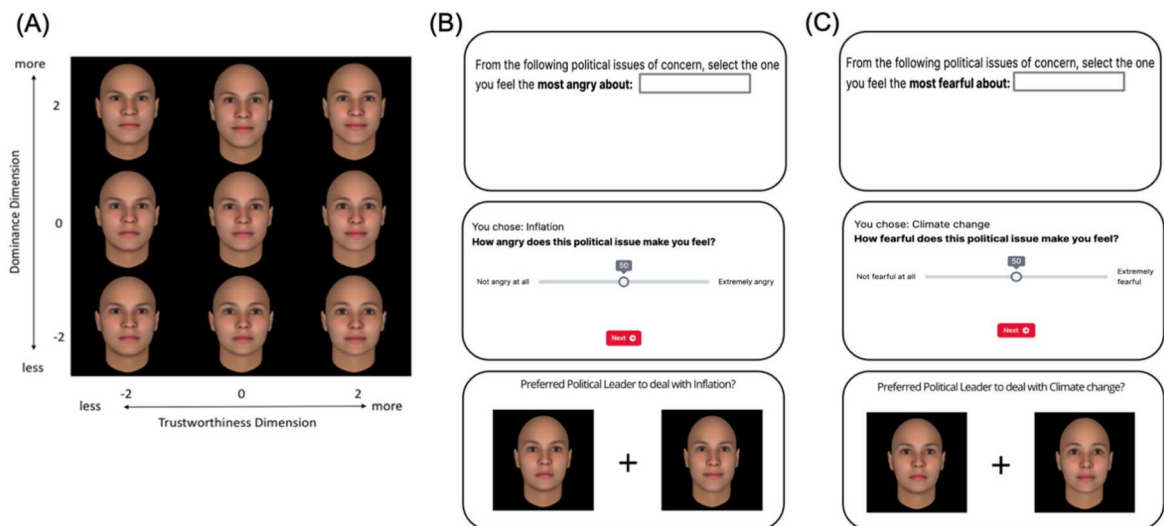


Figure 1. Stimuli used in the Leader Choice Task and experimental design. (a) The nine faces used in the task, varying systematically in trustworthiness and dominance. (b) Schematic representation of the anger block. Participants selected the political issue that made them feel most angry, for example inflation. They then rated the intensity of their anger on a slider ranging from not at all to extremely. Next, they completed the leader choice task, selecting on each trial the face they believed would be most effective at dealing with their chosen issue (36 trials). (c) Schematic representation of the fear block, identical in structure to the anger block but focused on the issue that made participants feel most afraid.

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants first completed demographic questions and items assessing their political party identification.

In the anger block, participants were shown a list of political issues from a nationally-representative issue list (Pew Research Center, 2024, see full list in SM) and asked to select the one that made them feel the most angry. *Anger* was defined as “the political issue that upsets or annoys you and elicits displeasure or hostility”. After selecting the issue, participants rated the intensity of their anger on a 0–100 scale, ranging from “Not at all” to “Extremely”. They then completed a leader-choice task (Safra et al., 2017) in which they selected the leader they believed would be most capable of addressing the issue they had chosen.

In the fear block, participants repeated the same procedure, this time selecting the political issue that made them feel the most afraid from the same list described above. *Fear* was defined as “this political issue worries you a lot and may be seen as a frightening threat”. After rating the intensity of their fear on the same 0–100 scale, they again completed the political leader choice task (Safra et al., 2017).

The order of the anger and fear blocks was counterbalanced across participants. The same list of political issues was presented in both blocks.

Materials and measures

Political party

Participants were asked: “If you absolutely had to choose between only the Democratic and Republican Party, which would you choose?” Democratic party/Republican Party.

List of political issues

Depending on the block, participants were asked to select the political issue that they felt the most angry or afraid about. The issues were drawn from the Pew Research Center’s survey on what the public views as the country’s biggest problems (Pew Research Center, 2024) See Supplementary Materials for the full list. Anger was most frequently associated with illegal immigration (19.3%), gun violence (17.8%), and inflation (15.2%), whereas fear was most commonly associated with climate change (15.2%), illegal immigration (14.2%), and domestic terrorism (11.2%) (see Table S2 for the full distribution). Across conditions, Democrats and Republicans chose different issues reflecting their different policy priorities (see Figure S1).

Emotional intensity rating

After selecting the political issue, participants rated the intensity of their fear/anger on a 0–100 scale,

ranging from “Not at all” to “Extremely”. On average, participants reported a mean intensity of 81.95 (SD = 16.62) for the issue that made them feel the most afraid and 86.51 (SD = 15.66) for the issue that made them feel the most angry.

Dominant leader preference

We employed the leader choice task (Safra et al., 2017). In this task, participants are presented with a 36 trials in which two faces are shown on the screen and are asked to select the one that they would vote for that could deal most effectively with the selected political issue. In each trial, participants were given 3 s to view the faces and provide an answer by clicking on the face they chose. The pairs of faces were created offline using nine faces selected from a freely available database (<https://tlab.uchicago.edu/databases/>). Each face was characterised by two dimensions: dominance and trustworthiness in a range of -2 to $+2$ points with an increment of two points (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008); see Figure 1. The stimuli included every combination of dominance and trustworthiness in this range resulting in nine faces. Stimuli were always presented in pairs in which the faces were 2–4 points different from each other on at least one dimension (dominance or trustworthiness). This resulted in 36 pairs of faces/trials.

We calculated the political dominant leader choice index as in previous work (Ambroziak et al., 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021; Laustsen & Petersen, 2017; Safra et al., 2017). Choices were analysed using mixed logistic regression for each subject, taking the trial number and face position as random factors and faces’ levels of trustworthiness and dominance as regressors. The coefficients from these regressions were then used to compute the probability of choosing a dominant leader. Specifically, for each participant, the two estimated parameters were then combined into a unique value, using the following formula:

$$\text{Stronger leader choice} = \frac{e^{\beta_0 + \beta_{\text{Dominance}} - \beta_{\text{Trustworthiness}}}}{1 + e^{\beta_0 + \beta_{\text{Dominance}} - \beta_{\text{Trustworthiness}}}}$$

Therefore, the dominant leader choice index increases when choices are more strongly influenced by dominance and less by trustworthiness. In other words, the index reflects the probability of choosing a leader with more dominant and less trustworthy

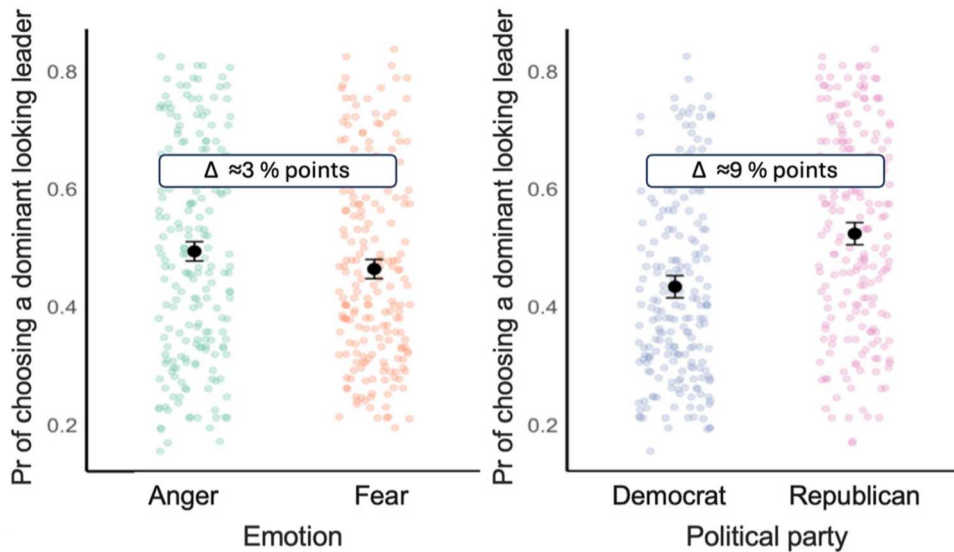
facial traits for each participant. The outcome of the formula is between 0 and 1, with higher scores depicting a more dominant leader.

Results

Figure 2(a) shows the effects of emotion and political party on the probability of choosing a dominant-looking leader. We analysed the dominant leader choice index using a mixed effects logistic regression with fixed effects of emotion, political party and their interaction, and with emotional intensity included as a covariate, along with random intercepts for participants and political issue. Fear, compared to anger, was associated with a lower preference for a dominant leader ($p = .035$), and Republicans showed a greater preference than Democrats ($p < .001$). The interaction between emotion and party was not significant ($p = .335$), and emotion intensity was unrelated to leader preference ($p = .952$). Participants had a 49.5 percent probability of choosing a dominant-looking leader when angry and 46.5 percent when fearful. Republicans showed a 52.5 percent probability, compared to 43.5 percent for Democrats. See Supplementary Tables S3 to S5 for full model results and robustness checks, including controls for demographics and block order as fixed effects and political issue as a random effect. Additional analyses showed that the effects of emotion did not vary by participant gender (see Table S6) and remains similar in magnitude but estimated with lower precision when including political issue as a fixed effect (see Table S7).

To examine how emotions affected reliance on dominance and trustworthiness cues, we analysed the trial-level data using a mixed effects logistic regression (Supplementary Table S8). The model included fixed effects of emotion, trustworthiness and dominance, the Emotion $\times$ Trustworthiness and Emotion $\times$ Dominance interactions, and block order as a covariate, as well as random intercepts and random slopes for trustworthiness and dominance by participant. In fear blocks, trustworthiness significantly increased the probability of choosing a face ($p < .001$), whereas dominance did not ($p = .86$). During anger, the positive effect of trustworthiness was reduced ($p < .001$), and dominance had a stronger positive effect than in fear blocks ($p = .032$). Thus, fear increased reliance on trustworthiness, whereas anger

(A)



(B)

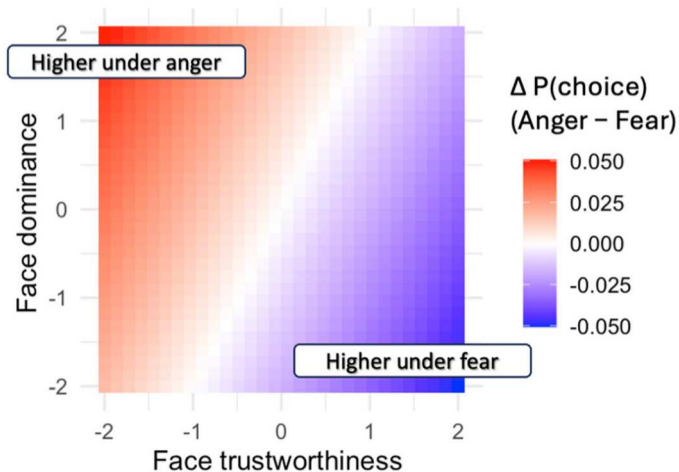


Figure 2. (a) Main effects of emotion (Anger, Fear) and political party (Democrat, Republican) on the probability of choosing a dominant-looking leader. Points show estimated marginal means from the mixed-effects regression model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Jittered grey dots display raw participant responses. The magnitude of the partisan difference (≈ 9 percentage points) was larger than the emotion effect (≈ 3 percentage points). (b) Model-based heatmap showing the difference in choice probability between anger and fear across the trustworthiness–dominance space. Colours represent the predicted probability difference (anger minus fear), with red indicating higher choice probability under anger and blue indicating higher probability under fear.

reduced reliance on trustworthiness and increased reliance on dominance. Emotion effects and interactions remained robust when controlling for political issue as a fixed effect (Supplementary Table S9). Figure 2(b) shows the predicted difference in choice

probability between anger and fear across the trustworthiness–dominance space. This pattern reflects anger increasing the contribution of dominance while reducing reliance on trustworthiness relative to fear.

Discussion

Facial features inform judgments and shape political choice (Little et al., 2007; Olivola et al., 2012; Todorov Alexander et al., 2005). Previous research has shown that people predisposed toward aggression tend to prefer dominant-looking leaders (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017), experimentally induced non-political anger increases such preferences (Ambroziak et al., 2022) and in US and UK samples, political ideology predicts leader choice (Von Mohr et al., 2025). Here we extend this knowledge by showing that discrete political emotions, elicited by real policy concerns rather than generic primes, can shift the perceptual information that citizens use when evaluating leaders, beyond political ideology. We first found that Democrats prefer a more trustworthy and less dominant-looking leader to deal with the political issue, whereas Republicans prefer a more dominant and less trustworthy-looking leader, replicating previous findings and providing further validation of the task (Ambroziak et al., 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021; Von Mohr et al., 2025). With regards to the emotion that people felt towards policy issues, we found emotion specific effects. Compared to fear, anger increased support for dominant-looking leaders, driven by greater weighting of dominance cues, whereas fear increased reliance on trustworthiness. Lastly, the type of emotion did not interact with political party. Together, these findings suggest that emotional influences on leader evaluation may reflect differences in how dominance and trustworthiness cues are weighted during decision-making, rather than solely reflecting overall negative affect or emotional intensity.

These findings complement work in political psychology showing that political contexts and policy debates can be important sources of emotional engagement in democratic politics (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011). Citizens frequently experience anger or anxiety in response to specific political issues such as immigration, climate change, economic conditions, or public safety (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Brader et al., 2008; Huddy et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2023; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014). Our results suggest that these issue-linked emotional reactions shape the facial cues people rely on when evaluating political leaders.

At the same time, because participants selected the issue that made them most angry or afraid, emotion and issue content are partly endogenous in

the present design. We therefore cannot rule out the possibility that some observed differences reflect the kinds of issues that elicited anger versus fear. Accordingly, the present findings should be interpreted as showing how anger versus fear, elicited in relation to self-selected politically salient issues, relates to leader preferences within this paradigm, rather than as identifying a pure effect of emotion independent of issue context. However, several aspects of the findings make a purely issue-content account unlikely. First, participants selected from a broad set of political issues (Table S2), and the distribution of selected issues was relatively dispersed rather than dominated by a single issue category. Second, the effect of emotion did not vary by party, despite clear partisan differences in issue selection, whereas an issue-driven account might plausibly predict such moderation. For example, as shown in Figure S1, Democrats and Republicans tended to select different issues as emotionally salient (e.g. Democrats more frequently selected gun violence or climate change, whereas Republicans more frequently selected illegal immigration or domestic terrorism), yet the effect of emotion on leader preference was similar across partisan groups. Third, the trial-level analyses showed that anger and fear shifted the facial cues participants relied on when evaluating leaders even when accounting for the specific political issue selected: anger increased reliance on dominance cues, whereas fear increased reliance on trustworthiness cues. Together, these patterns suggest that the findings are not fully reducible to issue content alone. Future work that experimentally manipulates emotion while holding issue constant would help isolate emotion more cleanly.

Our findings align with accounts suggesting that anger mobilises assertive, confrontational responses while fear promotes caution (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Marcus et al., 2000), and highlight that political emotions can shift the trait information citizens use when evaluating leaders. Consistent with appraisal-based accounts of emotion, anger is typically elicited by perceived injustice or norm violations and motivates punitive responses toward responsible actors (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Nabi, 2003; Roseman et al., 1994). In political contexts, this motivational orientation may prioritise leaders who signal the capacity to confront threats and impose costs on others, reflected in cues of dominance. Evidence from real-world conflicts supports this interpretation. During the Crimea crisis of 2014, individuals reporting

anger and hatred were more likely to prefer dominant leaders, whereas those reporting fear and anxiety were less likely to prefer such leaders (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). Similarly, panel and experimental evidence collected during the Russian invasion of Ukraine shows that aggressive emotions increase preferences for dominant leaders, whereas fearful emotions do not (Laustsen et al., 2025). Consistent with this literature, we found that anger increased reliance on dominance while also reduced reliance on trustworthiness. Interpreted through models of face perception, trustworthiness reflects inferences about a person's intentions, whereas dominance reflects perceived capacity to enact those intentions (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008). Thus, when anger increases reliance on dominance while reducing reliance on trustworthiness, individuals appear to prioritise leaders perceived as capable of confronting threats, while cues signalling benevolent intent become less influential in the evaluation.

Fear, by contrast, arises in situations of uncertainty and low control and motivates protection seeking and vigilance (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Marcus et al., 2000). Under such conditions, citizens may instead prioritise leaders who appear reliable and benevolent, traits often conveyed through cues of trustworthiness. This interpretation is broadly consistent with evidence from real-world conflicts showing that fearful reactions do not increase preferences for dominant leaders (Laustsen et al., 2025; Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). In line with this pattern, we did not observe increased reliance on dominance under fear. Instead, fear increased reliance on trustworthiness cues when evaluating leaders. Within models of face perception (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008), this shift suggests that voters focus more strongly on a leader's perceived intentions, such as whether they are likely to protect and support the group. Such emotional dynamics matter for democracy, because they show how specific emotional states can bias our political leader preferences (Marcus, 2019). Although the magnitude of these shifts was modest (i.e. a 3 percentage point increase in preference for dominant-looking leaders under anger compared to fear), the manipulation was subtle and ecologically grounded, suggesting that even small emotional differences may scale meaningfully at the population level during elections, where exposure to fear or anger inducing issues is frequent and often strategically amplified.

A methodological strength of our approach is the use of an experimental leader-choice task with computer-generated faces, which isolates specific facial traits and avoids the confounds inherent in natural photographs (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008; Safra et al., 2017). This approach provides a controlled behavioural measure of how discrete emotions influence political judgement, enabling future research into the specific effects of other emotions (e.g. disgust, hope) and eventually an understanding of if and how these effects generalise to real-world electoral behaviour.

We replicated the ideological asymmetry in leader preferences: Republicans preferred more dominant and less trustworthy-looking leaders than Democrats, consistent with prior face-based work (Ambroziak et al., 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021; Laustsen & Petersen, 2016, 2017; Von Mohr et al., 2025). Specifically, Republicans were estimated to have a 52.5% probability of choosing a dominant-looking leader, compared to 43.5% for Democrats. This pattern also parallels broader, non-face-based work on candidate-trait preferences and partisan trait ownership. Republicans are often associated with traits such as strong leadership and morality, whereas Democrats are associated with compassion and empathy (Hayes, 2005). Similarly, conservatives value powerful and strong leaders more than liberals, whereas liberals place greater value on warmth (Laustsen, 2017). These broader trait preferences are consistent with the present face-based findings, suggesting that facial dominance and trustworthiness may serve as perceptual cues to more general leader qualities that are differentially valued across ideological groups. This pattern may also reflect broader ideological differences in hierarchy-related preferences. Individuals with more conservative political attitudes tend to score higher on social dominance orientation and to express stronger preferences for group-based hierarchy and inequality (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). These preferences may also extend to leader evaluations, with conservative individuals showing stronger preferences for leaders with dominant facial traits (Ambroziak et al., 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021; Laustsen & Petersen, 2016; Von Mohr et al., 2025), particularly in political contexts framed as involving intergroup conflict (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). Despite these ideological differences in leader preference, anger and fear influenced leader traits in similar ways across partisan groups.

Several limitations warrant consideration. Participants selected the issue that made them most angry

or afraid, increasing ecological validity but reducing experimental control and leaving open the possibility that issue content may systematically differ across emotional conditions. Because issues were self-selected rather than randomly assigned, the types of issues associated with anger and fear may also vary systematically across participants and political groups. To account for this, we modelled variability across political issues in all analyses. Differences between political issues were controlled at both the participant and trial levels, using random effects in participant-level models and fixed effects in trial-level analyses. In the participant-level models, political issue was treated as a random effect to capture variability across issues while avoiding overfitting, given the limited number of observations per issue. This choice also reflected the fact that participants selected from 16 issues, several of which were represented only sparsely. We additionally estimated participant-level models including political issue as a fixed effect. In those analyses, the estimated effect of emotion remained similar in magnitude but was estimated with lower precision, suggesting that the association is not fully explained by differences in selected issue categories alone. Taken together, these analyses indicate that the findings are not reducible to issue composition alone, although issue context may contribute to the observed effects. The results should therefore be understood as reflecting the overall effect of the emotional prompt within this issue-selection paradigm. Second, political issues can carry gendered stereotypes regarding leadership competence. Prior research shows that voters hold gendered stereotypes linking leadership traits to policy competence. Masculine leadership traits such as strength and assertiveness are often associated with policy domains like defence, crime, or national security, whereas feminine traits such as warmth and compassion are associated with social welfare or education issues. These stereotypes can influence evaluations of political candidates and their perceived competence across policy domains (Bauer, 2015; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Lawless, 2004; Schneider & Bos, 2019). However, the issues most frequently selected in the anger condition (e.g. illegal immigration, gun violence, inflation) and the fear condition (e.g. climate change, illegal immigration, domestic terrorism) do not align consistently with the traditional distinction between stereotypically masculine and feminine policy domains. Relatedly, participant gender could in principle shape

leader evaluations if men and women differ in their responses to gendered leadership cues. However, additional analyses showed that the effects of emotion on leader preferences did not vary by participant gender, indicating that the influence of anger and fear on the probability of choosing a dominant-looking leader was similar for male and female participants. Third, the use of computer-generated avatar faces, although standardised and systematically manipulated, may not fully capture the complexity of real-world leader perception, where factors such as race, age, gender, and context also influence trait inferences. Fourth, the study was limited to a US sample and as such, we do not know whether these effects extend to other countries. Future research should test the generalisability of these findings across cultural contexts or political systems. Relatedly, future research could test whether a broader set of political emotions similarly influences leader evaluations.

In sum, anger shifted leader choice toward dominance cues, fear shifted it toward trustworthiness, and these patterns occurred independently of political ideology. This highlights that the emotional context in which citizens evaluate political problems can systematically shape the types of leaders they prefer, with potential consequences for electoral outcomes and democratic decision-making.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Mariana Von Mohr**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Manos Tsakiris**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

MT was supported by a NOMIS Foundation Grant for the Centre for the Politics of Feelings.

Data availability statement

Data is publicly available: <https://osf.io/cpnha>.

ORCID

Mariana Von Mohr  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0671-0735>

References

- Abele, A. E., Ellemers, N., Fiske, S. T., Koch, A., & Yzerbyt, V. (2021). Navigating the social world: Toward an integrated framework for evaluating self, individuals, and groups. *Psychological Review*, 128(2), 290. doi:10.1037/rev0000262
- Albertson, B., & Gadarian, S. K. (2015). *Anxious politics: Democratic citizenship in a threatening world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ambroziak, K., Safra, L., & Tsakiris, M. (2022). Non-political anger shifts political preferences towards stronger leaders. *Scientific Reports*, 12(1). doi:10.1038/s41598-022-15765-8
- Azevedo, R. T., De Beukelaer, S., Jones, I. L., Safra, L., & Tsakiris, M. (2021). When the lens is too wide: The political consequences of the visual dehumanization of refugees. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 115. doi:10.1057/s41599-021-00786-x
- Bauer, N. M. (2015). Emotional, sensitive, and unfit for office? Gender stereotype activation and support female candidates. *Political Psychology*, 36(6), 691–708. doi:10.1111/pops.12186
- Brader, T. (2006). *Campaigning for hearts and minds: How emotional appeals in political ads work*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brader, T., Valentino, N. A., & Suhay, E. (2008). What triggers public opposition to immigration? Anxiety, group cues, and immigration threat. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(4), 959–978. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2008.00353.x
- Ferguson, H. S., Owen, A., Hahn, A. C., Torrance, J., DeBruine, L. M., & Jones, B. C. (2019). Context-specific effects of facial dominance and trustworthiness on hypothetical leadership decisions. *PLoS One*, 14(7), e0214261. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0214261
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., & Glick, P. (2007). Universal dimensions of social cognition: Warmth and competence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11(2), 77–83. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2006.11.005
- Hayes, D. (2005). Candidate qualities through a partisan lens: A theory of trait ownership. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(4), 908–923. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00163.x
- Huddy, L., Feldman, S., Taber, C., & Lahav, G. (2005). Threat, anxiety, and support of antiterrorism policies. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 593–608. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00144.x
- Huddy, L., & Terkildsen, N. (1993). Gender stereotypes and the perception of male and female candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37(1), 119–147. doi:10.2307/2111526
- Laustsen, L. (2017). Choosing the right candidate: Observational and experimental evidence that conservatives and liberals prefer powerful and warm candidate personalities, respectively. *Political Behavior*, 39(4), 883–908. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9384-2
- Laustsen, L., Mazepus, H., Van Leeuwen, F., Bartusevičius, H., & van Vugt, M. (2025). What traits do citizens value in leaders during war? Experimental and panel-based evidence from Ukraine in 2022. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 13(1), 1–10. doi:10.1017/psrm.2025.10047
- Laustsen, L., & Petersen, M. B. (2016). Winning faces vary by ideology: How nonverbal source cues influence election and communication success in politics. *Political Communication*, 33(2), 188–211. doi:10.1080/10584609.2015.1050565
- Laustsen, L., & Petersen, M. B. (2017). Perceived conflict and leader dominance: Individual and contextual factors behind preferences for dominant leaders. *Political Psychology*, 38(6), 1083–1101. doi:10.1111/pops.12403
- Lawless, J. L. (2004). Women, war, and winning elections: Gender stereotyping in the post-september 11th era. *Political Research Quarterly*, 57(3), 479–490. doi:10.1177/106591290405700312
- Lerner, J. S., & Keltner, D. (2001). Fear, anger, and risk. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(1), 146. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.81.1.146
- Little, A. C., Burriss, R. P., Jones, B. C., & Roberts, S. C. (2007). Facial appearance affects voting decisions. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 28(1), 18–27. doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2006.09.002
- Marcus, G. E. (2019). How fear and anger impact democracy. *Democracy Papers Essay*. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/George-Marcus/publication/333245638_How_Fear_and_Anger_Impact_Democracy_-_Items/links/5ce415c7a6fdccc9ddc487aa/How-Fear-and-Anger-Impact-Democracy-Items.pdf
- Marcus, G. E., Neuman, W. R., & MacKuen, M. (2000). *Affective intelligence and political judgment*. University of Chicago Press.
- Moons, W. G., Eisenberger, N. I., & Taylor, S. E. (2010). Anger and fear responses to stress have different biological profiles. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*, 24(2), 215–219. doi:10.1016/j.bbi.2009.08.009
- Myers, T. A., Roser-Renouf, C., & Maibach, E. (2023). Emotional responses to climate change information and their effects on policy support. *Frontiers in Climate*, 5, 1135450. doi:10.3389/fclim.2023.1135450
- Nabi, R. L. (2003). Exploring the framing effects of emotion: Do discrete emotions differentially influence information accessibility, information seeking, and policy preference? *Communication Research*, 30(2), 224–247. doi:10.1177/0093650202250881
- Olivola, C. Y., Sussman, A. B., Tsetsos, K., Kang, O. E., & Todorov, A. (2012). Republicans prefer republican-looking leaders: Political facial stereotypes predict candidate electoral success among right-leaning voters. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3(5), 605–613. doi:10.1177/1948550611432770
- Oosterhof, N. N., & Todorov, A. (2008). The functional basis of face evaluation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105(32), 11087–11092. doi:10.1073/pnas.0805664105
- Pew Research Center. (2023). *Americans' feelings about politics, polarization and the tone of political discourse*. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-feelings-about-politics-polarization-and-the-tone-of-political-discourse/
- Pew Research Center. (2024). *Top problems facing the U.S.* https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/05/23/top-problems-facing-the-u-s/
- Plutchik, R. (1980). A general psychoevolutionary theory of emotion. In *Theories of emotion* (pp. 3–33). Elsevier. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780125587013_500077
- Roseman, I. J., Wiest, C., & Swartz, T. S. (1994). Phenomenology, behaviors, and goals differentiate discrete emotions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(2), 206. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.67.2.206
- Safra, L., Algan, Y., Tecu, T., Grèzes, J., Baumard, N., & Chevallier, C. (2017). Childhood harshness predicts long-lasting leader preferences. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 38(5), 645–651. doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2017.05.001

- Schneider, M. C., & Bos, A. L. (2019). The application of social role theory to the study of gender in politics. *Political Psychology*, 40(S1), 173–213. doi:10.1111/pops.12573
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (2001). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, N., & Leiserowitz, A. (2014). The role of emotion in global warming policy support and opposition. *Risk Analysis*, 34(5), 937–948. doi:10.1111/risa.12140
- Sutherland, C. A., Rowley, L. E., Amoaku, U. T., Daguzan, E., Kidd-Rossiter, K. A., Maceviciute, U., & Young, A. W. (2015). Personality judgments from everyday images of faces. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1616. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01616
- Todorov Alexander, M. A. N., Amir, G., & Hall, C. C. (2005). Inferences of competence from faces predict election outcomes. *Science*, 308(5728), 1623–1626. doi:10.1126/science.1110589
- Tsakiris, M., Vehar, N., & Tucciarelli, R. (2021). Visceral politics: A theoretical and empirical proof of concept. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*.
- Valentino, N. A., Brader, T., Groenendyk, E. W., & Gregorowicz, K. (2011). Election night's alright for fighting: The role of emotions in political participation. *The Journal of Politics*, 73(1), 156–170. doi:10.1017/S0022381610000939
- Vasilopoulos, P., Marcus, G. E., Valentino, N. A., & Foucault, M. (2019). Fear, anger, and voting for the far right: Evidence from the November 13, 2015 Paris Terror attacks. *Political Psychology*, 40(4), 679–704. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12513>
- Von Mohr, M., Hackenburg, K., Tanzer, M., Fotopoulou, A., Campbell, C., & Tsakiris, M. (2025). A leader I can (not) trust: Understanding the path from epistemic trust to political leader choices via dogmatism. *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 44(1), 88–107. doi:10.1017/pls.2024.11