

How Feeling Misinformation Shapes Politics

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Only recently have political psychology scholars begun to explore the emotions of groups. One body of research examines partisan emotions via affective polarization, which focuses on like or dislike of partisans and its implications for politics (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018). The other strand of research incorporates rich collective group emotions theories espoused by psychologists by asking respondents to recall and write about various emotional experiences as members of racial groups then observe their effects on policy opinions and political engagement (Banks, White, and McKenzie 2018) or simply asking individuals to answer how they feel about various political scenarios as members of groups (Burge 2014; Burge and Johnson 2018; Phoenix 2020; Phoenix and Chan 2021).

Psychologists studying intergroup emotions theory argue that self-categorization determines emotional responses. That is, how a citizen evaluates the legitimacy of institutions, communities, such as Muslim Americans, or policies, such as immigration or education policies, depend on how that person thinks about themselves. Those emotions then determine the way citizens and their groups behave (Mackie, Smith, and Ray 2008, p. 1876). The power of misinformation has increased because of the ways in which elites package it by calling on group identities and emotions. It is not merely the information being distributed but the idea that if you do not believe that information, then you are in violation of some group norm. This group-infused and emotionally-charged misinformation profoundly affects politics.

Two examples illustrate the group emotions-to-politics link: COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and conversations surrounding critical race theory. Misinformation surrounding the spread of COVID-19 and its remedies were rampant. At the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020, many [Black Americans](#) were under the impression that they [could not contract COVID-19](#). Yet, when the data surrounding cases, hospitalizations, and deaths emerged, many were surprised to learn that Black people were disproportionately affected by the virus (Ray 2020; Reyes 2020). These findings reignited the all too familiar feelings of fear and anxiety surrounding [Black Americans' trust in medical institutions and government](#).

However, once [several pro-vaccine campaigns were deployed](#) along with other changes to structural issues surrounding racial inequalities in receiving vaccines (e.g. putting vaccine distribution centers in more racial and ethnic communities, allowing the scheduling of vaccine appointments to occur online and in person, [vaccine mandates by employers](#)), many Black Americans were able to [make plans to receive the vaccine](#). The “perception hack” surrounding the virus was changed as were Black Americans’ willingness to obtain life-saving treatment and improve their trust in medical institutions.

A great deal of misinformation has also been disseminated about critical race theory (CRT) and harnessed for political use by playing on the fear, shame, and guilt of White Americans. Critical race theory is a legal concept which asserts that “racism is embedded in the legal system and government policy as opposed to individual prejudice” (Santos 2021). Research surrounding CRT has been published and debated in the halls of academia since the 1970s and came to the fore of political discussions in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd as many individuals called for a racial reckoning and inclined their ears towards understanding racial inequalities in America. However, [seven out of ten people](#) do not know what CRT is. Instead, many pundits, politicians, and political elites conflate CRT with any aspects of teaching about racism and discrimination in schools. As of February 2022, [36 states](#) adopted or introduced laws or policies that restrict teaching about race and racism. In 2021 the Republican candidate for Virginia Governor, Glenn Youngkin, ran on an anti-CRT platform, vowing to ban CRT from public schools. Many of his discussions surrounding fear of what our children are being taught, [resonated with a great deal of white voters and led to increased levels of political turnout](#).

Groups and emotions matter in politics. The overwhelming majority of literature in political science focuses on how the stoking of anger, anxiety, and resentment among individuals and partisans shapes politics (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Banks 2014; Banks, McKenzie, and White 2018; Burge and Johnson 2018; Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018; Phoenix 2019), but there are many other group identities (e.g. race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, occupation, etc.) with their attendant emotional valences (e.g. pride, shame, fear, and guilt) which are salient in political discourse. We need a more comprehensive understanding of how emotions operate at the group level to better understand the ways in which misinformation spreads, erodes trust in institutions, and shapes political participation.