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Who Gets Emotional About Politics?

Political interest and confidence-in-knowledge — but not factual knowledge — drive our emotional responses to politics

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Emotions Are Not the Enemy of Reason

For a long time, emotions were seen as the opposite of rational politics. Research shows the reverse: feeling and thinking go together.



Feeling is part of engagement

It's the engaged citizens who report the strongest emotions.

Anger, hope and worry are signs of investment, not of irrationality.



But there's a wrinkle

Strong emotions are also linked to believing misinformation and fake news.

So what fuels political emotions: knowing a lot, caring a lot, or merely feeling sure of yourself?

Our question: which ingredient of engaged citizenship actually drives political emotions?

3 Ingredients of “Political Sophistication”

Researchers often lump these together. We pull them apart — because they are not the same thing.



Knowledge

What you actually know



Interest

How much you care



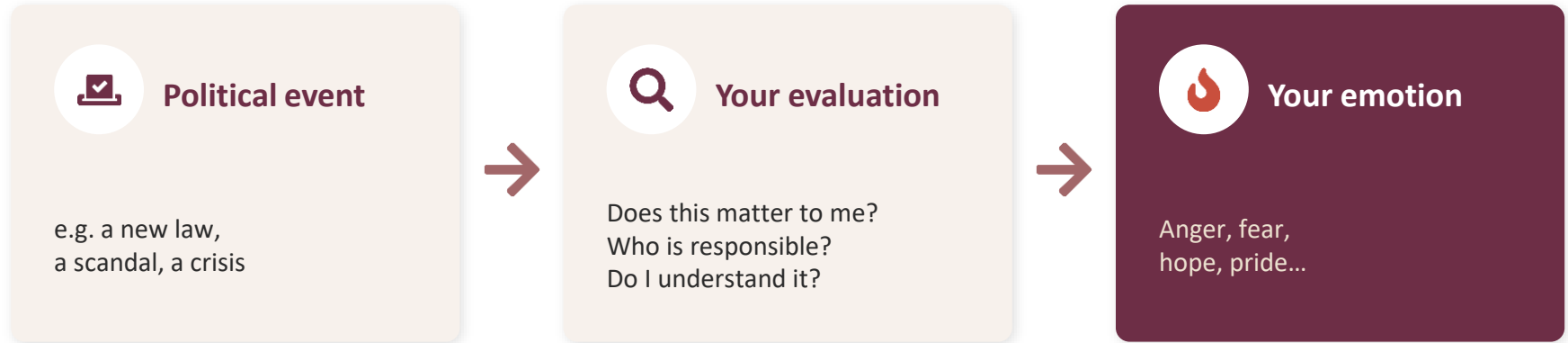
**Confidence-in-
knowledge**

How much you think you know

Surprising fact: confidence and actual knowledge are only weakly related ($r \approx 0.2$). Many people are sure they know a lot — and don't. And vice versa.

Where Do Emotions Come From?

Psychology's “appraisal theory”: emotions arise from how we evaluate events — not from the facts themselves.



The key insight: these evaluations are subjective. You don't need to be right — you only need to feel that politics matters to you and that you understand it. That's interest and confidence, not knowledge.

How We Studied It

Five samples, two countries, ~28,000 observations — plus a pre-registered experiment.



U.S. election surveys (ANES)

2012, 2016 and 2020

~15,900 respondents



Original study: Netherlands

Survey with built-in experiment,
(2022)

1,991 respondents



Original study: United States

Same pre-registered design (2022)

1,163 respondents

Experiment

Correlation isn't causation — so we manipulated confidence directly, by random assignment.



Easy quiz

“Which party has the most seats in parliament?”
→ most people get it right (70–80% correct) and feel knowledgeable.



Difficult quiz

“Which party has the second-most seats?” →
same topics, but most fail (only 35–42% correct)
and feel shaken.



People who happened to get the hard quiz afterwards reported significantly lower confidence in their political knowledge — in both countries. Then we measured their emotions.

Finding 1:

Knowledge Doesn't Make You Emotional

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of our tests found no relationship at all between factual knowledge and emotions

6 of 21 were negative — only 1 positive



Knowing more ≠ feeling more

Across five samples, people who answered more factual questions correctly were no more emotional about politics.



If anything, it cools things down

Where we did find effects, more knowledge went with slightly less fear, anger, pride or hope.

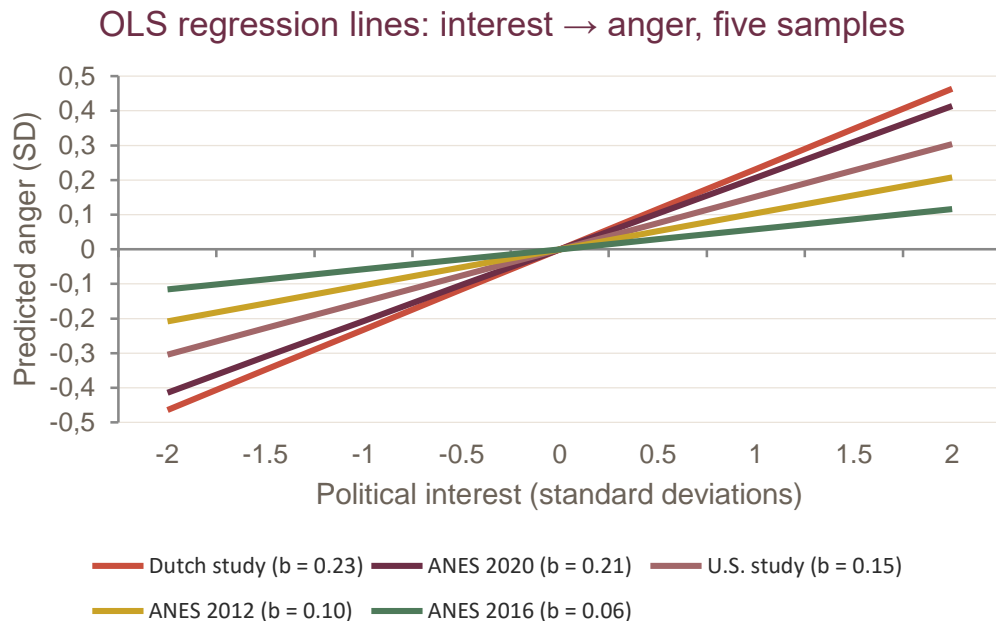


Why? Facts explain, they don't ignite

Knowledge tells you what is happening — it doesn't by itself make politics feel personally relevant.

Finding 2: Interest Fuels Emotion

People who care about politics feel more of everything — hope, fear, anger and pride alike.

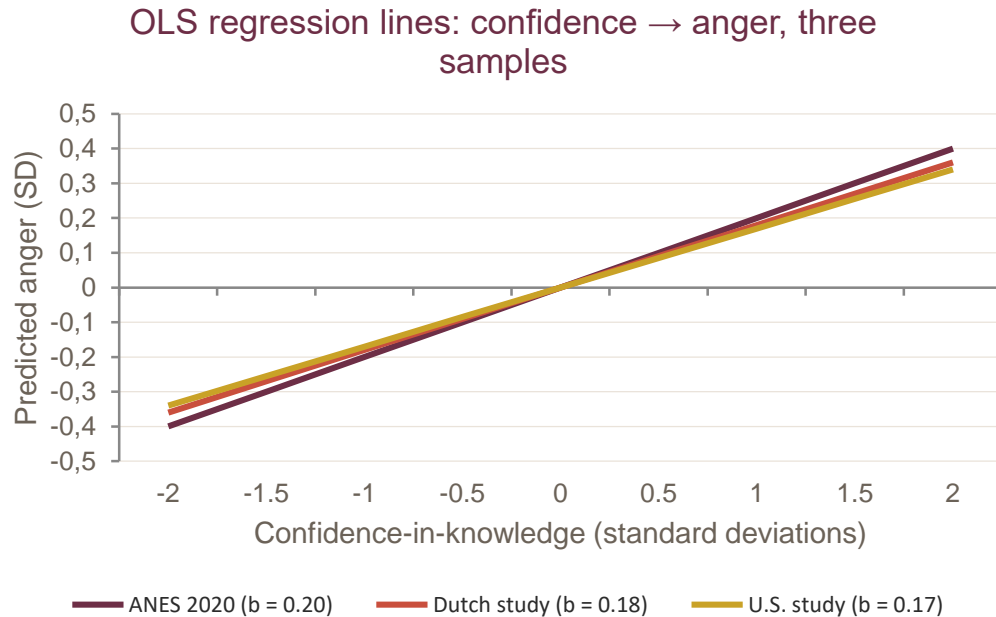


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tests showed a positive link
between political interest and
emotional intensity

*across all 5 samples,
2012–2022, NL & U.S.*

Finding 3: The More Confident, the Angrier



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samples show: the more confident people are in their political knowledge, the more anger (and fear) they report

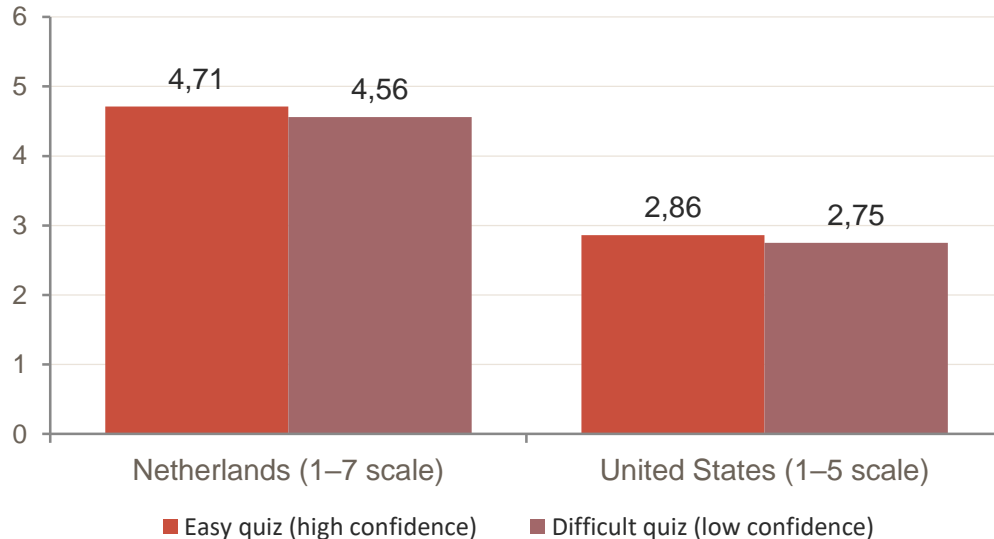
actual knowledge held constant — in the Dutch sample confidence also boosts pride & hope

Standardized OLS estimates, controlling for knowledge and socio-demographics; all three slopes significant at $p < .001$.

Finding 3: Confidence Causes Anger

The quiz experiment shows a causal effect: feeling knowledgeable makes people angrier about politics.

Average anger after the quiz



Anger, specifically

The boost appears for anger — not hope, pride or fear. Anger needs a sense of certainty about who's to blame.



Same effect in both countries

Small but significant ($p < .05$) and nearly identical in size in the Netherlands and the U.S.



Strong in surveys too

In the 2020 U.S. election study, confidence was the strongest anger predictor apart from party identification.

What This Means in Practice



For civic education

Teaching facts alone won't create engaged citizens. Programs should also build interest and confidence — the actual motors of engagement.



For parliaments & outreach

Emotional engagement signals investment, not ignorance. But anger in the public is driven by certainty — justified or not — more than by being well-informed.



Risks

Confidence without knowledge can direct anger at the wrong targets.

The goal: knowledge, interest and confidence growing together, hand in hand.

“To understand political emotions, ask not just who knows about politics — but who feels invested, and who feels confident.”

Thank You



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Paper

Rebasso, Schumacher & Rooduijn (2026), Political Behavior — open access

Data & code

Openly available on OSF: doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/MJGXQ

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