

# How do emotions change our political attitudes?

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Politicians know that turning on the tears can be a vote winner, but how does the political manipulation of our emotions actually work? Research in Political Psychology explores how emotions such as anxiety, even if their cause has nothing to do with politics, can result in a hardening of our views.

"There's been a lot of focus in recent years on emotions and [political attitudes](#), but the ways we, as political scientists, have studied this phenomena have made it hard to draw firm conclusions," said Dr. Jonathan Renshon, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "We bypassed many of the methodological problems of previous studies by inducing an emotion unrelated to politics and measuring its effects not with self-reports but with tonic skin conductance."

The authors believed that induced anxiety could 'carry over' to impact [political beliefs](#), potentially triggering prejudice toward groups such as immigrants. When [anxiety levels](#) are high voters are more likely to recall negative experiences with immigrants and interpret ambiguous information in a more negative and threatening manner.

To test the theory 138 men from Cambridge, Massachusetts were asked to watch a series of videos before answering surveys. First the group watched relaxing images of beaches and palm trees, before being divided into groups. Two groups watched soothing music or a screensaver of abstract shapes.. The third group was subjected to Sylvester Stallone's "Cliffhanger."

The results showed that the heightened physiological reactivity caused by watching two minutes of rope dangling peril, led to stronger anti-immigration attitudes.

"We found that the anxiety we generated was powerful enough that people couldn't simply turn it off, it carried over to unrelated domains and actually influenced people's political beliefs, particularly their attitudes towards immigrants," concluded Renshon. "This is all the more important as political campaigns become more adept at stimulating and manipulating the emotions of the general public."

**More information:** Jonathan Renshon, Joa Julia Lee, Dustin Tingley, "Physiological Arousal and Political Beliefs," *Political Psychology*, [DOI: 10.1111/pops.12173](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12173). [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.12173/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.12173/abstract)

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