

# Fearful conservatives and angry liberals process political information differently

January 9 2019, by Bert Gambini

---

Fear and anger related to the 2016 presidential election and climate change, one of the campaign's major issues, had different effects on the way conservatives and liberals processed information about the two topics, according to the results of a study by a University at Buffalo communication researcher.

The findings, published in the journal *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, suggest that certain emotional underpinnings of political ideology motivated how the electorate sought and processed information about the race itself and global warming.

"This has important implications for how [political dialogue](#) is shaped," said Janet Yang, the paper's lead author and an expert in the communication of risk information related to science, health and the environment. "It's not just what the candidates are saying; it's also how we communicate with one another." One point to consider is how political speech evokes intentional and unintentional reactions.

"The more we think about political speech, the more we need to study and monitor the emotions related to it more carefully," said Yang. "Emotional reactions have consequences that should be explored."

This is true in journalism, too.

"In [climate change](#) coverage, I think journalists often use language or images that have emotional implications, like the lonely polar bear

floating on ice, which could elicit different responses for different people," she said. "But if we're able to talk about these issues with the emotional component in mind, then we're more likely to get people to move toward collective action."

Yang said the research goal of her team, which included Haoran Chu, a UB graduate student, and LeeAnn Kahlor, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, was to explore whether risk perception and the emotional responses to that risk, in this case, fear and anger, impacted information processing, depending on political leanings.

"People usually don't think of elections as a risk topic, but because the campaigns of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton had emotion-laden narratives, we thought it would be interesting to see if people thought about elections as bearing potential risks."

The researchers used the Risk Information Seeking and Processing Model, a comprehensive model that seeks to understand what contributes to information seeking and information processing related to risk topics.

The model's premise is that risk perception is both cognitive and emotional. It's not exclusively a calculation of likelihood and severity. Emotion is critical and information insufficiency is central to the model. The theory argues that people continue processing information until they've accomplished their processing goals.

Yang and her colleagues collected data from two independent surveys of about 500 U.S. adults in the weeks leading up to the general [election](#) in 2016: one questionnaire about the election and the other about climate change.

"Emotion does different things depending on the context, which is quite fascinating," said Yang.

In the election context, conservatives who sensed fear about the election reported a high need for information. This led them to deal with media coverage, conversations and other information about the election with a lot of attention, which is considered a systematic approach to information processing. Related to climate change, liberals who experienced fear were more likely to process information carefully.

Curiously, anger didn't influence information-processing strategies as much as fear, according to Yang. However, liberals who were angry when thinking about climate change reported higher perceived knowledge about this topic.

"Fear and anger had very different influences on information-processing strategies," said Yang. "These emotions also drive conservatives and liberals in distinctive ways."

**More information:** Janet Z. Yang et al, Fearful Conservatives, Angry Liberals: Information Processing Related to the 2016 Presidential Election and Climate Change, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1077699018811089](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018811089)

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Fearful conservatives and angry liberals process political information differently (2019, January 9) retrieved 15 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-01-angry-liberals-political-differently.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.