Feeling is Believing? The Influence of Emotions on Citizens’ False Political Beliefs

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Emotions and Political Misperceptions

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Abstract

Many Americans hold inaccurate beliefs about political candidates and issues, which are troublesome because evidence suggests people often behave in accordance with those misperceptions. Scholars have recently begun to explore why citizens are misinformed and most extant research uses partisan-based explanations to examine this phenomenon. In the current study, I argue that using party affiliations as the primary explanatory factor is limited in helping to understand why or how citizens are misinformed and instead make the case for discrete emotions as the mechanism driving false beliefs about politics. Using panel survey data (N = 1,004) collected over three waves during the 2012 presidential election I show that angry citizens are more likely to hold false beliefs about Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The data also reveal that partisanship ceases to explain misperceptions about the candidates once the emotions anger and anxiety are accounted for. The findings indicate that false beliefs are driven in large part by anger, suggesting future research on misperceptions must account for citizens’ feelings toward political targets.
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An accurately informed citizenry is critical for democracy to function properly (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Such reasoning is the basis for fact-checking campaigns that attempt to increase the accuracy of citizens’ beliefs about politics (Gottfried, Hardy, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2013). Nonetheless, some citizens hold misperceptions about a variety of political candidates and issues and their behavior can at times be influenced by those false beliefs (Gilens, 2001; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000; Weeks & Garrett, in press). Misperceptions\(^1\)—beliefs about politics that deviate from the best available evidence—have a long history in the political arena (Allport & Postman, 1947) but recent presidential elections have been replete with falsehoods about the candidates (e.g. Weeks & Southwell, 2010; Winneg, Kenski, & Jamieson, 2005). In addition, advances in communication technologies have made the spread of misinformation relatively easy, increasing the possibility that citizens will be exposed to false political claims (Garrett, 2011).

Given the increased likelihood of exposure and the potential threat misperceptions pose to democratic outcomes, it is necessary to understand why citizens believe false political claims. Scholars have recently begun exploring this question and much of this work relies on partisan-based explanations rooted in the theory of motivated reasoning (e.g. Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Sunstein, 2009). This study is a departure from current explanations based on political party affiliation. Instead, I argue that citizens’ experience of negative, discrete emotions better explains false beliefs about politics. In particular, I propose that anger directed at a political target—in the present

\(^1\) I use the terms misperceptions, false beliefs, and inaccurate beliefs interchangeably.
case the candidates for President in the 2012 election—is likely to bias evaluations of claims and ultimately increase misperceptions beyond the influence of party identification. Focusing on discrete emotions like anger provides a more nuanced theoretical approach to understanding inaccurate political beliefs than do partisan-based theories like motivated reasoning and better explains why some are misinformed while others are not.

In the following sections, I discuss some of problems with applying motivated reasoning to political misperceptions and also explore why discrete emotions are likely to influence citizens’ beliefs about politics. I then test my predictions using three-wave panel data collected through an online survey of a representative sample of Americans that was conducted during the 2012 election season. The findings show that anger directed at candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney increases misperceptions about them at a later point in time whereas political party affiliation does not. I conclude by discussing the implications of these results, in particular the importance of focusing on discrete emotions’ effect on citizens’ false political beliefs.

**Motivated Reasoning and Political Misperceptions**

Extant research on political misperceptions has primarily applied motivated reasoning as a theoretical foundation (e.g. Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). The theory is premised on the idea that prior attitudes bias information processing. Sociopolitical concepts, such as Barack Obama or the state of the economy, are thought to trigger immediate affective responses and related attitudes that influence how people judge, evaluate, or behave toward those targets (Taber &
Lodge, 2006; Redlawsk, 2002). In particular, people are motivated to not only seek out information consistent with their prior attitudes, beliefs, and opinions, but also readily accept attitude-confirming evidence while critically counterarguing attitude-challenging information. Information supporting one’s prior attitude is more likely to be deemed credible and strong, while attitude-discrepant information is often viewed as weak and ultimately dismissed.

In the context of misperceptions, this suggests that political claims consistent with citizens’ party affiliation, ideology, or issue positions are more likely to be believed, while claims that challenge those prior attitudes or beliefs will likely be rejected. Empirical research has demonstrated a relationship between prior political attitudes and misperceptions. Both experimental and survey research shows that partisans are more likely to believe false claims about a political candidate they oppose than one they support (Einwiller & Kamins 2008; Hartman & Newmark, 2012; Kosloff et al., 2010; Winneg et al., 2005; Weeks & Garrett, in press). In addition, support or opposition for a variety of political issues has demonstrated a relationship with misperceptions about those issues (e.g. Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Meirick, 2013; Nyhan, 2010). For example, people who strongly supported the war in Iraq were much more likely to incorrectly believe Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (Kull, Ramsay, Lewis, 2003).

The conclusion from much of this research is that both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to believe false claims that favor their party or position on an issue. However, this work has yet to identify the precise theoretical mechanisms that lead to false beliefs. Notably, it fails to highlight why or how false claims are accepted. So despite the plausibility of partisan explanations, there are reasons to suspect the
motivated reasoning process might be an oversimplification of how people respond to political information.

First, some have argued that partisan motivated reasoning is overstated (Druckman, 2012; Kruglanski & Boyatzi, 2012). Not all citizens have strong attitudes about political issues or candidates (Converse, 1964) and there is frequently internal conflict and ambivalence in regard to politics (Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Thus, people without strong attitudes or beliefs may not engage in motivated reasoning. Evidence suggests this may be true with regard to misperceptions. For example, research shows people will at times believe attitude-discrepant claims and reject attitude-consistent ones. Polls conducted prior to and during the war in Iraq found nearly one-third of Democrats incorrectly believed Saddam Hussein was tied to al-Qaeda, a misperception that seems to contradict Democrats’ position on the war (Kull et al., 2003). Similarly, surveys conducted during the 2012 election demonstrate that some Democrats believed or were unsure about the claim that Obama was not a U.S. citizen, while significant percentages of Republicans reported that the claim about Obama’s citizen status was false (e.g. Cassino, 2013; Gallup, 2011). So although prior research suggests people are more likely to believe false claims that are attitude-consistent, there are numerous examples that indicate this is not the case for all. This suggests that a factor other than simple partisanship may be driving false political beliefs.

The second issue related to the use of motivated reasoning to explain misperceptions is conceptual. The theory suggests biased political information processing is driven by “automatic affective processes” (Taber & Lodge, 2006, p. 756). But rather than directly testing the influence of affect many studies use partisanship or
prior attitudes as a proxy (e.g. Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006). This is problematic because affect and attitudes (partisanship) are distinct concepts. Attitudes are global evaluations of objects and can range from positive to negative, favorable to unfavorable, or like to dislike (Fazio, 2000). Affect is more than simply liking or disliking a target. Affective responses are subjective experiences that can be good or bad (Clore & Schnall, 2005), conscious or unconscious, directed at something or not, and are caused by experiences or stimuli in the environment (Schimmack, & Crites, Jr., 2005). Affect subsumes lower order feeling states like moods and emotions. By relying on partisanship or prior attitudes as a substitute for affect, prior research has failed to capture the precise role feelings play. To date, studies of misperceptions have not directly examined the influence of affect independently of partisanship.

In addition, valenced-based approaches to affect—like motivated reasoning—fail to consider the effect of specific, discrete emotions like anger or anxiety. Valenced perspectives of affect suggest feelings lie on a continuum ranging from positive to negative and can vary in strength from strong to weak (see Russell, 2003). However, individual discrete emotions can influence information processing and have different consequences for beliefs and behavior (see Keltner & Lerner, 2010) and this is true in political contexts (e.g. MacKuen, Wolak, Keele & Marcus, 2010; Marcus, MacKuen, & Neuman, 2011). The potential influence of discrete emotions on false political beliefs has yet to be explored.

In sum, there is a clear need to move beyond simple, partisan-based motivated reasoning explanations for why people hold false political beliefs. As it stands, the theory fails to identify the underlying mechanisms that lead to biased evaluations of false
political claims. In particular, it does not shed light on exactly how or why people hold misperceptions. In the following section, I argue that discrete emotions offer a more comprehensive picture of why people are misinformed.

**Discrete Emotions and Misperceptions**

The discrete emotion approach provides insights into how affect or feelings can influence false beliefs. At their core, discrete emotions are functional for human beings and help people respond to their environments (Keltner & Lerner, 2010). Different emotions result from different appraisals of situations and each emotion is associated with a core-relational theme that guides responses to stimuli (Lazarus, 1991). Importantly, distinct emotions—even those of the same valence—can have different effects on judgment and evaluations (Lerner & Keltner 2000; 2001).

The unique influence of discrete emotions has been demonstrated in several studies of political behavior. In particular, the emotions of anger and anxiety have been shown to have different effects in political contexts. Anxiety is a distinct aversive and motivational state that occurs in response to threatening stimuli in one’s environment (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Anxiety signals danger and threat to one’s goals, which subsequently triggers action behaviors intended to help the organism survive (Eysenck, 1992). Anxiety elicits worry, uncertainty, perceptions of situational control, and high levels of physiological arousal, leading people to develop active strategies to reduce anxiety and uncertainty (Eysenck et al. 2007), such as increased information seeking (Marcus et al, 2000) and sharing information with others (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Anger is a negatively valenced emotion that is triggered when an individual’s goals are blocked, when one feels slighted, or when a perceived injustice or violation of
standards has occurred (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Anger is associated with perceptions of certainty and individual control (Lerner & Keltner, 2000) and results in behaviors that seek restitution and the restoration of goals, often by causing harm or damage to others (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009).

The influence of anxiety on political decision-making and behavior has a long tradition in research on emotion and politics. Much of this work has been situated under Affective Intelligence Theory, which suggests that affect and cognition work in tandem with one another through two information processing systems. The “surveillance” system scans an individual’s environment for novelty and threat, which, if found, trigger feelings of anxiety (Marcus et al., 2000, p. 10). The anxiety motivates people to take action against that impending threat. This action is manifested behaviorally by increased information seeking and information processing, and less reliance on habit. The anxiety engages thought and leads people to pay less attention to their previous focus and closer attention to the information at hand (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Stevens, 2005). As a result, they are more susceptible to attitude and belief change, depend less on prior dispositions like ideology or partisanship, process information more deeply, and are ultimately more likely to be influenced by contemporary information (Brader 2005, 2006). Importantly, even strong partisan are willing to give up on an attitude consistent belief when experiencing anxiety (Redlawsk et al., 2010). Because of this, Marcus et al. (2000) consider the surveillance system to be the “learning” system.

The second system working to process human cognition and emotion is the “dispositional” system. This system monitors behavior by allowing people to unconsciously rely on their established habits whenever possible (Marcus et al., 2000).
The dispositional system signals everything is as it should be, and there is nothing novel or challenging enough about the situation to set off the surveillance system. The dispositional system is associated with aversion, which occurs in response to consistent, known, and recurrent threats (MacKuen et al., 2010) and can take the form of anger (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Anger leads to avoidance of information and kick-starts defensive motivations (Marcus et al., 2011). Angry individuals are less likely to consider new information and that information is subsequently less influential and persuasive (Valentino et al., 2008). Anger allows people to avoid challenging information and to fall back on their prior dispositions and habits. Ultimately anger hinders learning as it leads to selective exposure and attention, reduced information seeking, and rejection of information that is not consistent with their beliefs (MacKuen et al., 2010). This evidence is our first hint that motivated reasoning processes in response to political information may be driven by the discrete emotion anger (Marcus et al., 2011), rather than general negative affect, as many have argued (e.g. Taber & Lodge, 2006). As we will see, this has important implications for the study of political misperceptions.

Much existing research on the role of emotions in politics collapses measures of anxiety and aversion (anger) (e.g. Brader, 2006; Brader et al., 2008; Marcus et al., 2000) or simply looks at valence (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Redlawsk, 2002), which do not allow for tests of the individual influence of each emotion. Although the two emotions often do co-occur and are not mutually exclusive, we know from appraisal theories and discrete emotion approaches that anxiety and anger (aversions) fundamentally work differently and can have drastically different consequences (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001).
The different appraisal and action tendencies associated with anger and anxiety should also affect how political misinformation is processed and ultimately what people believe. We know from Affective Intelligence Theory that appraisals associated with anxiety may contribute to more deliberation in response to political information (Marcus et al., 2000). Novel and uncertain situations trigger feelings of anxiety. An individual’s pre-existing habits may not be enough to diminish those anxious feelings so they must adopt behaviors that are not based on heuristics. As a result, anxiety leads to increased information seeking, and more careful deliberation and consideration of contemporary information (Brader 2005; Brader et al., 2008). Anxiety also reduces the influence of prior dispositions like party identification or ideology, increases the depth of information processing, and boosts learning (MacKuen et al., 2010; Marcus et al., 2000). Thus, anxiety should not be associated with false political beliefs. Anger should have very different effects for political misperceptions. Anger is characterized by aversion (Lerner & Keltner, 2000) and should trigger many of the motivated reasoning processes previously used to explain political misperceptions, including counter-arguing and source derogation. Anger sets off the dispositional system, which leads to less motivation to process information in depth, less consideration of the information at hand, and ultimately less learning (MacKuen, 2010).

**Hypotheses**

The previous discussion leads to three predictions and a research question. First, the effects of partisanship on false beliefs should be evident when discrete emotions are not accounted for. This prediction serves as a replication of much prior research on political misperceptions that takes a partisan-based approach.
**H1**: When discrete emotions are not accounted for, partisanship will be related to misperceptions such that Republicans and Democrats will hold more accurate beliefs about their preferred candidate and less accurate beliefs about the opposing candidate.

Second, because anger triggers defensive behavior, reduces willingness to consider new information, and halts learning, we should expect angry individuals to be more likely to hold false beliefs.

**H2**: Anger will be negatively related to belief accuracy.

Third, anxiety increases deliberation and reduces reliance on partisanship, which should ultimately reduce the likelihood that citizens are misinformed.

**H3**: Anxiety will be positively related to belief accuracy.

Finally, the question remains as to what happens to the influence of partisanship once discrete emotions are accounted for. Thus, a single research question is posed.

**RQ**: Does partisanship still predict misperceptions after discrete emotions toward the candidates are accounted for?

**Method**

The hypotheses were tested using data from a three-wave panel survey conducted by GfK Knowledge Networks (KN) during the 2012 Presidential election. The sample was selected from KN’s KnowledgePanel, which uses probability-based sampling techniques and duel-frame composition to obtain a representative sample. Participants are recruited using random-digit dialing and address-based sampling methods. Participants who do not have access to the Internet are provided a laptop and Internet
connection in order to participate. After receiving an emailed invitation to participate in the survey, all panelists log in and conduct the survey on a site hosted by KnowledgePanel. 1,004 respondents in the U.S. completed the baseline survey, which was conducted from July 14 to August 7, 2012. 782 participants (77.9% retention rate) returned for Wave 2, which ran from September 7 to October 4. Data from Wave 3 was collected from November 2 to 19 and included 652 respondents (83.4% retention rate from Wave 2; 64.9 % retention from the baseline). The analyses presented below are based mostly on data from Waves 2 and 3, as the predictor variables of interest in this study (emotion) were only measured in Wave 2. Any instances in which data from Wave 1 are used are clearly noted.

Demographics suggest the complete sample is representative of the larger population and is diverse with respect to gender (52.3% male), age ($M = 49.7$, $SD = 16.4$), race (74.7% Caucasian, 10.6 % Hispanic, 8.5% Black, 6.3% Other), education (90.3 % high school graduates or more; 34.2% bachelor’s degree or more), political party affiliation (44.7% Democrat or Democrat-leaning, 15.6 % true Independent, 33.6 % Republican or Republican-leaning), and political ideology (29.1% liberal, 33.0% moderate, 36.6% conservative).

**Measures**

**Party Affiliation.** The baseline survey asked respondents about their partisan affiliation in the following way: “Generally speaking, when it comes to political parties in the United States, how would you best describe yourself?” Respondents selected from one of seven options: *A strong Democrat; A not very strong Democrat; Independent, lean toward Democrat; Independent (close to neither party); Independent, lean toward*
Republican; A not very strong Republican; Strong Republican. Two dummy-coded variables (both coded = 1) were created for Democrats/leaning-Democrat (45.2% of Wave 3) and Republicans/leaning-Republican (35.8% of Wave 3). A separate dummy variable was created for those who strongly identify with one party or the other (dummy = 1; 11.8% of Wave 3).

**Media Use.** Use of online mainstream (relatively neutral), conservative, and liberal news was assessed. Media use was measured in a block of questions that included the following stem: “People also sometimes get their news on the web. Please tell me how often you got information about the Presidential candidates or the campaign from each of these sources in the past month?” Response options ranged from 1 (Every day or almost every day) to 5 (Never) and were reverse coded. Mainstream news online (Wave 3 $M = 1.67$, $SD = .91$, $r = .43$, $p < .001$) was measured by combining two items that tapped use of major national news organizations’ websites and nonpartisan online news (See Appendix for wording). Conservative site use (Wave 3 $M = 1.50$, $SD = .87$, $r = .54$, $p < .001$) combined use of two types of websites that favor conservative positions, while liberal site use (Wave 3 $M = 1.58$, $SD = .92$, $r = .55$, $p < .001$) aggregated use of categories of sites that favor liberal positions.

**Political Variables.** The models include three variables related to respondents’ political knowledge and attention. Political knowledge was computed by taking the sum of correct responses to four multiple-choice items regarding the US unemployment rate, the partisan make-up of Congress, the party of the President who appointed Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, and the name of the US Secretary of State (Wave 3 $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.21$). Attention to the campaign was operationalized as respondents’
answer to the question of “How closely do you follow news about the 2012 Presidential election?” Response options ranged from 1 (Very closely) to 4 (Not closely at all), which were reverse coded (Wave 3 \( M = 2.63, SD = .92 \)). General interest in politics (Wave 3 \( M = 2.82, SD = .92 \)) was assessed by asking, “More generally, how interested are you in politics and public affairs?” Possible responses ranged from 1 (Very interested) to 4 (Not interested at all) and were reverse coded.

**Discrete Emotions.** In Wave 2 respondents were asked about their feelings toward each candidate. They were provided the question stem, “when you think about Barack Obama/Mitt Romney, to what extent do you feel…,” followed by four discrete emotions including angry, anxious, enthusiastic, and hopeful. Response options ranged from 1 (A lot) to 5 (Not at all) and were reverse coded. The order of presentation for both the candidates and emotions were randomized. This study focuses on the role of negative emotions so enthusiasm and hopefulness are not included in analyzes. For respondents who participated in Wave 3, the mean levels of anger and anxiety toward the candidates are as follows: Obama: Anger \( (M = 2.57, SD = 1.49) \), Anxiety \( (M = 2.85, SD = 1.42) \); Romney: Anger \( (M = 2.39, SD = 1.45) \), Anxiety \( (M = 2.80, SD = 1.38) \).

**Political Misperceptions.** This study asked respondents about a series of 10 political misperceptions that circulated during the 2012 campaign. Five of these false claims were each about Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The misperceptions used in this study were identified in two ways. First, we compiled lists of prominent misperceptions that had been refuted by journalists or fact checking organizations like Factcheck.org and Politifact. Second, we utilized Amazon.com’s online platform Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which allows users to create “tasks” that are completed by
people in exchange for a small financial compensation (See Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012 for detailed information about MTurk samples for political research). “Workers” on MTurk are able to search for and complete tasks and projects that are of interest to them. In April 2012, we asked MTurk workers living in the United States to find “three false or misleading claims about Barack Obama/Mitt Romney.” The target of the misperceptions was randomly assigned to each worker. Workers were asked to use “any online source, including political news stories, reader comments, political blogs, discussion boards, etc.” to find the false claims. They were then asked to describe each claim in less than 50 words and also include the full URL addresses for the pages where the claims were found.

The MTurk workers found several dozen false claims about Obama and Romney. Each claim was examined and those that were identified by multiple MTurk workers were highlighted. The list of claims from MTurk was compared to those gathered from journalists and fact checking organizations and five of the most salient inaccurate claims about each candidate were selected. Once the final list was selected, it was verified that experts, journalists, or fact-checkers had successfully demonstrated that each claim was false. The misperceptions selected for the main panel survey included a variety of false claims about Obama and Romney. Among these were misperceptions about the candidates’ religion, personal characteristics, and policy initiatives and goals.

It is important to note that none of the misperceptions were promoted by the presidential candidates but were instead circulating online and through interpersonal channels. Although the claims used in this study are not a representative sample of
political misperceptions, they are an acceptable exemplar of the falsehoods surrounding the candidates in 2012.

Respondents in the panel survey were asked about each of the 10 previously identified misperceptions (see Appendix for wording of claims). One true item about each candidate was included in the questionnaire to ensure that respondents independently assessed each item. The true items are not included in the analyses. In each wave, respondents were first presented with the series of claims and asked how often they had heard each of them, as well as if they had encountered information suggesting each claim was false. Finally, respondents were asked to report the extent to which they believed each claim to be true. They were provided the stem, “what do you think about the accuracy of this statement? Is it…,” which was followed by five response options: Definitely true, Probably true, Probably false, Definitely false, or Unsure. Responses were recoded so that higher values reflect greater accuracy in assessing the claim. The Unsure response was recoded so that it was in the middle of the five-point scale.

Responses to the five false belief items were combined for each candidate to create a misperception scale that assessed respondents’ accuracy across the series of inaccurate claims. On average, in both Waves 2 and 3 accuracy was high for claims about Obama (Wave 2: $M = 3.65$, $SD = .92$, $\alpha = .84$; Wave 3: $M = 3.66$, $SD = .95$, $\alpha = .86$) and Romney (Wave 2: $M = 3.38$, $SD = .71$, $\alpha = .68$; Wave 3: $M = 3.49$, $SD = .73$, $\alpha = .70$).

**Control Variables.** All of the models accounted for a series of demographic variables including age, race (dummy coded, Caucasian coded high), and education level.
Results

The hypotheses were tested through a series of hierarchical linear regression models predicting belief accuracy for false claims about both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The models related to each candidate unfold over three steps. In Step 1, political party affiliation, media use, political participation, and other covariates serve as predictors of belief accuracy. In Step 2, Wave 2 anxiety and anger directed at each of the respective candidates are included. Finally, in Step 3 the lagged dependent variable—belief accuracy at Wave 2—is added to the model. Because belief accuracy is measured at Waves 2 and 3, this lagged dependent variable model therefore controls for prior beliefs and allows for stronger inferences of causality than cross-sectional surveys (Eveland & Thomson, 2006).

The first hypothesis stated that political party identification would be related to belief accuracy when the discrete emotion measures were omitted from the model. In particular, it was predicted that Republicans and Democrats will hold more accurate beliefs about their preferred candidate and less accurate beliefs about the opposing candidate. This hypothesis serves as a replication of much of the extant research on political misperceptions that focuses on motivated reasoning and partisanship as the primary explanatory factors. This hypothesis found support. Model 1 of Table 1 demonstrates that Republicans held less accurate beliefs about Obama while Democrats were more accurate. Similarly, Republicans were more accurate when presented with false claims about Mitt Romney (see Model 1 of Table 2). However, in this initial model Democrats’ beliefs about Romney were no less accurate than the comparison group (Independents). Thus, the general trend that partisanship predicts belief accuracy when
discrete emotions are not included holds true, replicating several previous studies on political misperceptions.

In the second step anger and anxiety directed at Obama and Romney at Wave 2 were added to the model predicting Wave 3 belief accuracy. These two emotions accounted for an additional 7% of the variance in belief accuracy in the Obama model (see Table 1, Model 2) and 4% in the Romney model (see Table 2, Model 2). Adding Wave 2 beliefs in the third step accounted for 24% of the variance explained in the Obama model and 20% in the Romney model.

The final two hypotheses and research question were tested using this lagged dependent variable model for each candidate. These models importantly control for Wave 2 beliefs when predicting Wave 3 beliefs. H2 predicted that anger directed at the presidential candidates would be negatively related to belief accuracy (Tables 1 and 2, Model 3). This hypothesis is strongly supported. As expected, anger was negatively and significantly related to accuracy for beliefs about both candidates (Obama, $b = -.06, p < .01$; Romney, $b = -.08, p < .001$). Over and above all other predictors in the models, including partisanship, the more anger individuals hold toward the candidates the more susceptible they are to believing false claims about the candidates.

H3 predicted that anxiety toward the candidates would be positively related to belief accuracy. This hypothesis failed to find much support. Anxiety was not related to accuracy in beliefs about Obama $b = -.01, ns$, but was positively associated with accuracy for Romney beliefs, $b = .03, p < .10$. Although the relationship between anxiety toward Romney and belief accuracy is positive, it fails to reach the traditional cut-off for
statistical significance ($p < .05$) and thus offer only tentative support that anxiety improves belief accuracy.

The sole research question asked what happens to partisanship once discrete emotions are accounted for. Recall that most prior research suggests misperceptions are a result of motivated reasoning and partisan affiliation. For the most part, that claim does not find support in the models presented here. In fact, partisanship mostly fails to explain political misperceptions once discrete emotions are taken into account. Although in the final model Democrats are significantly more accurate in regard to claims about Obama, partisanship does not reduce accuracy about either candidate when anger and anxiety are accounted for. Taken together, the results suggest that anger—not partisanship—is driving false beliefs.

One alternative explanation that must be considered is the possibility that the influence of anger is conditional on partisanship. For example, perhaps Republicans’ anger at Obama or Democrats’ anger at Romney is so strong that it produces a significant effect overall. Adding interactions terms to the models (not shown in Tables) for each candidate rules out this alternative explanation. For the Obama model, the interaction between Republicans and anger at Obama is non-significant ($b = .02$), as is the interaction between Democrats and anger at Romney ($b = .03, n.s.$). This suggests that the effect of anger on belief accuracy is not dependent on partisanship. In other words, Republicans’ anger at Obama is no more influential than non-Republicans’ anger and Democrats’ anger at Romney does not have a greater impact than does non-Democrats’.

**Discussion**
The results of this study offer a departure from much prior research on why citizens hold false beliefs about politics. In particular, it moves beyond partisan-based explanations and the theory of motivated reasoning and provides strong evidence that anger directed at political targets—not partisanship—drives false beliefs. Anger toward the presidential candidates in the 2012 election significantly predicted inaccurate beliefs one month later whereas partisanship did not reduce accuracy in assessing claims about the candidates. These findings provide a more nuanced theoretical explanation for false political beliefs and highlight a specific, emotionally-based mechanism for why people hold misperceptions.

The benefits of the discrete approach outlined here are two-fold. First, discrete emotions provide insights into who holds false political beliefs but also why they hold them. Rather than relying on the simple partisan affiliation, discrete emotions offer a more detailed theoretical explanation for false beliefs. Here, the emotion anger contributed to misperceptions about politics. Anger closes the mind to alternative explanations, hinders learning, and reduces the willingness to deliberate (MacKuen et al., 2010). This means that citizens who are angry with a particular candidate, even citizens who share a political party with that candidate, will be motivated to remain consistent with their prior feelings when considering the veracity of false political claims. This mechanism helps explain, for instance, why many Republicans do not believe false claims about Obama and why some Democrats do. It is angry individuals, not necessarily strong partisans, that fall victim to these claims. Anger likely biases beliefs by prohibiting consideration of corrections and fact-checking messages that are intended to create accurate perceptions. So rather than carefully considering the accuracy of a
claim about a presidential candidate, angry individuals stick to what they already believe without deliberation. Citizens who are not angry at political targets—even partisans who might not agree ideologically with the target—are simply more likely to carefully about the veracity of these claims. They are not biased by anger and therefore come to have more accurate political beliefs, regardless of their partisan affiliation.

The second benefit of the discrete approach is that it moves beyond valenced-based conceptualizatons of affect. Anger and anxiety lead to very different behavioral tendencies (Keltner & Lerner, 2010; MacKuen et al., 2010) and a valence based-approach fails to capture this distinction. This is especially important given that anger and anxiety—two emotions of the same valence—had very different effects in this study. Anger is associated here with less accuracy about the false claims while the effect of anxiety is mostly null. This suggests these two discrete emotions work in different ways and should not be combined into a single scale. By analyzing the two emotions separately we are able to pinpoint the exact type of emotional response that contributes to misperceptions. Contrary to prior research on motivated reasoning (e.g. Taber & Lodge, 2006) it is not simply negative affect that biases information processing. Instead, anxiety may facilitate learning and deliberation while anger may lead people to process information in a biased manner (MacKuen et al., 2010). This suggests that anger in particular may account for much of bias found in studies on motivated reasoning, though future research must address this proposition before definitive conclusions can be made.

Future research must also specifically address how discrete emotions influence the processing of corrections and fact-checking messages. Though the results of this study are consistent with prior research showing that anxiety facilitates learning and
anger prohibits it, the nature of the data here do not allow us to consider the effects of specific messages. Experimental studies are needed to determine whether anger leads to rejection of fact-checking messages and ultimately inaccurate beliefs.

The results of this study provide evidence that political misperceptions are founded not in partisan-based motivated reasoning but instead stem from feelings of anger directed at political targets. Anger is a powerful emotion that can strongly influence how people think about and react to political information. The findings reported here highlight the challenges that fact-checking campaigns face. Given that anger leads people to often reject information that challenges their feelings, even well-constructed corrective messages that are circulated widely may struggle to update angry individuals’ beliefs. Of course, the study of political misperceptions remains a relatively new area of political communication research and much more work is needed on both why people hold false beliefs and what can be done to correct them. This study provides a foundation for that work by providing new theoretical insights into exactly why people hold false beliefs and the strong influence emotions like anger have in the process.
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References


EMOTIONS AND POLITICAL Misperceptions


## Table 1

*Hierarchical Linear Regression: Predicting Misperceptions about Barack Obama During the 2012 Election*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 1 $b$ (SE)</th>
<th>Model 2 $b$ (SE)</th>
<th>Model 3 $b$ (SE)</th>
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<td>-.20 (.08)*</td>
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<td>.14 (.06)*</td>
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<td>-.07 (.06)</td>
<td>-.06 (.05)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.03 (.07)***</td>
<td>.03 (.01)*</td>
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<td>-.03 (.07)</td>
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<td>-.08 (.03)*</td>
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<td>Liberal Media Site</td>
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<td>Political Knowledge</td>
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<td>Interest in Politics</td>
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<td>.03 (.05)</td>
<td>.00 (.04)</td>
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<td>-.06 (.02)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<td>-.01 (.02)</td>
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<td>Total $R^2$</td>
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*Note.* All regression coefficients are unstandardized. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. N = 633.
### Table 2

**Hierarchical Linear Regression: Predicting Misperceptions about Mitt Romney During the 2012 Election**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 1 $b$ (SE)</th>
<th>Model 2 $b$ (SE)</th>
<th>Model 3 $b$ (SE)</th>
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<td>Republican (or leaning)</td>
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<td>Democrat (or leaning)</td>
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<td>Strong Party Identifier</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>.07 (.01)***</td>
<td>.04 (.01)**</td>
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<td>Race (Caucasian =1)</td>
<td>.32 (.07)***</td>
<td>.32 (.07)***</td>
<td>.19 (.06)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainstream Media Site</td>
<td>.04 (.05)</td>
<td>.01 (.05)</td>
<td>-.01 (.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservative Media Site</td>
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<td>.02 (.03)</td>
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<td>Liberal Media Site</td>
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<td>-.03 (.04)</td>
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<td>Political Knowledge</td>
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<td>.10 (.02)***</td>
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<td>Attention to the campaign</td>
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<td>W2 Misperceptions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$</td>
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<td>.26</td>
<td>.46</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* All regression coefficients are unstandardized. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. N = 633.
EMOTIONS AND POLITICAL Misperceptions

Appendix

Question Wording

Media Use:

Mainstream Online News:

“The website of a major national news organization that is not frequently characterized as favoring a party or ideology, including USA Today, CBS News, and Yahoo! News.”

“The website of nonpartisan online news organizations or blogs, such as RealClearPolitics or Politico.”

Conservative Online News:

“The website of a major national news organization that is frequently characterized as favoring conservative positions or Republican candidates, such as The Wall Street Journal or FOX News.”

“The website of a politically conservative online news organization or blog, such as Drudge Report, TownHall or the Cybercast News Service (CNS News).”

Liberal Online News:

“The website of a major national news organization that is frequently characterized as favoring liberal positions or Democratic candidates, such as The New York Times or MSNBC.”

“The website of a politically liberal online news organization or blog, such as The Huffington Post, ThinkProgress or the Daily Kos.”

Wording for false claims about Barack Obama and Mitt Romney:

Barack Obama:

“Barack Obama is Muslim, not Christian.”

“Osama Bin Laden's death was faked by the Obama administration.”

“Barack Obama used federal stimulus money to outsource U.S. bridge projects to Chinese companies.”
“Barack Obama said he wants gas prices to skyrocket so that Americans will switch to alternative energy sources.”

“Barack Obama is a Socialist because he believes the government should own the property and equipment used to produce goods.”

“Tax cuts made up about a third of the Obama administration’s 2009 stimulus package.” (True)

Mitt Romney:

“Mitt Romney, who is Mormon, does not call himself a Christian.”

“As Governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney signed a healthcare law providing taxpayer-funded abortions.”

“Mitt Romney said he knows what it means to work with the black community because his ancestors owned slaves.”
“Mitt Romney said that Mormon Church leaders should play a defining role in national affairs.”

“Mitt Romney did not pay taxes for 10 years starting in the late 1990s.”

“Mitt Romney and his wife, Ann, made about $25 million in 2010 (True).”