The angry voter?

The role of emotions in voting for the radical left and right at the 2019 Belgian elections

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Abstract

This study examines the role of negative (anger, fear) and positive emotions in addition to political attitudes (political trust, populist attitudes, external political efficacy) as key determinants of voting behavior. We rely on the RepResent voter survey conducted in 2019 in Belgium (n = 3,236) allowing us to assess the relationship between emotions, political attitudes, and the vote for radical right (VB, PP) and radical left parties (PTB-PVDA). Findings indicate that anger is significantly and positively related to voting for radical left and right parties, while controlling for key political attitudes and issue positions. Fear and positive emotions are not significantly more related to voting for radical parties than for other parties. The results suggest that anger should be more systematically integrated in electoral research. These findings call for further analysis on the causal mechanism linking emotions and voting behavior, and the (in)direct effects of emotions on voting.

Key words: emotions, voting behavior, radical left, radical right, Belgium, anger

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Introduction

'It's the emotions, stupid!". Research has increasingly recognized that emotions play a role in politics, anger in particular (Magni, 2017). Especially radical left and radical right parties are expected to attract citizens with underlying feelings, such as anger, and to exploit them politically in an attempt to challenge their mainstream party competitors –in line with their anti-elite profile. This strategy seems to be fruitful. Radical left and right parties have performed well in the ballot box in Western Europe, forcing traditional parties to respond (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In Belgium, for instance, both the radical left PTB-PVDA[i] and radical right VB[ii] have celebrated victories following the federal, European and regional elections on 26 May 2019 (Close & van Haute, 2020; Walgrave et al., 2020). Yet, few studies have directly examined the role played by different types of emotions in the vote for *both* radical left and radical right parties. This is the aim of this study, using data from Belgium. We aim to add to the debate on affective politics by exploring how both negative (anger, fear) and positive emotions drive the vote for radical parties. Our question is whether including emotions in the equation brings new insights to our understanding of the vote compared to established and attitudinal determinants of vote choice (political trust, populist attitudes, external political efficacy) for ideologically diverse radical parties. In doing so, we contribute to two strands of research. First, we contribute to a growing body of research exploring underlying explanations of the electoral success of these types of parties (Rooduijn, 2018; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Radical parties, either on the left or right side of the political spectrum, are characterized by ideologically extremist positions. Radical right parties combine nativist (i.e., views that states should be inhabited by natives) and authoritarian elements (i.e., the belief in a strictly ordered society) (Mudde, 2004). Radical left parties reject the dominant structure of the capitalist economic system, advocate for alternative power structures, and call for major reforms to tackle extant inequalities in society (March, 2012).

Second, we contribute to the literature that highlights the role of emotions in politics. Marcus (2000) has suggested a turn towards "affective politics" by introducing emotions as vital drivers in rational decision-making processes (Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Especially, emotions —negative ones in particular— are expected to affect voting for mostly radical right parties (Vasilopoulos et al., 2019).

While the idea that emotions matter for electoral behavior, especially for the vote for radical parties, has gained ground, several theoretical and empirical questions remain open which we propose to explore. A first question is about which types of emotions do weight in the vote for radical parties. Do we see an effect for both (lack of) positive and negative emotions, and for different discrete emotions (see Roseman, 1991)? Second, there is a need to investigate the potential differences in the role of emotions when it comes to voting for distinct types of radical parties. Many prior studies focus on radical right-wing parties as these tend to be electorally stronger in most Western European contexts. Still, this results in limited evidence on whether emotions are equally relevant in driving the vote for radical left parties.

To address these lacunas, we use panel survey data collected amongst a representative sample of voters during the 2019 elections in Belgium (RepResent). We measure emotions as a set of discrete emotions (anger, fear, positive emotions) toward Belgian politics. The Belgian context allows us to test our model on three parties, PTB-PVDA, VB and PP[iii]. In the French-speaking community, PTB and PP compete, and in the Dutch-speaking community, PVDA and VB. Belgium is an excellent case as it allows for within-country comparisons between two political systems sharing similarities and differences. Two radical parties in both political systems have experienced an electoral lift-off during the most recent 2019 elections: PTB in the respectively French-speaking and Dutch-speaking party system. These parties can be classified as either radical left (PTB-PVDA) or radical right (PP, PVDA), but are also considered anti-establishment parties due to their anti-elite profile and outsider position within

the political landscape: both are reluctant to rule and are ostracized by other parties (Delwit, 2021; Jacobs, 2022). Interestingly, PVDA appears as an electorally weaker party in Dutch-speaking Belgium, although polls predict an upward trend; in French-speaking Belgium, the radical right PP did not reach the electoral threshold in 2019. The presence of a stronger (PTB, VB) and weaker radical left and right party (PP, PVDA) permits in-depth comparison. It allows us to test whether emotions, along with political attitudes, operate similarly for radical left and right parties, and whether the relationship between emotions and voting is connected to the ideological position of the party in the system. Our expectation, supported by our findings, is that emotions –anger in particular—are connected to voting for radical parties, irrespective of the host ideology.

Theoretical Framework

Discrete Negative and Positive emotions and Voting for Radical Parties

Politics is said to stir people's emotions (Bakker et al., 2021; Close & van Haute, 2020; Marcus, 2000). These studies depart from psychological literature on motivated reasoning and consider affect as essential in guiding political decision-making processes. Discrete emotions are key factors when explaining support for radical right populist parties (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019; Widmann, 2021). Emotions describe mental or affective states that reflect evaluative-valanced reactions to incidents, actors or objects that can vary in intensity, although they are usually short-lived and directed toward external stimuli (Nabi, 2010). This perspective points to categorical emotional statements corresponding to affective states that arise following appraisal patterns, of which anger and fear are recognized as most pertinent in politics (Marcus, 2000; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Anger and fear are often jointly triggered by different types of social and political threats (Rico et al., 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Both are basic discrete emotions, and following the socio-functional approach, both emotional responses arise when people perceive that vital

resources and privileges are jeopardized (Cottrel & Neuberg, 2005). Still, cognitive appraisal

theory asserts that anger and fear operate differently (Roseman, 1991). Anger would be easily

elicited when citizens identify constraints while trying to reach a specific goal, especially if

they feel entitled to a particular outcome. Fear, by contrast, would be prevalent especially

when a given threat signals future uncertainty, and when others are held responsible for a

given outcome. It originates from an unfamiliar source that is perceived to be out of one's

control, signifying a threat that cannot be eliminated (Lazarus, 1991). Hence, cognitive

appraisal theory claims that anger and fear have distinct antecedents and are triggered in

different situations. We thus expect a distinct relationship with voting for radical left and right

parties and these emotions (Rico et al., 2017, 2019).

First, we expect anger to be more strongly associated to voting for radical parties due

to the mechanism of anti-elitism and blame attributions (Rico et al., 2017). Anger would arise

if citizens blame the political establishment for what goes wrong in society, criticizing the

'corrupt' elite, thereby often integrating a populist component (Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn,

2013). Blame attributions and moral evaluations of the elite combined with a confrontational

outlook resonate with anger's underlying appraisals (Rico et al., 2017). Key to our argument

is that, following Rico and colleagues (2017, p. 447) 'anger is a moral emotion', an essential

component of perceptions that a given situation is unfair or illegitimate. Cognitive appraisal

theories proclaim that anger develops when citizens can identify the cause of a threat with

certainty, especially when they detect external accountability and blame others (Lazarus,

1991; Smith & Kirby, 2009). For citizens with a protest attitude, the source of the threat or the

identification of a culprit –i.e., elites or other societal groups that are perceived as

'undeserving'— is usually rather clear-cut. Anger can trigger confrontation, which makes

radical parties —that claim to challenge the elite, reject the status quo and question how the

society is being governed— an appealing political choice (Magni, 2017; Rico et al., 2017).

The Belgian context of compulsory voting creates a situation without real 'exit' options (apart from abstention, casting a blank or invalid vote), which is why we expect that anger drives the vote for radical parties (Hooghe et al., 2011):

H1: Anger toward politics is significantly more correlated with voting for the radical left and radical right than with voting for other parties.

Second, fear can also be linked to voting for radical parties. Cognitive appraisal theory describes fear as a discrete emotion that is mostly prone to arise in uncertain situations in which individuals are confronted with a threat that is considered beyond once's own control (Lazarus, 1991; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Citizens can perceive various threats (e.g., rising economic inequality, immigration, or terrorism), which may lead them to react in a way to optimize their chances of eliminating the threat's source (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). These citizens often have a clear conception of a source to blame, linked to their underlying political orientation or ideology. Therefore, we would expect anger to have a clearer link to the vote for radical parties, since these parties have clear views on who to blame, which align well with citizens' perceptions (Rico et al., 2017, 2019; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). In addition, fear can be expected to result in risk-avoidance behavior and information-seeking (Valentino et al., 2019), potentially producing more moderate opinions:

H2: Fear toward politics is significantly correlated with voting for the radical left and radical right, although to a lesser extent than anger.

Recently, positive emotions in relationship to voting behavior have become more pertinent (Close & van Haute, 2020). Positive emotions that are future-oriented and that entail a prospective outlook for the future, such as hope, can be a powerful mobilizing force (Bettarelli et al. forthcoming; Nai, 2021; Widmann, 2021). Following AIT, positive emotions belong to the disposition neural system which activates goal-oriented positive behavior (Marcus et al., 2000). When citizens believe that the elite is corrupt and does not act on behalf

of the people, but instead serve an 'undeserving' group (e.g., the rich, or immigrants), the

prevalence of a positive, prospective outlook on the future may be minimal (Nai, 2021;

Widmann, 2021). Hence, a lack of positive emotions is perceived as more compelling as it

may resonate with pessimist outlooks on politics, which aligns with radical parties' focus

(Nai, 2021; Rico et al., 2017). Therefore we expect positive emotions (hope, joy) to be

inversely connected to voting for radical parties:

H3: Positive emotions toward politics are significantly less correlated to voting for the radical

left and radical right than with voting for other parties.

While we focus on exploring the role of how emotions may *drive* the vote, we should

not disregard the possibility of a reciprocal relationship. Research assessing the causal

relationship between voting for the radical right, political discontent (Rooduijn et al., 2016)

and nativism (Harteveld et al., 2017) suggests that the relationship is likely to be reciprocal.

Voting for radical parties is a complex phenomenon driven by the interplay of demand and

supply-side explanations (e.g., van Kessel, 2013). Hence, radical parties might not only attract

citizens with high (or low) levels of discrete emotions, but may simultaneously –due to their

rhetoric, communication– further stir these emotions. Put differently: emotions may be cause

and a consequence of the vote for radical parties. Unfortunately, with the data at hand we are

only able to test the former explanation. Informed by theory and prior evidence (Rico et al.,

2017, 2019; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019), we test whether emotional citizens are more inclined

to vote for the radical left or right, but recognize that the relationship is likely more complex.

The role of emotions should, however, be addressed in parallel with other attitudinal

and ideological drivers of the vote for radical left and radical right parties (Geurkink et al.,

2020; Rooduijn et al., 2017; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Among the demand-side

explanations, scholars have underlined the role of grievances, cultural backlash, the rise of a

new, intergenerational cleavage (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), or positions on issues that are

'owned' by radical parties on the left or on the right (e.g., immigration, economy) (Aron & Superti, forthcoming; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Some argue that voting for radical right parties is primarily driven by ideological views and policy preferences (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Van Der Brug et al., 2000). Radical right parties often are 'nativist' in nature and tend to mobilize mainly on the immigration issue –an issue that they typically own (Damstra et al., 2021). Various studies assert that ideological reasons are central to voters' choice for radical right parties due to concerns on immigration (Goovaerts et al., 2020; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Van Der Brug et al., 2000). Similarly, prior evidence shows that voters for radical left parties are driven at least partly by ideological considerations, favoring socio-economic policies aimed at reducing inequality, ensuring redistribution and facilitating government interventions in the economy (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Next to these factors, research has identified three attitudes that are consistently linked to voting for radical left and right parties (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Geurkink et al., 2020; Rooduijn, 2018): low political trust, low external political efficacy and high levels of populist attitudes. Any study on voting behavior for radical left or right parties should thus control for these key attitudes.

First, voters of radical left and radical right parties are theorized to have low levels of political trust, which can be described as the evaluation of an individual citizen of specific political institutions or actors, such as the parliament (van der Meer, 2010) or politicians and parties (Marien, 2013). Political trust expresses the degree to which citizens believe that their expectations of the well-functioning of these institutions or actors is reached or is violated (Kasperson et al., 1992). Essentially, political trust grasps the confidence that a political institution or political actor will act in the interest of the people. Empirical studies have shown that in some cases low political trust is correlated with voting for a radical right party, although the results are mixed and vary across variants, countries and time (Akkerman et al., 2017; Geurkink et al., 2020; Rooduijn, 2018; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018).

Second, low levels of political efficacy –in particular of its external dimension– are associated with voting for radical left and radical right parties. External efficacy relates to the extent to which political institutions are perceived as responsive to citizens' demands, capturing citizens' perception of whether they are able to influence the political process (Niemi et al., 1991). The emphasis on 'external' indicates that it relates to the institutional responsiveness, irrespective of how capable or confident a citizen feels regarding its influence on politics (i.e., internal efficacy). While external efficacy and political trust often coincide, both are theorized to be distinct concepts: citizens can still believe that political institutions and actors generally act in the public interest, although they perceive their influence on the political process to be low. Empirical research has demonstrated that external political efficacy and trust are distinct drivers of voting for radical right, populist parties (Geurkink et al., 2020), others have suggested that citizens with low external efficacy are more likely to vote for radical right populist parties (Rooduijn, 2018) –yet some do not confirm this (Geurkink et al., 2020). The results are likely driven by the specific context and party under study. Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2010), for instance, found low political efficacy to drive voting for radical left and not for radical right parties.

Finally, voters of radical left and right parties –which are often also populist in nature– are assumed to share a set of beliefs (i.e., 'populist attitudes') as a uniting factor which combines anti-elitism, people-centrism, and the idea that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (Akkerman et al., 2014; Geurkink et al., 2020; Rooduijn, 2018; Spruyt et al., forthcoming). Populist attitudes grasp the idea that citizen representation needs to be closely guided by people as opposed to the elite, representing politics as antagonistic with a moral opposition between the 'good' people and the 'corrupt' elite. Populist attitudes go beyond political distrust or perceived lack of responsiveness of political institutions (external political efficacy) via suggesting that the people are the solution for problems created by the

elite, advocating for a political mandate to emanate from the people (Geurkink et al., 2020).

Citizens voting for radical left and right parties are assumed to score high on populist attitudes

(Rooduijn, 2018; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018), which is shown to be conceptually and

empirically distinct from trust and efficacy (Geurkink et al., 2020).

We test whether these three key cognitive components (trust, external efficacy and

populist attitudes) similarly affect the vote for the different radical left and radical right

parties which have competed in the 2019 elections in Belgium. We also test whether both

attitudinal and emotional determinants affect the vote for these parties.

Data and Method

Case Selection

We rely on data from the 2019 federal elections in Belgium to test our hypotheses.

Belgium is a federal country consisting of three regions (Brussels, Flanders, Wallonia) which

de facto has two separate party systems[iv], respectively for the Dutch-speaking community

(i.e., Flanders and the Dutch-speaking community in Brussels) and for the French-speaking

community (i.e., Wallonia and the French-speaking community in Brussels) (Deschouwer,

2012). We examine voting for radical left and radical right parties participating in any of the

two linguistic communities. Our main interest is the vote for a radical right party (VB in

Flanders, PP in the French-speaking community) and for a radical left party (Belgian's

Working Party, PVDA-PTB, which competes in both communities). VB and PVDA-PTB are

the largest radical right and left parties, with 18 seats for VB (11.9%) and 12 seats (8.6%) for

PVDA-PTB out of 150 seats in the Chamber. They control together about 20 percent of the

seats, making them significant electoral forces and serious competitors for mainstream parties.

VB can be characterized by strict anti-immigration stances and viewpoints on assimilation; it

is considered a nativist party with xenophobic positions (Van Haute & Pauwels, 2016). The

party is the main owner of the immigration issue and adopts a populist rhetoric. PVDA-PTB

has its roots in a Maoist tradition and has evolved into a party criticizing neoliberalism and

advocating against the capitalist system (Wauters & Pittoors, 2019). While PVDA-PTB has

abandoned its explicit Maoist ideals, it still self-identifies as a radical left, socialist party

representing the working class: its party statutes still include references to its heritage (Delwit,

2022). PVDA-PTB is the only unitary party in Belgium. It participates in the two party

systems and forms one fraction in the federal parliament. The PP was founded in 2009 and

has been described as radical right (Close & Ognibene, 2021). It articulates ultra-liberal

stances on socio-economic issues with radical positionings on security and immigration

issues, Islamization, even embracing conspiracy theories. The party obtained one seat in the

Chamber in 2010 and 2014 but lost it in 2019, after which the party was dissolved.

RepResent Panel Survey

We rely on the RepResent panel survey (Walgrave et al., 2020), an online panel survey

conducted by the EOS RepResent consortium involving the five largest Belgian universities.

Its overarching objective was to explore the relationship between distinct forms of democratic

resentment and citizens' feelings of representation and voting behavior. The panel included

pre- and post-electoral surveys during the regional, federal and European elections on May

26, 2019. It is a rich, original dataset including four waves in total (Pilet, 2020). We use the

first two waves, containing variables on emotions, political attitudes and voting behavior.

Fieldwork for this pre-election wave was conducted between April 5 and May 5, 2019; for the

second, post-election wave between May 28 and June 18. 3,910 respondents completed both

surveys (1,978 in Flanders; 1,429 in Wallonia; 503 in Brussels). After listwise deletion, this

results in a final sample of 3,236.[v] Respondents were drawn from an online sample managed

by the survey company KANTAR TNS using CAWI questionnaires (Computer Assisted Web

Interviewing). Sampling was conducted to be representative of the voting age population

based on gender, age and education in their respective region. The sample reflects the Belgian

electorate for gender, age and party choice, with a slight overrepresentation of highly

educated voters. We report data with weights; analyses without weights yield identical results.

We use variables from the first two waves. Sociodemographics, attitudes and

emotions are measured in wave 1. The dependent variable (vote) is measured in wave 2 (post-

election), following prior approaches on the same data (Bettarelli & Van Haute, 2022;

Goovaerts et al., 2020). Hence, we consider the longitudinal structure of the data. Still, we

cannot fully substantiate causal claims. A reciprocal relationship may be present with

emotions being cause and consequence of voting for radical parties, which we unfortunately

cannot test.

Dependent Variable: Vote Choice

We use respondents' self-reported vote choice for the 2019 federal elections for the

Chamber of Representatives: "Which party did you vote for the Chamber for the previous

elections on May 26, 2019?". This was followed by a close-ended list with the parties that

participated and which were represented in the federal Parliament, as well as exit options (did

not vote, not eligible to vote yet, did not remember, voted for party not included in the list,

casted a blank or invalid vote).[vi] We group voting behaviors into five categories based on

party ideology and the extent to which parties can be considered as mainstream or not

(Harteveld et al., 2022): vote for radical-left (PTB-PVDA), green (as they cannot be

considered a 'mainstream' party, Ecolo, Groen), mainstream left (socialist parties, PS,

sp.a/Vooruit), mainstream right (liberal, Christian-democrat and conservative parties, MR,

Open VLD, LesEngagés, CD&V, DéFi, N-VA) and for the radical right (VB, PP).

Respondents that reported any exit behavior were excluded. This choice is justified due to our

aim to compare the antecedents of different types of parties; including these other categories

could bias results.

Independent Variables

Discrete emotions. To measure emotions, we align with theory-building on cognitive appraisal theory. Questions have been constructed to measure the way citizens feel about politics in general to tap into an affective state (Close & van Haute, 2020): "When you think about Belgian politics in general, how much do you feel the following emotions?" They were presented with a close-ended list of eight discrete emotions in a non-randomized order, where respondents had to indicate on a scale from 0 ('Not at all') to 10 ('A great deal') how much they experienced each of these: anger, bitterness, worry, fear, hope, relief, joy, satisfaction. A factor analysis using principal axis factoring and Oblimin rotation suggests that a three-component solution is optimal with reliable constructs: *anger* (anger, bitterness, $\alpha = 0.79$), *fear* (worry, fear, $\alpha = 0.77$)[vii] and *positive emotions* (hope, relief, joy, satisfaction, $\alpha = 0.93$).

Political Trust. An index measuring respondents' trust in four key political institutions is included: "Could you indicate on a scale from 0 ('No trust at all') to 10 ('Complete trust') how much trust you personally have in each of the following institutions", namely political parties, federal parliament, politicians, and the European union ($\alpha = 0.93$). Higher scores reflect higher levels of political trust.

Populist Attitudes. Populism was measured by assessing respondents' agreement with three validated items that tap into the relationship between the elite and the people and adherence to the general will (Akkerman et al., 2014), ranging from 1 ("Fully disagree") to 5 ("Fully agree") "Politicians must follow the people's opinion"; "Political opposition is more present between citizens and the elite than between citizens themselves"; "I prefer being represented by an ordinary citizen rather than by a professional politician" ($\alpha = 0.93$). These items tap into the anti-elite component of voting for radical left and radical right parties.

External Political Efficacy. An index of external political efficacy was constructed by probing respondents' agreement with three items ranging from 1 ('Fully disagree') to 5 ('Fully agree'): (1) 'In general, our political system works honestly', (2) 'Our political

decision-making processes are sufficiently transparent', (3) 'In general, our political system works effectively'. These items form a reliable scale with higher scores reflecting higher levels of external political efficacy ($\alpha = 0.86$).

    Covariates. We have included a set of sociodemographic controls: age (continuous, in years), gender (binary, 0 = male, 1 = female), education (5-point scale from 1 'no or primary education' to 5 'university education', which was recoded to 3 categories to reflect low, middle and high educational level, which are included as dummies with the former as reference category). Political interest ('To what extent are you interested in politics in general?') is measured on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 ('Not at all') to 10 ('To a great deal'). Self-reported left-right orientation measured on an 11-point scale has been included too ("In politics, the terms 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' are often used. Can you place your own views on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means "left," 5 means "center," and 10 means "right"?). Two salient issue-based attitudes relevant for voting for the radical left or right are included. Both ideological positions capture the core issues of the radical parties investigated here (Goovaerts et al., 2020). The first statement measures respondents' ideological position on a major socio-economic issue: "Some people think that the government should intervene as little as possible in the economy, others think that the government should intervene as much as possible in the economy. Can you place your opinion on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that the government must intervene as little as possible and where 10 means that the government must intervene as much as possible?" Higher scores correspond to a more left-wing orientation. A second statement measures respondents' position on a key sociocultural issue, using the following statement regarding assimilation: "Some believe that non-western foreigners should be able to live in Europe while maintaining their own culture. Others believe that they must adapt to European culture. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that non-western foreigners must be able to fully retain their own

culture and 10 that they must fully adapt to European culture?" A higher score indicates a more ethnocentric position (Descriptives in Table A1).

Results

Multinomial Logistic Regression

We test H1 to H3 using multinomial logistic regression as the dependent variable is categorical (five categories: vote for radical left, greens, mainstream left, mainstream right and radical right, with the latter as reference category). We approach this in a stepwise manner (Table 1), via first estimating a model only including sociodemographics, political attitudes and issue positions (Model 1), after which we include the emotions (Model 2). This allows to assess changes in R^2 when introducing emotions, and to observe whether the results for the political attitudes and issue positions remain. Political attitudes and issue positions do explain vote choice (Model 1): voters for the radical right differ significantly from voters of radical left, green, mainstream left and right parties in terms of advocating for assimilation of immigrants. Voters for radical right parties report significantly lower political trust than green, mainstream left and right parties, while the difference with radical left voters is not significant. Similar results are present for external efficacy: voters of radical right parties report lower levels compared to green and mainstream left parties, the difference with the radical left and mainstream right not being significant. Voters of the radical right are significantly less likely to report populist attitudes compared to other voters.

Model 2 introduces emotions in the equation, resulting in a modest increase of the R^2. Voters of radical right parties report significantly higher levels of anger compared to green, mainstream left and mainstream right parties, while the difference with the radical left is not significant. There are no significant differences for fear. Finally, compared to voters of the radical right, voters of mainstream right parties are more likely to report positive emotions (but not compared to radical left voters). Almost all effects (on left-right orientation, issue

positions, political attitudes in terms of trust, external efficacy, populist attitudes) remain

while introducing emotions into the model. Hence, H1 is confirmed; H2 and H3 are rejected.

The effects of both factors relating to attitudes (trust, external efficacy, populist attitudes) and

issue positions (support for assimilation) and an affective component (anger) each offer an

independent explanation to voting behavior.

Table 1.

Explaining Vote Choice for the radical right, radical left and mainstream parties during 2019 Federal Elections in Belgium.

Dependent variable: Vote choice Chamber in Wave 2 (ref.: vote for radical right)	Radical left vote				Green vote			
	Model I		Model II		Model I		Model II	
	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p
Sociodemographics								
Age (in years)	-0.003(0.008)	0.676	-0.005(0.008)	0.520	0.008(0.006)	0.214	0.005(0.007)	0.420
Female	-0.264(0.240)	0.272	-0.205(0.244)	0.402	0.092(0.205)	0.653	0.135(0.210)	0.521
Education (ref.: none or primary education)								
Secondary education	0.461(0.593)	0.437	0.491(0.596)	0.411	0.966(0.497)	0.052	0.909(0.497)	0.067
Tertiary education	0.455(0.622)	0.465	0.461(0.627)	0.462	1.820(0.518)***	<0.001	1.734(0.519)***	<0.001
Political interest	0.111(0.045)*	0.014	0.116(0.046)*	0.012	0.058(0.040)	0.150	0.075(0.041)	0.066
Self-reported left-right orientation	-1.034(0.066)***	< 0.001	-0.997(0.066)***	<0.001	-0.899(0.059)***	<0.001	-0.862(0.059)***	<0.001
Political attitudes and issue positions								
Support for income equality	0.013(0.056)	0.810	0.014(0.057)	0.806	0.043(0.052)	0.408	0.056(0.053)	0.293
Support for assimilation to culture	-0.244(0.051)***	< 0.001	-0.223(0.052)***	<0.001	-0.213(0.043)***	<0.001	-0.183(0.046)***	<0.001
Trust	0.135(0.072)	0.060	0.085(0.085)	0.316	0.342(0.062)***	<0.001	0.312(0.074)***	<0.001
External efficacy	0.239(0.194)	0.219	0.174(0.204)	0.392	0.620(0.167)***	<0.001	0.527(0.173)***	<0.001
Populist attitudes	1.764(0.258)***	< 0.001	1.824(0.264)***	<0.001	0.823(0.220)***	<0.001	0.950(0.226)***	<0.001
Emotions								
Fear			0.002(0.068)	0.973			0.004(0.062)	0.949
Anger			-0.052(0.073)	0.479			-0.177(0.064)***	0.006
Positive emotions			0.099(0.087)	0.251			0.014(0.074)	0.852

	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p
Dutch-speaking	-3.198(0.285)***	<0.001	-3.161(0.286)***	<0.001	-2.721(0.259)***	<0.001	-2.649(0.259)***	<0.001
Constant	1.344(1.491)	0.367	0.998(1.521)	0.512	1.177(1.284)	0.359	1.515(1.295)	0.242

	Mainstream left vote				Mainstream right vote			
	Model I		Model II		Model I		Model II	
	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p	B(S.E.)	p
Sociodemographics								
Age (in years)	0.026(0.007)***	<0.001	0.025(0.007)***	<0.001	0.038(0.005)***	<0.001	0.035(0.006)***	<0.001
Female	-0.002(0.211)	0.993	0.040(0.216)	0.852	0.414(0.169)*	0.015	0.538(0.176)**	0.002
Education (ref.: none or primary education)								
Secondary education	0.665(0.467)	0.155	0.632(0.467)	0.176	1.593(0.396)***	<0.001	1.548(0.393)***	<0.001
Tertiary education	0.640(0.497)	0.198	0.609(0.499)	0.222	2.136(0.419)***	<0.001	2.082(0.418)***	<0.001
Political interest	0.032(0.041)	0.429	0.046(0.042)	0.266	0.069(0.032)*	0.032	0.096(0.034)**	0.005
Self-reported left-right orientation	-1.063(0.061)***	<0.001	-1.024(0.061)***	<0.001	-0.350(0.049)***	<0.001	-0.315(0.050)***	<0.001
Political attitudes and issue positions								
Support for income equality	0.020(0.053)	0.710	0.022(0.054)	0.685	-0.061(0.040)	0.128	-0.042(0.042)	0.313
Support for assimilation to culture	-0.147(0.047)**	0.002	-0.127(0.048)**	0.008	-0.130(0.037)***	<0.001	-0.095(0.037)*	0.011
Trust	0.269(0.063)***	<0.001	0.222(0.075)**	0.003	0.357(0.050)***	<0.001	0.248(0.061)***	<0.001
External efficacy	0.679(0.172)***	<0.001	0.585(0.178)**	0.001	0.446(0.137)***	0.001	0.244(0.144)	0.089
Populist attitudes	0.696(0.227)**	0.002	0.798(0.232)***	<0.001	0.002(0.178)	0.990	0.253(0.185)	0.171
Emotions								
Fear			0.072(0.064)	0.256			-0.062(0.052)	0.234
Anger			-0.184(0.066)**	0.005			-0.201(0.054)***	<0.001
Positive emotions			0.054(0.076)	0.473			0.173(0.063)**	0.006
Dutch-speaking	-3.000(0.263)***	<0.001	-2.921(0.264)***	<0.001	-1.653(0.235)***	<0.001	-1.645(0.236)***	<0.001
Constant	2.201(0.007)	0.091	2.238(1.316)	0.089	-0.512(1.074)	0.633	-0.257(1.089)	0.813
-2 log likelihood	4772.0						4702.8	
R^2 Cox & Snell	54.2%		55.6%					

| Nagelkerke R^2 | 57.7% | 59.2% |

Note: Results from a multinomial regression. Entries are logit coefficients, standard errors (S.E.) and p-values (p). Sign.: [*]<0.05; [**]<0.01; [***]<0.001. N=3,236.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to disentangle how negative and positive discrete emotions are related to voting for radical left and radical right parties. Findings reveal a significant relationship between anger and voting for radical parties. Anger appears as an independent explanation, even when other traditional determinants are included (sociodemographics, political attitudes and issue positions). Hence, anger is an extra layer in models of voting for radical parties. It unites voters for both radical left and right parties. Both voter bases seem fed up with politics and experience feelings of anger and bitterness when they think about politics. Anger, hence, is clearly the dominant emotion: fear and positive emotions do not trigger similar reactions. The central role for anger as opposed to other emotions corroborates prior studies on voting for the radical right (Rico et al., 2017, 2019; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019).

This points to a significant role of affective components in voting behavior, next to attitudinal drivers. Anger is a typical moral emotion (Rico et al., 2017) stemming from perceptions that a given situation is unfair or illegitimate, and when 'exit options' are less available. Due to the compulsory voting in our case study, voters do not have the option to "exit" (i.e., not turnout), which could play a role as to why anger is mostly captured by radical left and radical right parties, while in other countries this may be partly captured by those that did not turn out. Following cognitive appraisal theory, anger finds a fertile breeding ground when voters have a clear idea of the cause of a specific threat and source for a blame attribution. Radical left and right parties –in Belgium, but also more broadly— tend to mobilize on blaming different types of elites for what is going wrong in society (Magni, 2017; Rico et al., 2017). This could explain why fear is a less relevant emotion in explaining the vote for radical left and right parties, as fear is typically expected to arise mostly in cases where no clear agents or sources are to blame – which does not seem to hold in the Belgian

context. Moreover, (the lack of) positive emotions do(es) not seem to drive the vote for

radical left and radical right parties. We expected positive emotions, as they typically entail a

prospective outlook for the future, to be negatively associated with voting for radical parties.

While controlling for alternative explanations (i.e., trust, efficacy, populist attitudes, issue

position), positive emotions were not associated with voting for radical parties. Instead, its

effect seems to be grasped already by several cognitive components (such as political trust).

All in all, only anger seems to be a factor that drives the vote for radical parties on top of

attitudinal drivers and key issue positions.

Second, it is remarkable that the effects that we found are rather consistent for both the

radical left and radical right. These parties tend to canalize dissatisfaction with the political

elite, blaming them for what is going wrong in society (Delwit, 2021; Van Haute & Pauwels,

2016). In their rhetoric, leaders of these parties –spurred by the social media revolution—

engage regularly in negative campaigning and attack politics, via presenting politics as a

battle between people and the elite. Hence, our findings corroborate prior research which has

found that radical parties tend to make more regular use of negative emotions (Widmann,

2021), which translates into the role of anger as an affective component explaining voting

behavior. While prior studies have mostly focused on radical right parties, our study suggests

that a similar mechanism is at play for the radical left.

While anger seems to drive voting for radical left and radical right parties on top of

other attitudinal determinants, trust and populist attitudes matter as well. Still, some political

attitudes (external political efficacy, populist attitudes), seem to affect voting for specific

parties differently, which should encourage scholars to consider the origin and broader

identity of the radical parties in their political and media contexts. We found that populist

attitudes drive the vote for radical left parties, but not radical right parties. This could be due

to the fact that VB has gone through a normalization and institutionalization process: it has

been present as a relevant actor in the federal and regional legislative assemblies, and the

media since the 1990s. Elites from VB may be perceived positively by voters, and could

appear as professional politicians able to represent their interests and preferences. Hence, lack

of external efficacy and populist attitudes may have limited and even unexpected effects on

voting for radical parties that are well-represented in the parliament and are visible in the

mass media. Another potential explanation of the unexpected effect of populist attitudes on

the radical right vote pertains to the electoral context: the country was governed by a right-

wing coalition for five years, driving resentment among (voters of) parties of the left in the

opposition. Populist attitudes are more associated with voting for these parties: the attitudes

that we measured as 'populist' may be a result of resentment toward the government and not

of a rejection of political elites in general.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. Future studies may want to clarify how

emotions and anger interact with attitudinal drivers of voting for radical right parties (e.g.,

anti-elitism, people-centrism). Furthermore, we were not able to explore the reciprocal,

bidirectional or causal relationship between emotions and the vote for radical parties, which

presents a major limitation. In line with prior studies drawing on cross-lagged models

showing that some political attitudes (e.g., political discontent, nativism) are both cause and

consequence of the rise of populist parties (Harteveld et al., 2017; Rooduijn et al., 2016),

future studies may want to explore evidence of a reciprocal relationship. While our study

suggests that angry voters are more likely to vote for radical parties, this does not rule out the

possibility that radical parties–via their rhetoric, communication style, blaming elites— may

themselves induce anger, suggesting a reinforcing spiral. Given this unidirectional test and

our impossibility to assess a reciprocal relationship, the effects may be overestimated. We

should therefore be cautious while interpreting them. Moreover, we tested effects in only one

specific country context for both radical left and right political parties. While the results

corroborate studies assessing emotions in other contexts (Rico et al., 2017, 2019;

Vasilopoulos et al., 2019), further replication in other contexts and using parties with a

distinct history or ideology is needed. Besides, findings may be hardly generalizable to other

contexts, given the Belgian system of compulsory voting. Prior research has verified that lack

of exit options seems related to political distrust (Hooghe et al., 2011), while our current

analysis suggests that radical parties also attract a high share of angry voters. Still, for now,

our findings indicate that anger should not be overlooked while assessing electoral behavior

for *both* radical left and radical right parties, even while controlling for alternative

explanations. Anger drives the vote for radical parties on both the left and right sides of the

political spectrum, but its modalities are complex and the causality is difficult to prove, urging

for future in-depth investigation on how anger interacts with key attitudinal drivers of voting

behavior.

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i *Parti du Travail de Belgique-Partij van de Arbeid*– Labour Party of Belgium.

ii *Vlaams Belang* – Flemish Interest.

iii *Parti Populaire* – Popular Party.

iv The small (less than 1% of the population) German-speaking community in the East of the country also has a specific party system for local elections; still, these German-speaking parties do not play any crucial role at the federal level.

v We estimated separate models for the Dutch- and French-speaking party systems (1,843 respondents for the Dutch-speaking sample for the models predicting VB votes; 1,548 for PVDA; respectively 1,290 (for PP) and 1,461 (for PTB) for the French-speaking sample, which shows that effects mostly pertain to the largest parties in the respective party systems (i.e., VB in Flanders; PTB in Wallonia).

vi Belgium has a compulsory voting system where voters are obliged to turn out: the number of respondents that did not vote is rather low, which is visible in our data.

vii In a principal components analysis, fear and anger also score on one dimension (Online Supplementary Files). Given the distinct theoretical expectations, we tested them as separate distinct emotions. Findings confirm that both operate differently. A 'negative emotions' variable without distinguishing between fear and anger is significant, but this result is, as more fine-grained models show, driven by anger. We report both anger and fear separately as taking them together would distort these findings. Including anger and fear separately (without controlling for each other) confirms anger drives the results.