

FEAR IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: EMPHASIS ON FEAR OF UNKNOWN

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Abstract

Politics involves emotions (Redlawsk, 2006) and reasoning (Redlawsk & Pierce, 2017). The study of political communication campaigns generally follows two directions (Weber, 2007): emotional valence (positive and negative campaigns) and the impact of enthusiasm and fear. The modern founder of this latter direction is considered to be political psychologist and scholar Ted Brader. If the political communication process is filled with content and imagery associated with success and aimed at evoking enthusiasm, voter motivation to engage in the political process increases, reinforcing existing beliefs and making political decisions based on these beliefs—such as voting for a candidate. Conversely, if the political communication process is filled with content and imagery associated with fear, voter motivation increases to reconsider existing beliefs and encourage reassessment of their choices based on current evaluations. The analysis of threat perception is central to understanding Brader's findings. Moreover, the perception of threat can have both direct and indirect impacts on political behavior. The hypothesis of this paper suggests that negative emotions require more differentiation to have an indirect influence on political behavior as clear and distinct as direct influence: the likelihood of predicting political behavior through the political communication process will increase, and the political communication process will become more precise. Based on a qualitative content analysis of the Georgian Dream Party statements, this paper hypothesizes that if we do not limit our response to threats solely to fear (Brader & Marcus, 2013) but also consider the fear of unknown, we can better highlight the indirect influence on political participation and engagement, significantly narrowing the field of interpretation in the political communication process.

Keywords: *Political communication, fear, content analysis.*

1. Introduction & literature review

Fear of the unknown refers to anxiety around unpredictable situations or events. It can also link to things that people find unfamiliar or strange. Individuals are likely to experience fear of the unknown when there is a lack of information. Another name for the condition is intolerance of uncertainty.

Intolerance of uncertainty (IU) has been extensively studied in political psychology, revealing significant influences on political beliefs and behaviors.

(i) Association with Political Conservatism – Research indicates that individuals with higher needs to manage uncertainty and threat are more likely to exhibit conservative political orientations. This suggests that conservatism may offer psychological comfort by providing clear structures and resistance to change.

(ii) Neural Processing and Political Polarization - Research indicates that intolerance of uncertainty can modulate brain-to-brain synchrony during exposure to political content. Individuals with higher IU levels tend to process political information in a more polarized manner, aligning their neural responses more closely with like-minded individuals.

(iii) Perception of Threat and Policy Preferences - Individuals with high IU are more likely to perceive the world as dangerous, which can lead to stronger support for policies emphasizing security and nationalism. This heightened threat perception influences attitudes toward immigration and international relations.

(iv) Belief in Conspiracy Theories - IU has been linked to the endorsement of conspiracy theories. The need for certainty drives some individuals to accept simplistic explanations for complex events, making them more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking.

(v) Impact on Political Engagement - High levels of IU can lead to political disengagement or extreme partisanship. The discomfort with uncertainty may cause individuals to avoid political participation or, conversely, to adopt rigid ideological positions to mitigate uncertainty.

These examples underscore the pivotal role that intolerance of uncertainty plays in shaping political attitudes and behaviors, influencing everything from ideological leanings to susceptibility to misinformation.

Ted Brader's work on fear and enthusiasm in political psychology, particularly in his book "Campaigning for Hearts and Minds (2006)", explores how emotional appeals shape political behavior. While intolerance of uncertainty (IU) is not a primary focus of his work, there are strong theoretical connections between IU and Brader's findings on fear and enthusiasm in politics.

(i) Fear and IU – Brader's research shows that fear-based political ads make people more vigilant, leading them to seek out more information and reconsider their political choices. Individuals with high IU, however, may respond differently—they may avoid uncertain or ambiguous political messages altogether, or they may gravitate toward strong, authoritative figures who promise stability.

(ii) Enthusiasm and IU – Brader argues that enthusiasm reinforces existing political loyalties and encourages participation. For those with high IU, enthusiastic messaging that offers certainty and clear political direction (e.g., strong party identity or nationalism) may be particularly persuasive.

(iii) Threat Perception and IU – Brader's work aligns with research showing that IU is linked to heightened threat sensitivity. If a political campaign uses fear effectively, people with high IU might be more likely to support policies or candidates that promise security and order.

While Brader himself may not have explicitly studied IU, his work on emotion in political campaigns intersects with how uncertainty intolerance shapes political behavior.

While there is no direct research linking intolerance of uncertainty (IU) with Ted Brader's specific studies on fear and enthusiasm in political campaigns, related research indicates that individuals with high IU may respond differently to emotional political messages. For instance, studies have shown that fear and anxiety can influence political decision-making, potentially affecting how individuals with high IU process political information.

Additionally, research on how the brain responds to politically charged information suggests that individuals with high IU may process such information differently, which could influence their reactions to fear-based and / or enthusiasm-based political messages.

These insights suggest that IU could play a role in moderating responses to emotional appeals in political campaigns, aligning with the mechanisms identified in Brader's research.

2. Theoretical framework & main questions

Paper analyzes Georgian Dream's political rhetoric and pivotal speeches in consolidating power through the fear of the unknown. It heavily depends on two main theoretical frameworks: (i) psychological conditioning and (ii) political framing.

Psychological conditioning and political psychology are deeply connected, as conditioning shapes how individuals form political beliefs, react to political stimuli, and engage in civic behavior. Essentially, political systems leverage psychological conditioning to influence behavior, from voting habits to ideological rigidity.

In the context of Ted Brader's groundbreaking framework of Fear vs. Enthusiasm, three types of conditioning are especially interesting: (a) operant conditioning and political engagement - for example, negative reinforcement, like public shaming or legal penalties, may discourage political dissent or opposition; (b) social conditioning and ideological loyalty - for example, media conditioning through repeated messaging can create echo chambers and reinforce political polarization, and (c) fear conditioning and political manipulation - for example, fear-based conditioning makes people more likely to support authoritarian policies or surrender civil liberties in exchange for security.

Candidates have clear incentives to use appeals intended to stir an emotional response in the audience (Jerit 2004; Brader 2005, 2006; Crigler, Just, and Belt 1996) – for instance in terms of mobilizing the crowds by drumming up enthusiasm, or in persuading undecided voters by triggering anxiety on relevant issues. Using emotions to give messages a distinctive "branding" and to "affectively connect" with voters is, of course, not a new approach (Nai, Maier 2021).

When it comes to the role of emotions in politics, consistent evidence shows their centrality for exposure to (and processing of) political information (Redlawsk 2006; Valentino et al. 2008; Nai et al., 2017), cognition (Kühne et al. 2011; Miller 2011), political attitudes (Vasilopoulos, Marcus, and Foucault 2018), and voting choices (Marcus 2000; MacKuen et al. 2010). This being said, much less evidence exists from the supply side; to what extent do politicians rely on emotional messages when competing for public office?

Paper relies on cognitive and affective dimensions of political conceptualization while analyzing Georgian Dream's pre-election (October 2024) and post-election rhetoric.

The main questions of the research are:

- ✓ Does fear based on conspiracy trigger / reinforce intolerance of uncertainty?
- ✓ Does intolerance of uncertainty in politics lead to / reinforce political polarization?
- ✓ Does political polarization challenge Ted Brader's paradigm of fear vs. enthusiasm?

This paper believes that without distinct answers to these questions, Ted Brader's framework tends to be reductionist, seeking to isolate root causes in the characteristics of individual voters or single pathways. This paradigm is very rich and productive, and it has produced some of the field's most enduring findings, including Ted Brader's groundbreaking research. But it is also quite constraining, as scholars in this paradigm seek to demonstrate that one specific set of predictors is truly foundational. These quests for foundational causes often end up ignoring the mediating and moderating processes that may well have more important effects than the foundations.

3. Main findings & analysis

Georgian Dream officials, particularly Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze and the Honorary Chair of the Georgian Dream Bidzina Ivanishvili, have frequently invoked the terms "Global War Party" and "Deep State" in their political discourse. These terms are used to describe alleged entities influencing global conflicts and Georgian politics and to induce the fear of the unknown in voters.

Irakli Kobakhidze's Mentions:

- December 2024: Kobakhidze expressed support for Donald Trump's efforts to dismantle the "Deep State," suggesting that its defeat would benefit Georgia's interests.
- December 2024: He referred to the "Global War Party," accusing it of instigating global conflicts and asserting that defeating it was crucial for Georgia's well-being.
- May 2024: Kobakhidze accused the "Global War Party" of orchestrating the attempted assassination of Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, further alleging that such entities threaten political figures opposing their agendas.
- July 2024: He claimed that the "Global War Party" was responsible for the first assassination attempt against Donald Trump, highlighting the group's alleged reach and influence.

Bidzina Ivanishvili's Mentions:

- April 2024: At a rally, Ivanishvili accused the "Global War Party" of preventing Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO, suggesting that this exclusion left them vulnerable to Russian aggression.

These instances underscore Georgian Dream officials' consistent use of "Global War Party" and "Deep State" to articulate their perspectives on international influence and domestic political dynamics.

Qualitative content analysis of these speeches from the highest hierarchy of the Georgian Dream and statements from the major opposition parties and CSOs show that Georgian Dream's political rhetoric has historically relied on a mix of political frames. Their prioritization tends to shift depending on the political climate; however, their general messaging strategies reveal a certain common pattern. Paper considers 5 most prevalent frames (Just, Crigler, Neuman 2006) that illustrate how affect is so closely bound to the cognitive structure of political understanding. Georgian Dream primarily operates through an Us-Them and Control lens, ensuring they maintain political dominance by discrediting opponents and presenting themselves as the guarantors of stability. Economic rhetoric serves as a supporting narrative, while human impact is largely secondary.

3.1. Example: Analyzing GD political council statement

The statement is a strongly worded political document that employs conspiracy-laden rhetoric, emphasizing themes of fear, global war party, conspiracy, peace, opposition, and Europe.

Below is a content analysis based on these key themes.

Fear - is a dominant emotional appeal throughout the text. The statement suggests that Georgia is under existential threat from external forces, primarily Western institutions allegedly controlled by the "global war party" and the "deep state." The document frequently warns of "sanctions, war, and the loss of sovereignty", portraying Georgia as a besieged nation resisting foreign coercion. Fear is reinforced through references to Ukraine's destruction, the imposition of economic hardships, and the supposed goal of turning Georgia into a second war front.

Example: "The threats that were once whispered behind closed doors have now been made public: 'Either you go to war, or we will punish you.'"

This sentence portrays Western actors as making ultimatums, attempting to force Georgia into a war against its will, reinforcing fear of external control and national destruction.

Global War Party - is the central antagonist in this statement. It is framed as a transnational force that manipulates countries into war for its own interests. The statement attributes wars in “Ukraine and other parts of the world” to this entity, arguing that Georgia has so far resisted becoming another victim.

Example: "The global war party can only manipulate the views of a small minority. The supporters of the collective National Movement—the local war party—are being pitted against their own country’s national interests."

This passage equates internal opposition groups with the "global war party," painting them as traitors rather than legitimate political competitors.

Conspiracy - the statement heavily relies on conspiracy narratives, particularly the existence of a "deep state" that secretly controls governments, media, and financial institutions. The deep state is portrayed as a shadowy, unelected force that overrides democratic decision-making. It is alleged to have manipulated Ukraine into war, orchestrated economic crises in the EU, and seeks to punish Georgia for refusing to submit to its agenda.

Example: "President Trump stated even before the election that 'either America will destroy the 'deep state' or the 'deep state' will destroy America.'"

This reference to Trump’s rhetoric aligns Georgia’s struggles with the broader global battle against the so-called deep state, reinforcing the idea of a hidden elite working against national interest.

Peace - while the statement condemns Western institutions, it presents the current Georgian leadership as the sole force protecting peace. Peace is framed as Georgia’s most valuable achievement under its government, and the West is accused of trying to undermine it by pushing Georgia into war with Russia. The opposition is cast as a "war party" attempting to drag the country into conflict.

Example: "Ultimately, no amount of sanctions will intimidate the Georgian people, who understand well that no sanction can compare to the destruction of their country."

Here, peace is equated with the refusal to engage in conflict, implying that Western actors seek to destroy Georgia through war.

Opposition - the statement presents opposition groups as Western puppets rather than legitimate political actors. It characterizes them as part of the "local war party", working against Georgia’s national interests. The document claims they lack independent thought and are unwilling to debate government representatives, implying cowardice and subservience to foreign powers.

Example: "Unfortunately, their servile mindset prevents them from critically assessing the actions of American and European bureaucracies."

This framing suggests that opposition figures are brainwashed or compromised, rather than political actors with genuine concerns.

Europe - the European Union is depicted as being in “a state of decline, manipulated by the deep state, and acting against its own interests”. The statement criticizes the European Parliament’s resolutions against Georgia and claims that most European countries are not sovereign but merely follow the deep state’s orders. However, it does not outright reject the idea of European integration. Instead, it suggests that Europe must first "cleans itself” of the deep state before Georgia can truly align with it.

Example: "We hope that by 2030, the EU will have fully overcome informal oligarchic influence and the 'deep state' problem, creating the right conditions for Georgia’s EU membership."

This line implies that while Georgia still seeks EU integration, it will only do so under conditions that align with its current government’s vision—one in which Europe is free from alleged deep-state influence.

To conclude, this statement constructs a narrative of Georgia as a besieged but resilient nation, resisting a powerful, hidden elite that seeks to “drag it into war”. It heavily relies on conspiracy theories about the "global war party" and "deep state," blaming Western institutions for economic hardships, international conflicts, and political interference. The opposition is dismissed as foreign-controlled, and peace is framed as a government achievement that the West wants to sabotage. This rhetoric aligns with broader populist and anti-globalist narratives, which often depict elites, foreign powers, and internal opposition as threats to national sovereignty.

4. Summary & discussion

Georgian Dream's messaging is strategically crafted to consolidate domestic support, vilify opposition figures, and create an "us vs. them" mentality, portraying the government as a defender of peace and independence.

Georgian Dream in all the analyzed statements appeals to fear, nationalism, and anti-Western sentiment while still leaving the door open for a "future, reformed EU integration". This, in its turn, creates ambiguity, triggers intolerance of uncertainty, leading to permanent, non-stop strikes against the rule of Georgian Dream for well over 100 days; despite severe crackdowns and disproportionately high penalties.

Back to the main questions highlighted in the paper - in all cases the answer is YES. The next step of the study could be testing them as hypotheses and possibly, build a new framework, where intolerance of uncertainty could play a moderating role.

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