

# Coping with Politics: The Benefits and Costs of Emotion Regulation

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Politics permeates everyday life, often evoking negative emotions among the public and affecting their well-being. Politics has, in essence, become a chronic stressor for many. Fortunately, people can protect themselves from politics: people commonly employ emotion regulation strategies to help reduce their negative emotional responses to politics and thereby protect emotional well-being. However, this protection may also come at a cost when people lose their affectively-driven motivation to take action aimed at changing the political system that evoked the negative emotions in the first place. Here, we review the recent literature examining emotion regulation and political action, considering both the benefits and costs of emotion regulation. Finally, we outline several important unresolved questions to guide future research.

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Politics permeates everyday life: It dominates most news cycles, and much of pop culture. It shapes people's social networks, even their workplaces. For many, politics has become a marker of who they are and what they stand for. At times, politics is a source of friendship and connection, evoking feelings of joy and satisfaction. More often, though, it is a source of negative emotions, such as anger, outrage, and anxiety [1]. In fact, politics can be a chronic stressor that impairs people's well-being. In this way, for many, the pervasiveness of politics has become a serious problem.

Though distressing, experiencing negative emotions about politics can serve an important function: Such emotions motivate people to engage in political action [2••]. Political action – volunteering, protesting, donating,

contacting representatives – is integral to democratic societies because it gives voice to those suffering injustices and represents a pathway to change for those dissatisfied with the status quo [3]. Negative emotions among the public, thus, can play a crucial role in functioning democracies, suggesting that even when unpleasant to experience, negative emotions are an important and useful part of political life.

Importantly, even though negative emotions can be productive at times, they are also unpleasant, which commonly motivates the use of emotion regulation strategies to manage the emotions. Particular emotion regulation strategies can indeed effectively reduce unpleasant emotions and in turn help protect people's overall well-being [4,5]. However, using these strategies in the face of political stress may come with a trade-off: as they reduce negative emotional responses to politics and protect well-being, they can also reduce the underlying force that motivates people to take political action aimed at changing the political system that evoked the emotions in the first place.

In this review, we briefly discuss the links between negative emotion and political action. We then discuss the evidence that people use emotion regulation to effectively manage their emotional responses to politics, and consider both the pros and cons of this regulation. We end by highlighting several unresolved questions representing fruitful avenues for future research.

## Politics, Negative Emotion, and Action

Americans commonly experience negative emotion in response to political events. For example, partisans feel strongly negative when their party loses an election, as assessed with both psychological and physiological markers [6,7]. People also experience negative emotion far in advance of elections. For example, in 2019, 56% of U.S. voters reported that the upcoming 2020 election was a significant source of stress, a full year before the election [8]. More generally, 81% of the public reported feeling angry or dissatisfied with “Washington D.C.” in 2018 and just 3% reported feeling happy [9]. These emotions are also not new: Across more than ten years of polling starting in 2006, the percentage of Americans who feel frustrated or angry with the government has been consistently high (73%-86%) while the percentage who feels ‘basically content’ has been consistently low (11%-22%; [1]). These patterns also extend deeply into daily life: In a recent two-week daily diary study, 91% of people felt at

least *some* negative emotion about U.S. politics at least half of the days and 41% of people felt *strong* negative emotion about U.S. politics at least half of the days [10]. Moreover, these negative emotions were linked with worse well-being, predicting lower daily psychological and physical health.

Fortunately, emotions – even negative ones – help us take action to respond adaptively to our environment [11,12]. The fact that negative emotions provide powerful motivation for action has long been recognized by scholars of political action. Political action occurs when individuals engage in any action to achieve group goals in a political context [13]. This action comes in many forms, including posting one’s support for political policies on social media, donating to a political campaign, and even taking to the streets in protest. Research using both experimental designs and field studies has repeatedly demonstrated that negative emotion powerfully predicts political action [14–16]. Although this work has often examined anger, research has also found that other negative emotions – including fear and even sadness – can promote political action as well [14,16]. However, even if these negative emotions provide motivational benefits, they are still unpleasant for people to experience, and therefore commonly lead individuals to find ways to manage them or avoid them altogether.

### Coping with the Stress of Politics

To better understand how people’s negative emotions shape their political action, we must first grapple with people’s inherent motivation to protect their emotional well-being [17<sup>•</sup>,18]. Any analysis that emphasizes the role of negative emotion in predicting political action would be incomplete without acknowledging the role that emotion regulation undoubtedly plays as these processes unfold in daily life (Figure 1, Panel A): When facing distress, people often aim to feel better (i.e., activating a hedonically-oriented emotion regulation goal) which activates the search for an emotion regulation strategy to meet that goal [19].

To anticipate which strategies people are likely to use to manage emotions about politics, it is useful to consider politics as a chronic stressor [20]. Akin to chronic stressors, politics represents hard-to-change systems that regularly evoke negative emotions among the public. When facing hard-to-change stressors, people often turn to methods of coping that involve adapting to the stressor by changing one’s emotions [21,22]. Fortunately, people have a variety of tools to change their emotions.

One particularly common and effective strategy is *cognitive reappraisal* – reframing situations in ways that change their emotional impact. Reappraisal can take on many specific forms, including rationalizing the status quo (e.g., system justification [23]), considering what can

be learned from the situation (e.g., meaning-making [24]), or minimizing the situation’s long-term implications (e.g., distancing [25]), and others [26,27]. In turn, reappraisal is used frequently in daily life [28] and especially when facing political stressors [2<sup>••</sup>,29<sup>••</sup>]: In a recent two-week daily diary study, 90% of the sample attempted reappraisal to manage their emotions about politics on at least half of the days and 56% attempted reappraisal every day [10]. Importantly, both experimental [2<sup>••</sup>] and longitudinal research [29<sup>••</sup>] indicates that reappraisal effectively lowers negative responses to political stressors. Another common strategy that people use to manage their emotions around politics is *distraction* – directing attention away from emotionally evocative political events [10,29<sup>••</sup>].

In a recent two-week daily diary study, 83% of the sample attempted distraction to manage their emotions about politics on at least half of the days and 48% attempted it every day [10]. Furthermore, in a nationally-representative sample, nearly 40% of respondents reported that they have taken steps within the past year to reduce their news consumption [8], likely as a strategy to redirect attention away from politics to protect their well-being. Although they are highly distinct strategies [30], distraction, like reappraisal, also effectively helps people feel better during stressful political times [10].

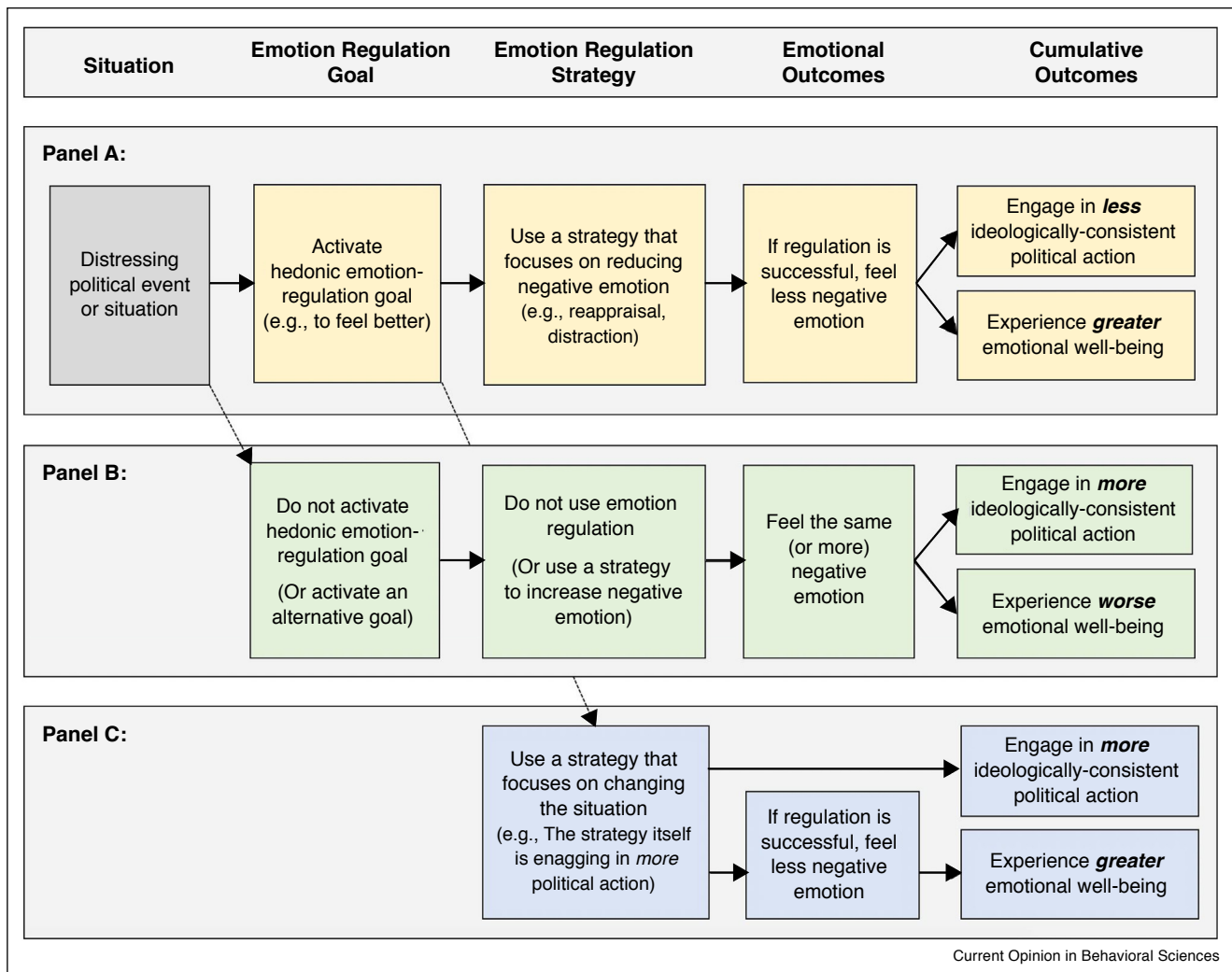
Taken together, this recent research indicates that people can successfully cope with the chronic stress of politics. This coping also carries important downstream consequences, as the ability to successfully manage emotions in daily life predicts longer-term well-being [4,31]. However, decreasing negative emotion can also decrease the motivational benefits associated with negative emotion (Figure 1, Panel A). As such, there may be a crucial trade-off between emotional well-being and political action aimed at changing the political system that evoked the negative emotions in the first place.

### The Trade-off of Protecting Oneself from Politics

When faced with a situation that could benefit from the motivation provided by negative emotion, there may be an important trade-off between engaging in emotion regulation to feel better and engaging in action to change the situation itself [32,33]. This trade-off may be particularly important within the context of political stressors, where individuals experience emotions that stem from their group identity and thus experience conflict between their personal motives (e.g., to feel better) and their group’s motives (e.g., to take collective action on behalf of the group [17<sup>••</sup>]).

Research indicates that individuals who successfully use effective forms of emotion regulation within politically-charged contexts do indeed feel better in the short run,

Figure 1



Conceptual depiction of the complex processes involved in coping with political stressors. Commonly, people use emotion regulation strategies to reduce negative emotions, which can come with a trade-off between emotional well-being and ideologically-consistent political action (**Panel A**). Alternatively, people may not activate a hedonic goal (e.g., not strive to feel better; **Panel B**) or may use different types of strategies (e.g., feel better by taking political action; **Panel C**), which would result in a different set of cumulative outcomes.

but are also less likely to engage in political action that supports their ideological views [2<sup>\*\*</sup>,10,34]. For example, cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies among those who voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential election found that successfully using reappraisal to manage emotions about the election and the Trump presidency predicted less political action (including traditional forms of collective action like protesting and volunteering, as well as non-traditional forms of modern action like online posting [2<sup>\*\*</sup>]). Such findings are consistent with a larger body of research indicating that the outcomes of any emotion regulation strategy depend on its context [35,36<sup>\*</sup>], and that even reappraisal can come with important costs when it is time to take action [32,37,38]

It is important to note that not all action is created equal – some forms of action can be counterproductive, oppressive, or even violent. Accordingly, it may be beneficial to use effective emotion regulation to reduce such forms of action (e.g., action rooted in bias towards outgroup members). For example, recent experimental research found that using reappraisal led American conservatives to have weaker opposition to marriage equality for the gay community [39], and led Israelis to have weaker support for hostile policies towards Palestinians [40]. These findings indicate that reappraisal can be a useful approach when attempting to compromise with outgroup members [41]. However, research also demonstrates that seeking harmony with outgroup members can lower individuals' motivation for broader social change [42,43]. Thus, while

reappraisal can help people compromise with “the other side”, it may also stall progress when “the other side” is in power – when social change will hinge upon challenging the status quo.

### Questions for Future Work

Here, we outline multiple directions for future research, highlighting five promising questions on the interplay between emotion regulation and political action that are particularly consequential to consider.

#### What about Positive Emotions?

Although reducing negative emotion is a common goal during times of stress, emotion regulation also helps people enhance positive emotion [44]. We would expect that feeling better about politics – whether by reducing negative emotion or by increasing positive emotion – would reduce people’s motivation to take action to challenge the status quo. However, one positive emotion – hope – could inspire action while also enhancing well-being. Hope hinges on believing that change is possible, and some research finds that hope mobilizes people to act [45]. However, the links between hope and political action are complex, with some evidence showing it has no effect or might even impair action [46,47]. Given this complexity, the field would benefit from a fulsome understanding of how the experience and regulation of hope and other positive emotions influences individuals’ well-being and political action tendencies.

#### Which Emotions Do People Want to Feel?

When considering the emotions people want to feel, we must recognize that people may *not want* to feel better when faced with distressing situations (see Figure 1, Panel B). People not only strive for emotions that feel good, they also strive for emotions that can be useful for the given context, whether pleasant or unpleasant [48]. For example, when their group is under threat, people are motivated to feel existential concern (i.e., angst) about their group’s longevity [49] – an emotional experience that promotes ingroup-protective action. In cases like these, people may experience an inverse trade-off: *greater* motivation to take political action but potentially *worse* downstream emotional well-being as individuals accumulate greater degrees of negative emotion. It is worth noting, however, that if people regularly experience negative emotions that are evaluated positively or experienced as somewhat pleasant (e.g., righteous anger), it may be possible to avoid a cumulative cost to well-being [50].

#### Can Political Action Itself Be a Form of Regulation?

People frequently regulate their emotions with strategies that involve adapting to a stressor (e.g., using reappraisal to change one’s perspective on the stressor). However, people can also powerfully shape their emotions by targeting the stressor itself [19,22]. In the domain of political stress, people could engage in political action

as a method of regulating their emotions (Figure 1, Panel C). For instance, an individual may find herself so frustrated with a politician that she canvasses a swing district for his opponent. Taking this action might help alleviate her frustration and therefore bolster her well-being. If so, engaging in action as a successful form of emotion regulation may help avoid the trade-off between well-being and action.

While this pattern is promising, action may not be a viable regulation option for many people who lack the knowledge, connections, and resources that facilitate political action. After all, those who suffer most from politics are often also the ones with the least free time and money to invest in taking action. Even people with resources may still opt to feel better via easy-to-use strategies like reappraisal and distraction given how frequently people feel negative emotion about politics [1], and how relatively infrequently opportunities for political action arise. Given this complexity, future research is crucially needed to better understand the dynamic, bidirectional, and overlapping links between emotion, emotion regulation, and political action in daily life [51,52].

#### Do Other People Regulate our Emotions about Politics?

For better or worse, many people have a vested interest in our emotional experiences. Just as we try to regulate our own emotions, other people try to regulate our emotions as well. This regulation can occur on a dyadic level [53,54], as when friends comfort one another after their party loses an election, but can also happen on a much larger scale [17\*\*], as when politicians try to inspire a nation’s hope. Activists, in particular, may be motivated to stoke outrage to promote political engagement and can achieve this aim by capitalizing on reappraisal’s ability to *increase* negative emotional experiences [55] (e.g., by persuading individuals to reframe upsetting political events in even stronger and more personally-relevant ways). Emotion regulation is not merely a personal process that each individual manages on their own – regulation is also unfolding on a national scale [56]. Assessing the scope of the power of emotion regulation represents an impactful avenue for future work.

#### How Can an Emotion-Regulation Perspective Enhance our Understanding of Politics?

The field of emotion regulation is full of nuanced theoretical models and sophisticated empirical approaches that can clarify and expand our understanding of the interplay between emotion and politics. The field provides frameworks and methods to systematically test *why* people regulate [48], *what* forms of emotion regulation are most common [19], and both *when* and *how* particular strategies work best [52] – all of which can illuminate the emotional dynamics unfolding around politics. Through unifying language and theory, this work can build connections with other fields that are also grappling

with regulation processes: For example, there is a useful bridge to build between emotion regulation and system justification given that system justification (e.g., reconstructing the political status quo in positive ways) represents a powerful way in which people can manage their emotions about politics. Using the theories and tools of emotion regulation research, we can build precise, mechanistic, dynamic models of how people regulate their emotions about politics – and the crucial outcomes of that regulation.

### Concluding Comment

Although politics often resembles a chronic stressor, people have the tools to regulate that stress. Successfully managing this stress, however, can come with a crucial trade-off: Commonly-used forms of emotion regulation can protect individual well-being, but can also come at a cost to collective political action that challenges the status quo. Only by understanding the complex interplay between emotion, emotion regulation, and political action can we hope to optimize *both* well-being and productive political action moving forward.

### Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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