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Express Yourself? Political Conversation, Emotion Regulation, and the Expression of Political Emotions

CHRISTINA M. HENRY
WILLIAM P. EVELAND, JR.
The Ohio State University, USA

This study answers two key questions: (1) *which* emotions lead to *what* kinds of political talk and (2) *when* do these emotions lead to political talk? We employ a novel approach to understanding the relationship between emotion and communication by assessing the role of emotion regulation (ER) ability and group-based motives for regulation, using Intergroup Emotions Theory and theories of motivated emotion regulation. Using a nationally representative sample of parents during the 2016 U.S. election, we find that the link between emotion and talk depends on the kind of talk considered, the type of emotion, and its consistency with one's partisan identity. We discuss the utility of these approaches in specifying the relationship between emotion and communication and the implications of an ER approach for communication across contexts and modalities. This study contributes to a theoretical understanding of emotion and talk in a highly partisan and polarized context.

Keywords: political communication, motivations for discussion, emotion, affective intelligence theory

Politics today is often deeply emotional. Indeed, the nature of the current political environment has prompted some scholars to view politics as akin to a "chronic stressor," because political events regularly produce strong emotions that individuals must try to manage (Ford & Feinberg, 2020, p. 124). Emotion regulation is a central concept that explains how individuals manage their emotions in daily life. It is a process in which there is a goal to change or sustain one's emotional state through the utilization of various strategies to reach this goal. Although recent research has investigated how emotions can motivate political talk (e.g., Wolak & Sokhey, 2021) and explored questions about which opinions or topics would be expressed and with whom (e.g., Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Noelle-Neumann, 1993), few have fully probed the emotional antecedents of political talk. Furthermore, this prior work does not explicitly consider the *expression* of *emotion* as an aspect of political talk that is distinct from sharing facts or opinions. We propose that political talk, and emotion expression specifically, can function as a means of ER and examine how ER ability may moderate the link between feeling and expressing political emotions.

Christina M. Henry: henry.964@osu.edu
William P. Eveland, Jr.: eveland.6@osu.edu
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Toward this end, we focus on one common interpersonal context for political talk—parent-child dyads—during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Proximate others, such as spouses and children, make them a particularly convenient target for possible emotional expression because political talk is more frequent with close others (Klofstad, McClurg, & Rolfe, 2009). By focusing on a single dyadic context rather than multiple discussants, we remove cross-discussant variability in the nature of respondents' relationships with discussants. We can also more easily measure multiple characteristics of those discussants (e.g., age, gender, political interest) and more thoroughly consider the content of political talk within the dyad.

We contribute to the study of political talk by advancing a unified theoretical framework for understanding the effects of emotion on political talk and expression. We begin with a review of past research on motives for political talk, both within and beyond the parent-child dyad. Then, we briefly discuss ER and partisan in-group motives for ER before addressing how ER ability may influence the relationship between emotion and expression in the parent-child context and beyond. Our findings demonstrate the utility of an ER approach for studying political talk by illustrating the role of intergroup emotions and ER ability in the expression of political emotions. We contribute to the study of political discussion and communication more broadly by advancing a unified theoretical framework for understanding the effects of emotion on political talk and expression.

Motives for Political Talk

Building on deliberative democratic theories, scholars have argued that informal political talk may contribute to creating an engaged and sophisticated citizenry (e.g., Mutz, 2006). Such political talk occurs in many dyads, from close relational ties to strangers, although most work has emphasized the former (Klofstad et al., 2009). Political talk can encompass a wide range of topics and settings (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2006). Scholars have begun to argue that what needs greater emphasis is a focus on the *content* of political talk (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011), as most prior works only measure how frequently individuals talk rather than what they talk about.

Our study focuses on political talk within the parent-child dyad during a U.S. presidential campaign. Past work has shown that major political events, such as elections, can motivate political talk between parents and children (Valentino & Sears, 1998). Exposure to school programs can also motivate children to talk about politics with their parents, which can lead to increased parental talk (McDevitt & Chafee, 2002). However, within the parent-child context specifically, most past works have neglected to address the extent to which parents are *goal-oriented* in their political talk with their children and what those goals might be. Prominent models of communication and political socialization (see Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012) tend to limit themselves to discussing influential parent behaviors, such as political talk, rather than underlying motivations for parent behavior, and in any case, the parent communication behaviors studied are typically quite general (e.g., political talk frequency). In summary, despite decades of research, the political socialization literature has not paid sufficient attention to parental *motives* for political expression with children—or the expressions themselves. Therefore, we turn to more general scholarship on political talk, which has recently begun to consider the "why" question.

Much like political socialization research, for many years political talk research has either ignored motivations or relied on Downs' (1957) classic argument that political talk serves as a shortcut to making informed and rational voting decisions. Others have noted that deception may sometimes serve as a motivation for political talk or shape the content of the talk (Ryan, 2013). Still others have distinguished between strategic and understanding orientations toward political talk (Rojas, 2008). However, there is growing recognition that political talk often serves more social or nonpolitical motives (Eveland et al., 2011). Recent evidence seems to confirm that motivations that compel individuals to engage in nonpolitical conversations also motivate political talk (Gil de Zúñiga, Valenzuela, S., & Weeks, 2016). Moreover, when theorizing about the conditions that promote political talk, emphasis has been placed on perceptions of the opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) or personality characteristics that promote more frequent talk (York, 2019). However, we seek to build on studies that have elucidated *implicit or unconscious motives* for political talk. To this end, we review a broad range of scholarship to understand the role of emotion in political talk and emotion expression.

The Role of Emotion in Political Talk

Recent research has begun to directly examine the role of emotion as a motivator for political talk (Wolak & Sokhey, 2021), typically using the theoretical lens of affective intelligence theory (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKeun, 2000). The findings of this literature are somewhat contradictory, due in part perhaps to the study-by-study variations in the target of emotion (e.g., emotions toward the political environment vs. a particular political actor) and the discrete emotions measured (e.g., fear vs. anger vs. anxiety as negative emotions or enthusiasm vs. pride as positive emotions). Overall, the findings suggest that negative emotions, such as anger (but typically not fear), prompt more frequent political talk but not more and sometimes less frequent talk with disagreeing discussants (Brader & Wayne, 2015; Landreville & LaMarre, 2011; Lee & Jang, 2017; Valenzuela & Bachmann, 2015; Wolak & Sokhey, 2021). Positive emotions, such as enthusiasm or pride, may increase talk frequency and exposure to disagreement (or shift the balance of agreeable and disagreeable talk), but these findings are less consistent (Brader & Wayne, 2015; Lee & Jang, 2017; Lyons & Sokhey, 2014; Valenzuela & Bachmann, 2015; Wolak & Sokhey, 2021).

Moreover, most work on emotion and political talk emphasizes whether a given emotion leads to more frequent political talk but has not attended to whether the emotions that are felt (e.g., anger) are verbally expressed (e.g., "Donald Trump makes me angry!"). Thus, here, we consider the *expression of political emotions* as a distinct subset of political talk. Consequently, we investigate the relationship between felt emotion and general political talk within and outside the parent-child dyad, as well as the more specific link between felt emotion and the expression of that emotion within the parent-child dyad. However, because of the inconsistency in the results derived from work built on affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2000) we derive our predictions from research on the psychology of emotion and emotion regulation.

Emotions are usually categorized as having two distinct and universal dimensions: valence (i.e., positive or negative) and arousal (e.g., activation and intensity; Russell, 1980). Although we could consider the impact of particular discrete emotions (e.g., anger, fear, happiness) on talk, considerable research in

psychology has shown that emotions, regardless of the valence of that emotion, can motivate talk[1] (Rimé, 2009; Rimé, Bouchat, Paquot, & Giglio, 2020). Simply put, as emotional intensity increases, so too does talk (Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, & Rimé, 2000). Expressing emotions can communicate thoughts and intentions, signal information about the social environment, and prompt reciprocal or complementary emotions in others (van Kleef, 2009). Individuals often seek to talk after experiencing an emotion because they believe that others may help process emotional events and provide emotional support or, at times, relief (Duprez, Christophe, Rimé, Congard, & Antoine, 2015). Unsurprisingly, sharing after emotional events can accrue numerous psychological and social benefits (Tamir, Zaki, & Mitchell, 2015).

In sum, past work has shown inconsistent relationships between different discrete emotions (e.g., anger, fear, or enthusiasm and political talk frequency), although psychological theories of social sharing predict that as emotions become more intense, individuals are more likely to discuss *these emotions* with others (Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 2020). Thus, we first question whether emotional intensity predicts general political talk frequency both within and outside the parent-child dyad. However, in considering emotional expression, we hypothesized that emotional intensity should elicit the expression of those emotions regardless of their valence. In doing so, we probed the relationship between emotion and different forms of political talk—that is, simple political talk frequency versus the explicit expression of political emotions.

RQ1: *To what degree is overall felt emotional intensity related to overall parent political discussion frequency and parent-child political discussion frequency?*

H1: *Felt emotional intensity will be positively associated with the overall frequency of expressed political emotions by the parent to the child.*

Emotion and ER From an Intergroup Perspective

Most people experience a myriad of distinct emotions in their daily lives and respond in different ways to these experiences. For example, one can experience the slight annoyance of a traffic jam and simply turn on a podcast to make the slow commute more pleasurable. Alternatively, one can ruminate about having overslept that morning and worry about being late until that slight annoyance turns into full-blown anxiety. These different responses to an emotional experience can represent different approaches to ER. ER is the (often unconscious) process by which people modify their emotional experiences in some way (Gross, 2015). Often, behaviors are undertaken in pursuit of or anticipation of certain emotional outcomes (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007), and thus ER can occur to shape one's emotional experience *before* experiencing any emotion (e.g., choosing to watch a romantic comedy to feel happy) or *during* the experience of an emotion. Furthermore, ER is a core process in the experience of emotion (Russell, 2003), occurring for both positive and negative emotions. This being

[1] Discrete emotions that have been shown to be an exception to this general claim are embarrassment, shame, or guilt, which have been shown to predict avoidance rather than disclosure (Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998).

the case, understanding ER is integral to understanding the impact of emotion on political talk and the expression of political emotion.

Partisan Group Identity's Role in Feeling and Expression

To understand emotion and ER specifically within the partisan political context, we turn to intergroup emotions theory (IET) and group-based theories of ER (Porat, Tamir, & Halperin, 2020). IET argues that when identification with a group becomes a part of the self-concept, it can prompt group-based emotions (Mackie & Smith, 2018). Group-based emotions can be distinct from individual-level emotions because events and objects are appraised for their implications for the group, even if they may have no direct effect on the self (Mackie & Smith, 2018). Understanding group identity's role in emotion and its regulation is helpful because it provides a basis for understanding what individuals *want to feel* (that is, a motivation) based on their partisan identity. Group members tend to converge toward the emotions of the in-group (Leonard, Moons, Mackie, & Smith, 2011). For example, people may want to feel sad on the National Day of Mourning to feel a greater sense of national belonging or to increase in-group cohesion (Porat, Halperin, Mannheim, & Tamir, 2016). Furthermore, group members might seek to feel emotions that are perceived as useful for furthering certain in-group goals (Porat et al., 2020).

In this regard, an understanding of group-based ER can be helpful in determining which emotions may be expressed or suppressed. ER in an intergroup context means that individuals may want to feel either *positive* or *negative* emotions, depending on the perceived in-group emotional norms (i.e., what the in-group feels) and the perceived utility of particular emotional states for furthering collective goals (Goldenberg, Halperin, van Zomeren, & Gross, 2016). This means that individuals may seek an emotional "fit" with their in-group (Leonard et al., 2011). Therefore, when investigating the relationship between the experience of *political* emotions and their expressions, we highlight emotion and expression through the lens of in-group partisan identity. We classify emotions and expressions as being *in-group consistent* when these emotions are positive toward the in-group (e.g., a Democrat feeling enthusiastic about Hillary Clinton) and negative toward the out-group (e.g., a Democrat feeling angry about Donald Trump). By the same logic, *in-group inconsistent* emotions and expressions are those that are negative toward the in-group and positive toward the out-group. In defining in-group *inconsistent* emotion and expression, this approach acknowledges that although individuals seek to feel similar emotions as their in-group, at times a conflict can arise between the self and one's in-group. When an individual detects this incongruence, it can arouse negative emotions toward the in-group that motivate either desires to restore closeness to the group or desires for detachment (Packer, 2008). Emotions that are perceived to be dissimilar to the in-group's may be regulated differently—and expressed to a different degree—than emotions that are perceived to be in line with one's in-group identity.

First, to better understand how in-group consistency relates to political talk broadly and to build upon the key outcome in much of the prior work on political talk and emotion, we asked whether *consistent* and *inconsistent* emotions are related to political talk frequency both within and outside the parent-child dyad. Further, we proposed that, based on the established relationship between emotional intensity and emotional expression, there should be a positive relationship between felt emotions and their expression for

both consistent and inconsistent emotions and expression. Feeling more of any kind of emotion should lead to some tendency to express that emotion.

RQ2a: To what degree is consistent felt emotional intensity related to overall parent political discussion frequency and parent-child political discussion frequency?

RQ2b: To what degree is inconsistent felt emotional intensity related to overall parent political discussion frequency and parent-child political discussion frequency?

H2a: Consistent felt emotional intensity will be positively associated with frequency of consistent expressed emotions by the parent to the child.

H2b: Inconsistent felt emotional intensity will be positively associated with frequency of inconsistent expressed emotions by the parent to the child.

However, we do not necessarily expect the strength of the above-mentioned relationships to be identical. Based on the literature about group-based ER (Goldenberg et al., 2016), we expect that individuals would seek to express emotions that they perceive as *consistent* with their partisan in-group's feelings more than expressing emotions that they perceive as *inconsistent* with their partisan identity. Thus, we hypothesize that the relationship between felt emotional intensity and expression would be greater for *in-group consistent* emotions than for *in-group inconsistent emotions*.

H3: The relationship between consistent emotional intensity and consistent expression frequency will be greater than the relationship between inconsistent emotional intensity and inconsistent expression frequency.

Individual Differences in Emotion Regulation Ability

ER is a psychological process that can change what emotions individuals feel and how these emotions are expressed. Here, we focus on measures of one's *ability* to regulate one's emotions to understand how ER can change the relationship between felt and expressed political emotions. ER ability is an individual difference in one's habitual responses to the emotions that arise in everyday life. That is, individuals can vary in their awareness of their emotions, control of their emotions, or ability to execute other goals when in certain emotional states (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Importantly, in the present context, ER ability affects the degree to which individuals habitually express or suppress their emotional responses. ER is often interpersonal, and communication with others is a commonly employed means of regulating one's emotions (Zaki & Williams, 2013). Thus, we turn to briefly exploring two personality characteristics that relate to individual differences in ER ability: attachment orientation and reflective functioning.

Attachment theory argues that the quality of early interactions with attachment figures (i.e., caregivers) determines our internal working models for how others will respond to our needs for

socioemotional support. Attachment orientations were originally theorized to capture differences in individuals' responses to their emotions (or ER ability):

> . . . attachment theory has become one of the most influential conceptual frameworks for understanding emotion regulation . . . [Bowlby's, the founder of attachment theory] writings were motivated by clinical and ethnological observations of humans and other primates who were experiencing, expressing, and regulating emotions such as affection, anxiety, anger, grief, and despair. . . [He] described and conceptualized the relatively stable individual differences in emotion regulation that emerge from prolonged reliance on particular attachment figures. (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2014, p. 237)

Early experiences with these attachment figures translate into either secure or insecure attachment orientations in adulthood. The two dimensions of adult attachment orientation are *attachment anxiety*, which relates to a sense of worry about the reliable responsiveness of one's attachment figures, and *attachment avoidance*, which relates to a sense of distrust in attachment figures' capacity or willingness to help in times of distress (Jones, Cassidy, & Shaver, 2015). Insecure attachment has also been associated with difficulties in regulating one's emotions in adaptive ways (Pascuzzo et al., 2013), from hypersensitivity to negative events to maladaptive coping (Gentzler, Kerns, & Keener, 2010). More specifically, those who are insecurely attached have been shown to respond differently to the experience of negative emotions compared to those who are securely attached (Wei, Vogel, Ku, & Zakalik, 2005). Thus, individual differences in attachment orientation should be related to differences in ER ability. Specifically, parents who are insecurely attached should have greater difficulty regulating their political emotions in their expressions toward their children.

Reflective functioning refers to a broader ability to understand one's own and others' behaviors as guided by underlying feelings, desires, intentions, and other mental states (Slade, 2005). Parental reflective functioning (PRF; Luyten, Mayes, Nijssens, & Fonagy, 2017) is a parent's ability to represent and understand their child as a psychological agent and allows the parent to appropriately respond to the child's affective states. One aspect of PRF, *pre-mentalizing,* refers to an individual difference in parents' tendency to misinterpret or misunderstand the child's mental states, often making hostile and certain attributions about the child's mental states. Essentially, pre-mentalizing represents a lack of ability to understand the child's perspective or imagine oneself in the child's internal mental world. This dimension of PRF has been associated with ER difficulties, such as a lack of emotional awareness and the use of strategies to successfully manage one's emotions (Schultheis, Mayes, & Rutherford, 2019). PRF is linked to ER because the capacity to understand, accept, and control one's own emotions influences the ability to think of the child's thoughts, feelings, and internal motivations (Morelen, Shaffer, & Suveg, 2016). Thus, it may be that these parents lack the ability or motivation to regulate their own emotions in a goal-directed manner both within and outside of the parent-child context. Thus, individual differences in PRF should relate to differences in ER ability, with parents who are higher on the pre-mentalizing dimension also having poorer ER ability.

We argue that ER ability in the form of attachment and PRF impacts the relationship between the experience of an emotion and its expression such that, for those lower in ER abilities, there will be a weaker

relationship between emotional intensity and expression. Thus, we propose the following conceptual hypotheses:

H4a: ER ability moderates the relationship between consistent emotional intensity and emotional expression.

H4b: ER ability moderates the relationship between inconsistent emotional intensity and emotional expression.

Specifically, we propose that ER is a contributory moderator (Holbert & Park, 2020) for both predictions. That is, the relationship between intensity and expression should be *weaker* for those low in ER ability compared to those high in ER ability, but emotional intensity should still have a positive relationship with emotion expression at all levels of ER ability.

Method

Respondents were caretakers of children aged 6–17 selected from YouGov's online panel, matched to a sampling frame that used a propensity score function based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and Census region.[2] Interviews began on October 28, 2016, and nearly all were completed by Election Day (November 8). The 680 respondents were matched to a final sample of 600 respondents. After weighting provided by YouGov, these 600 respondents should match the demographic profile of U.S. parents living with children in this age range.[3] Detailed measurement information and descriptive statistics for the measures are presented in an online appendix.[4]

We begin by describing our outcome measures. *Parent general political discussion frequency* was measured using a single item asking how many days per week the respondent discussed politics (in general). *Parent-child election talk* was a four-item scale that captured the frequency of parent talk with the child ("without offering an opinion") about various aspects of the election, including how elections work and where candidates stood on issues. The remaining outcome measures were derived from a series of questions about parents' emotional expressions about the two major party candidates to their child. Expression was indicated by the response to, for example, "How often do you **TELL** [child] that [Donald Trump/Hillary Clinton] makes you [angry/disgusted/proud/hopeful]" on a four-point scale of never, seldom, sometimes, or often. First, we combined all positive expression items (i.e., pride and hope) to measure *positive emotion expression* and all negative expression items (i.e., anger and disgust) to measure *negative emotion expression*. Then, we reclassified the original emotion expression items as *inconsistent emotion expression* or *consistent*

[2] Technically, only 95% of our final sample were actually parents (biological, step, or adoptive). Given the very small number of nonparents among the caretakers, for simplicity we use the term "parent" throughout the article.

[3] Weights are used for all analyses reported below except for PROCESS models, which cannot use weights.

[4] Link to online appendix: https://osf.io/qudxv/?view_only=e715d09fa4934e54a9c0bd401a327819

emotion expression based on the parent's partisan identification.[5] All items were summed to capture *total emotional expression*.

Next, we discuss parent predictors. *Political interest* was measured with a single item asking about the respondent's interest in the current presidential election. *General political knowledge* was measured using five standard factual items (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993). *Strength of partisanship* was measured using a single item by folding a directional partisan identification measure in the middle, with the lowest value for strength of partisanship assigned to those who were "true" independents and the highest assigned to those who were strong partisan identifiers. *Positive emotional intensity* and *negative emotional intensity* were measured with four discrete emotions for each of the two candidates, from "not at all [angry/disgusted/proud/hopeful]" to "very [angry/disgusted/proud/hopeful]" using a slider ranging from 0 to 100. The same items were combined differently into *consistent emotion intensity* and *inconsistent emotion intensity* based on the respondent's partisan preferences. All items were combined to tap *total emotion intensity*.

We were able to control for several important child "discussant" or dyadic variables that are not typically gathered in studies using broader name-generator approaches (which tend to focus solely on the perceived partisanship of the discussant). The parents were asked to provide their child's *age* and *gender* and to estimate their *child's political interest*. *General parent-child talk* was based on parent reports of the frequency of talk with their child about six topics unrelated to the 2016 election. *News co-viewing* was measured using three items that each captured shared parent-child exposure to party conventions, presidential debates, and campaign news coverage.

Finally, we measured parents' attachment orientation and PRF as proxies for ER ability because these variables are related to ER ability and (in the case of PRF) specific to the parent-child context in which expression was measured. Two dimensions of attachment were measured (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007)—*attachment avoidance* and *attachment anxiety*—using five of the six items from the full scale as originally validated (e.g., "I try to avoid getting too close to my partner" or "I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them") using a rating from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.[6] PRF was assessed using the single dimension of *pre-mentalizing* using four slightly reworded items drawn from the six-item dimension validated in the PRFQ (Luyten et al., 2017)[7] (e.g., "[child name] sometimes fusses just to annoy me" or "[child name]'s behavior is too

[5] For respondents who did not report identifying or leaning toward the Democratic or Republican party, we imputed party preference based on their relative strength of preference for the Democratic or Republican party using a 100-point feeling thermometer. Respondents who reported a score at least 10 points higher for one party than the other were classified as aligning with that party. Those who could still not be classified as having an in-party were excluded from analyses using "(in)consistent" measures. This approach helps maintain statistical power by retaining "closet" partisans, while also making tests that are contingent on true "identification" more conservative.

[6] One item was dropped from each dimension of the validated measure in an effort to keep overall survey length manageable.

[7] Two items were dropped to conserve questionnaire space; slight rewording was done to better apply to our older target child grouping.

confusing to even begin to understand") with response options ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Following the respective literatures, we conceptualize those who are low in attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, and pre-mentalizing to be *high* in ER ability, and those high in attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, and pre-mentalizing to be *low* in ER ability.

Results

First, we briefly describe the relationship among our key variables to understand the nature of emotion and expression within our particular sample and to compare our approach to emotion to the more common dimensional approach. Importantly, these findings align with our argument for the value of considering political emotions and their expression in the context of group identities. Respondents were far more likely to report experiencing negative (M = 58.35, SD = 18.59) than positive (M = 38.77, SD =18.23) emotions $t(599) = -16.14$, $p < .001$. More importantly for our theoretical arguments, their emotions were even more likely to be consistent (M = 69.54, SD = 23.35) than inconsistent (M = 28.49, SD = 24.10) with their own partisan interests $t(505) = 21.95$, $p < .001$. As with felt emotions, our respondents were more likely to frequently express negative (M = 2.04, SD = 0.75) than positive (M = 1.75, SD = 0.67) emotions about the candidates $t(598) = -9.71$, $p < .001$. However, they were even more likely to frequently express consistent (M = 2.39, SD = 0.97) than inconsistent *(*M = 1.46, SD = 0.63) emotions $t(504) = 18.53$, $p < .001$.

RQ1 questioned the relationship between total emotional intensity and the frequency of parent political talk. Parents who experienced more intense emotions overall were likely to discuss politics frequently in general (r = .09, $p < .05$) and with their children (r = .11, $p < .05$), although the relationships were relatively weak. To compare the approach of prior research that distinguishes positive and negative emotions (Lee & Jang, 2017), we found that positive emotions were positively but only modestly related to both forms of talk frequency (r = .15 and r = .19, both $p < .01$, for overall and dyadic talk, respectively). However, negative emotions were unrelated to either form of talk frequency ($r = -.04$ and $r = -.06$, both $p > .10$).

H1, which predicted that overall emotional intensity would be positively related to the sum of emotion expressions, was supported (r = .26, $p < .01$). Compared to prior work, positive emotions were positively related to total emotional expression at a similar level (r = .33, $p < .01$), but negative emotions were not ($r = -.02$, $p < .01$).

H2a predicted that the intensity of consistent emotions would predict the expression of consistent emotions, and H2b predicted that the intensity of inconsistent emotions would predict the expression of inconsistent emotions. Consistent emotions and expression (r = .49, $p < .01$) and inconsistent emotion and expression (r = .59, $p < .01$) were both strongly and positively related, supporting both H2a and H2b. H3, which predicted that the correlation between consistent emotion and expression would be larger than the correlation between inconsistent emotion and expression, was not supported. Contrary to our prediction, the association between inconsistent emotion and expression is stronger than that between consistent emotion and expression (two-tailed $z = -2.36$, $p < .05$).

Table 1. OLS Regression Predicting Five Aspects of Parent Political Talk.

	Parent overall political frequency	P-C election talk frequency	P-C consistent emotion expression	P-C inconsistent emotion expression	P-C total emotion expression
Consistent emotion	0.13*	−0.04	0.29*	−0.16*	0.14*
Inconsistent emotion	−0.03	−0.12*	−0.18*	0.45*	0.09#
Black Parents	−0.10*	−0.01	0.07	−0.06	−0.01
Hispanic Parents	−0.14*	−0.00	−0.01	0.07#	0.02
Other non-White parents	−0.10*	0.01	−0.04	0.00	−0.03
Parent Age	0.08#	−0.03	0.00	0.07#	0.03
Parent Education	0.05	−0.05	−0.07#	0.12*	0.01
Parent gender (female)	0.01	0.01	0.06	−0.02	0.05
Parent pol. knowledge	0.20*	0.04	−0.02	−0.17*	−0.11*
Parent strength of PID	0.02	0.01	0.02	−0.01	0.01
Child age	−0.13*	0.19*	0.12*	0.06	0.14*
Child gender (female)	−0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02
Child political interest	0.08#	0.29*	0.15*	0.05	0.15*
P-C general talk frequency	−0.00	0.16*	0.05	0.02	0.05
P-C co-viewing	0.30*	0.40*	0.32*	0.19*	0.37*

Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients. White parents are the baseline for other ethnic/racial categories.
Note. #$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, two-tailed.

Regarding RQ2a, we found that consistent emotions were also moderately associated with overall parent political discussion frequency ($r = .26$, $p < .01$), parent-child election talk ($r = .19$, $p < .01$), and total emotion expression ($r = .19$, $p < .01$). For RQ2b, inconsistent emotions were weakly and negatively associated with overall parent political discussion frequency ($r = -.17$, $p < .01$) and parent-child election talk ($r = -.14$, $p < .01$), but not total emotion expression ($r = .04$, $p > .10$). Table 1 presents results, largely consistent with the correlational analyses above, from more fully specified ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models controlling for numerous parent and child characteristics.

We predicted that ER ability would moderate the relationship between felt emotional intensity and frequency of *consistent* (H4a) and *inconsistent* (H4b) expression. Although fully specified PROCESS models (Hayes, 2013), including all predictors in Table 1 plus the three ER ability measures, were estimated we report only the interaction tests here to conserve space.[8] Each interaction was tested in its own distinct model to avoid multicollinearity problems, and we reported one-tailed *p*-values given our directional predictions. The results reveal that two of the six tests—all derived from a common logic—were supported, with a third approaching significance.[9] Attachment avoidance (low ER) moderated the intensity-expression

[8] For the PROCESS models, components of the interaction terms are mean centered before analysis.
[9] Significance tests for interaction tests are one-tailed.

relationship for consistent (B = –.0055, SE = .0020, p = .003) but not inconsistent (B = –.0004, SE = .0012, p = .377) emotions. Pre-mentalizing (low ER) moderated the intensity-expression relationship for inconsistent emotions (B = .0020, SE = .0009, p = .015), but for consistent emotions, the interaction only approached significance (B = –.0025, SE = .0017, p = .071). Attachment anxiety (low ER) did not moderate the relationship for either consistent (B = –.0016, SE = .0019, p = .206) or inconsistent (B = –.0002, SE = .0011, p = .441) emotions.

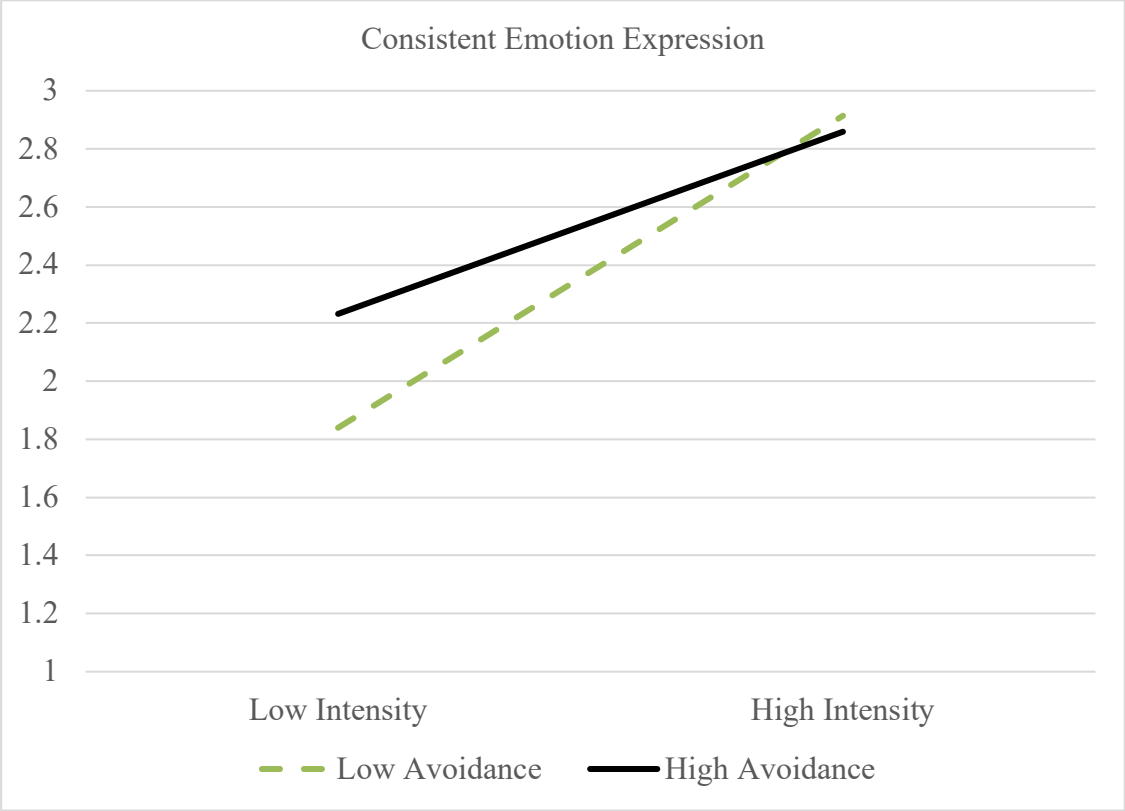

Figure 1. Interaction plot between consistent felt emotion intensity and ER ability (attachment avoidance) predicting consistent emotion expression.

Note. Low and high values of avoidance represent the 16th and 84th percentiles, respectively.

Plots for the two significant interactions and the one interaction that approached significance revealed a common pattern. All interactions were of a contributory nature (Holbert & Park, 2020). For the two *consistent* emotion intensity / expression relationships (H4a), those higher in ER ability demonstrated a stronger association between emotion intensity and emotion expression (see Figures 1 & 2). For the *inconsistent* emotion intensity / expression relationship (H4b), those lower in ER ability demonstrated a stronger association (see Figure 3). In short, ER ability led to a stronger link between felt emotion intensity and expression for in-group consistent emotions but a weaker link between felt emotion intensity and expression for in-group inconsistent emotions. Greater ER ability appears to have

produced more withholding of inconsistent emotions and more expression of consistent emotions. Nonetheless, the relationship between emotion intensity and expression was present regardless of ER ability, as expected. Collectively, these interaction findings provide more support for H4a than H4b, but together, there is modest support for our hypotheses of the moderating effect of ER ability on the link between emotions and expression.

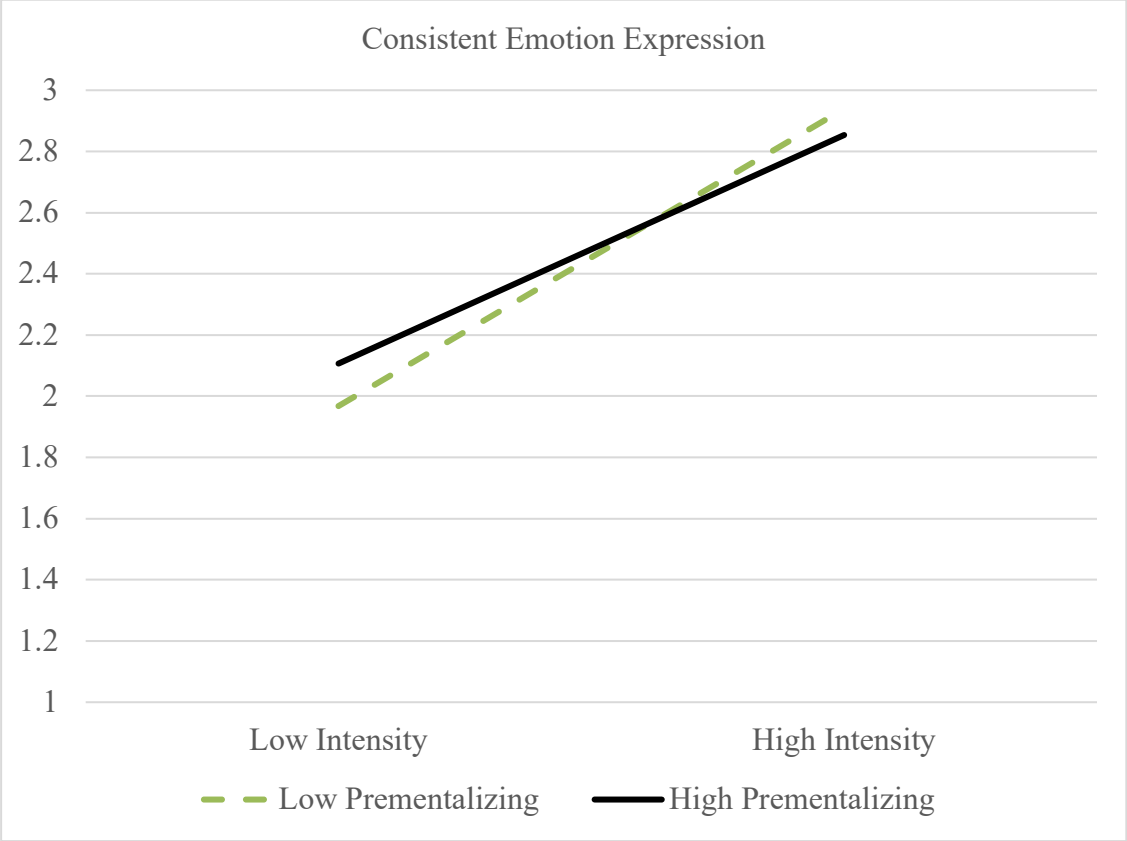

Figure 2. Interaction plot between consistent felt emotion intensity and ER ability (pre-mentalizing) predicting consistent emotion expression.

Note. Low and high values of pre-mentalizing represent the 16th and 84th percentiles, respectively.

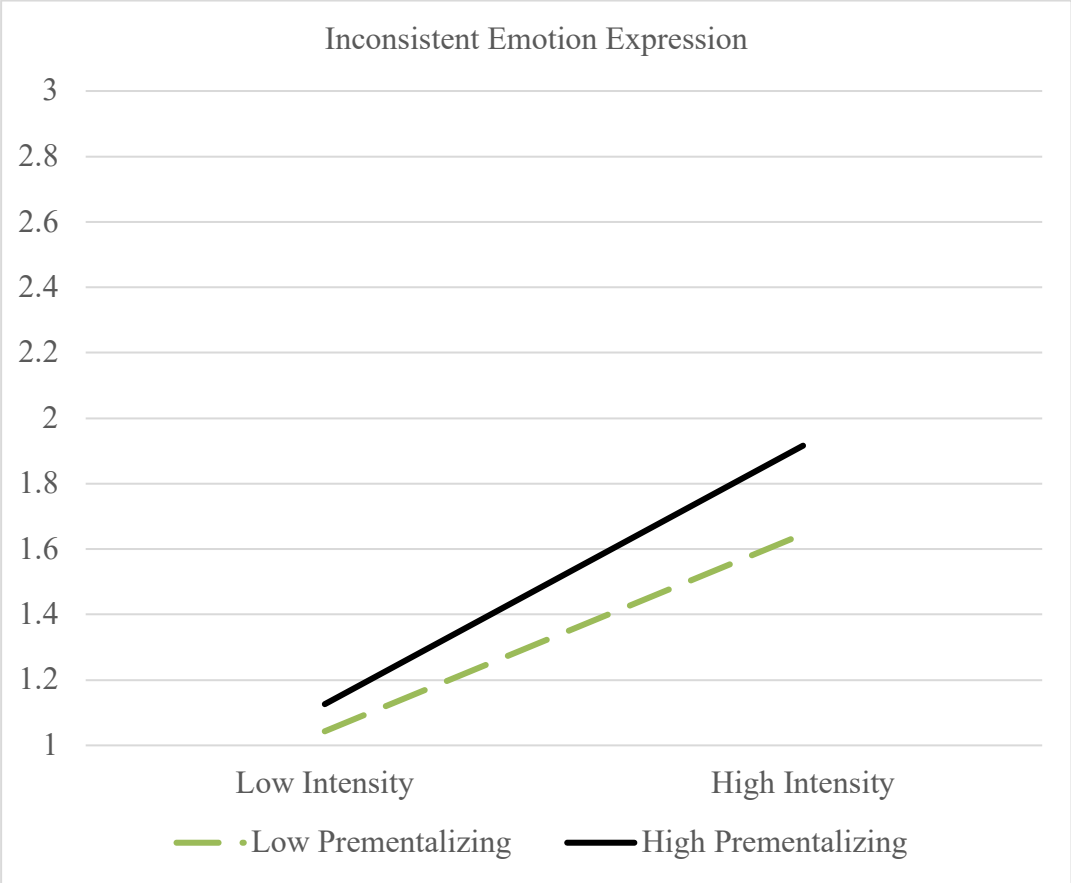

Figure 3. Interaction plot between inconsistent felt emotion intensity and ER ability (pre-mentalizing) predicting inconsistent emotion expression.

Note. Low and high values of pre-mentalizing represent the 16th and 84th percentiles, respectively.

Discussion

Most people who pay attention to politics experience emotions in reaction to daily political events (Ford & Feinberg, 2020). The present study adds to other works that examine emotion's important role in producing political discussion (e.g., Brader & Wayne, 2015; Wolak & Sokhey, 2021). We contend that existing theories that attempt to understand how emotion relates to political behavior broadly, the most notable being affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2000), remain inadequate in explaining *why* and *when* political emotions will be expressed or lead to other kinds of political talk. Therefore, one of our unique contributions is our theoretical focus on the process of ER as a motivation for political talk. We provide a theoretical framework for exploring how emotion leads to talk in a highly partisan national environment. In elucidating the motivations for political talk frequency or emotion expression, an ER approach fits well with the reality that most political discussion is embedded in everyday social interactions and is often incidental rather than deliberate (e.g., Minozzi, Song, Lazer, Neblo, & Ognyanova, 2020). Indeed, our findings indicate

that the overall intensity of emotions predicts political talk and illustrates a more complex relationship between emotion and talk than previously examined.

Our study is unique in building upon IET (Mackie & Smith, 2018) and theories of group-based ER (Goldenberg et al., 2016; Porat et al., 2020) to demonstrate how an intergroup approach to emotion and ER can be useful in explaining the relationship between emotion and communication in a political context high in affective polarization. Here, we found that both felt and expressed emotions that were in-group *consistent* were more common than those that were in-group *inconsistent*. Across emotional distinctions, the experience of an emotion positively predicted that emotion's corresponding expression. However, there was considerable diversity in the relationship between different forms of emotions and differing kinds of talk. These results demonstrate the value of focusing on the content of political talk rather than on just the frequency of such talk (Eveland et al., 2011). Furthermore, positive emotions were associated with both measures of political talk frequency, and negative emotions were unrelated to either political talk frequency measure. Often, theories of emotion and political behavior using a discrete emotional approach (Marcus et al., 2000) do not attend to the *target of emotion* (i.e., the object of emotion) but rather predict that certain emotions will unilaterally lead to particular kinds of behavior. More generally, because of the inconsistency in results across past studies of political talk using either a dimensional (e.g., Landreville & LaMarre, 2011; Lee & Jang, 2017) or discrete (Wolak & Sokhey, 2021) approach to emotion, delineating emotions by their consistency with one's group identity may prove a more reliable approach to understanding emotion's role in political communication.

Contrary to our expectations, the relationship between felt emotional intensity and expression was stronger for *inconsistent* emotion and expression than for *consistent* emotion and expression. This counterintuitive finding may be because of the 2016 U.S. election context, in which both Democrats and Republicans saw their party's candidate as less than ideal (Pew Research Center, 2016). Future work is necessary to explore conditions under which consistent and inconsistent emotions are expressed and would benefit from using methodologies such as experience sampling to capture feelings and expressions in real time as opposed to retrospectively.

Finally, this study found some support for the role of ER ability in the expression of political emotions. Within the political context, ER ability may produce a greater expression of consistent emotions and suppression of inconsistent emotions as a function of these feelings (i.e., ER that is consistent with one's in-group). We found that when emotions were *consistent* with partisan identity, those high in ER ability were more likely to express these emotions. However, when emotions were *inconsistent* with partisan identity, there was a stronger relationship between feeling and expression for those who were low in ER ability. The opposing but logical pattern of results across consistent and inconsistent emotion and expression not only shows the value of a group-based approach to emotion but is in line with other studies that show that group members seek to feel emotions common to their in-group (Leonard et al., 2011).

An important limitation of our study is the absence of direct measures of ER ability. We suspect that this limitation contributed to the only modest support for our related predictions. Additionally, because of the cross-sectional nature of this study, we cannot address issues of causality, although it would seem logical that one is likely to feel an emotion before expressing it. Nonetheless, experimental work in which emotion and/or ER are manipulated would be useful in addressing this concern (e.g., Ford, Feinberg, Lam, Mauss, & John, 2019).

This study focused on political communication within the United States, which may naturally lead to speculation about whether an ER approach can generalize to other political contexts where politics may be less polarized (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2021) or where the political system is multiparty and based on proportionate representation rather than dichotomous and winner-take-all elections. On the one hand, the emotionality of contemporary politics globally, particularly with the rise of populism in various countries and the unique level of emotionality of populist messages (Obradović, Power, & Sheehy-Skeffington, 2020), makes the relevance of an ER approach to political communication unbounded by geography. However, norms surrounding which emotions can be freely expressed and notions of which emotions are ideal or desired are culturally specific (Tsai, 2007). Therefore, the degree to which identity consistent or inconsistent emotions lead to emotional expression may also differ by context. Nevertheless, an ER approach provides a framework for understanding this contextual variation in contrast to other approaches, which assume that certain discrete emotions lead to particular communicative outcomes irrespective of the specific context in which they are felt or expressed.

Another limitation of our study was that we did not have an overall measure of parent emotion expression outside of the parent-child dyad and, aside from the parent-child dyad, we did not consider any other discussion dyads (e.g., spouses, friends). Although our data were in the parent-child context, the ER approach could reasonably be applied to other interpersonal contexts and communication about other topics; little of our theoretical reasoning is inherently tied to the parent-child context. Communication scholars can (and should) be at the forefront of studying ER in everyday life since interpersonal communication is one of the most often employed strategies of ER (Zaki & Williams, 2013). For example, ER has already been identified as important for satisfaction within romantic relationships (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014) through the pathway of communication practices that work to decrease negative emotions. Within the realm of mass communication, work drawing from mood management and mood adjustment theories (Greenwood & Long, 2009; Stevens & Carpentier, 2017) continues to articulate how media can be used as a *means of ER*. However, surprisingly little work has examined how individuals regulate their emotions once they are exposed to media content or outside of exposure to primarily entertainment messages. For instance, emotions have been repeatedly shown to impact the diffusion of content across social media platforms (Brady, Willis, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017), and individuals can easily "catch" these emotions when browsing this content (i.e., emotional contagion, Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). However, this work rarely considers *how individuals want to feel* or how these ER motives influence expression and engagement online. An ER approach may help to understand why some individuals may seek out news media content that provokes outrage (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014) or explain variation in selective exposure to partisan media content (Song, 2017).

In conclusion, this study argues that the *content* of political talk matters. Emotions seem to prompt talk, but this relationship is conditional on particular emotions and the aspects of talk considered. We contribute to an emerging perspective in the study of emotion and politics that seeks to understand how emotion may lead to political action and/or ER (Ford & Feinberg, 2020). Our work suggests that group identity and ER ability are important factors in the relationship between feelings and expressions in political contexts. More generally, an ER approach tries to understand how and what people want to feel, and their ability to achieve these goals can change communication behavior. We believe that this approach may prove useful in the study of interpersonal and mass communication across contexts and modalities.

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