

Study finds relationship between economic political opinions and competitiveness, resource scarcity

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Credit: University of Cincinnati

The motorist tailgating you on the highway might be doing more than just getting you upset—they could also be influencing your political views.

People tend to lean more economically conservative when they're angry, according to an article recently published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. The two co-authors, University of Cincinnati assistant professor of marketing Anthony Salerno and University of Manitoba assistant professor Keri Kettle, came to the conclusion after running multiple studies that included more than 1,000 participants.

In the first of four studies, 538 undergraduate students were asked to score how prone they are to anger, how competitive they are and how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements like, "Laws of nature are responsible for differences in wealth in society," and "If people work hard, they almost always get what they want." The study showed positive relationships between anger proneness, economic conservatism and competitiveness, providing preliminary evidence that anger enhances support for economic conservatism by making people more competitive.

Next, the two business professors enlisted 203 paid participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing internet marketplace, to write essays and then answer surveys. A control group was asked to write about their typical day, and a second group was asked to describe experiences that illustrate what it feels like to be angry. This manipulation caused the latter group of respondents to feel what Salerno terms "incidental anger."

"We got people angry that way, and then we asked them, 'Oh by the way, we want to ask you a few basic personality questions,'" says Salerno.

"We had things like age and gender, but along with those, we had a measure of people's economic views. We embedded that in with a longer list of questions, and people had no idea that their responses were being influenced by this previous writing task."

That influence caused a statistically significant rightward shift in the angry participants' economic views. The question of what makes people angry elicited a wide range of responses, including:

"Traffic makes me angry. People tend to leave all rational thoughts behind them when they get behind the wheel of a car. People don't pay attention to what they are doing when they drive, and it leads to dangerous situations. It is even worse when there is rain or heavy congestion. Traffic makes me angry because it brings out the aggression

of others."

"I get angry when people ask me for advice, and then don't follow the advice I give them. I also get angry when people try to think for me. When either of these things happen, I get restless and stressed. I will try to leave the room or calm down in a place by myself and away from anyone else."

"The only thing that makes me feel angry is general stupidity and lack of common sense. Like if I am talking to two people and one asks for the time. I will tell them while the other looks and listens on, then a minute later the other person asks for the time. It's like they are purposely trying to raise my blood pressure. I feel like a tumor is growing in my brain and is about to burst. Half the time I feel like slapping them, but I usually just give them the look of stupidity then walk away before something bad happens."

When Salerno and Kettle started the project, they originally thought that anger might just make people more conservative in general, but that turned out to not be the case. "It's this very specific aspect of a person's [political views](#)," Salerno says.

So what gives?

"When you make people angry, you also make them more competitive," Salerno explains. "If you think about competition, it's about trying to win out over someone else, and it's usually over some type of valuable or desirable resource. By making people more competitive, we think that people become more focused on acquiring resources."

Another study conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk backs up that thought. Salerno and Kettle used the same anger influence from their previous study, but they added a new wrinkle: resource scarcity versus

resource abundance. They gave the participants 10 sets of five words apiece and asked them to form sentences by unscrambling the words. Some of the participants were influenced by the inclusion of words like "scarce," "insufficient" and "broke." Others received words like "abundant," "plenty" and "sufficient." The economic views of those who were influenced to believe that resources were scarce shifted much more than those influenced to believe they were abundant.

It works in the other direction, as well. Salerno says a group of respondents were first asked what makes them grateful before being asked about their political beliefs. The incidental gratitude—which stems from the belief that another person has caused a positive outcome in one's own life—led to a more economically liberal response.

"Once people were reminded of a time they were grateful, they actually became more likely to support policy that would promote resource redistribution," Salerno says.

Making people angry is a time-honored tradition during election season, and Salerno doesn't doubt that someone might try to put the findings of this study to nefarious uses. His hope is that the study has the inoculating effect of helping people understand how their emotions can be used to manipulate them. "By making [people](#) more aware, they're less susceptible to its influence," he says.

More information: Keri L. Kettle et al, Anger Promotes Economic Conservatism, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167217718169](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217718169)

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