BOOK REVIEWS


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Anger can propel us to action in our political lives, but it can also lead us to be closed-minded and resistant to compromise. In *Anger and Racial Politics: The Emotional Foundation of Racial Attitudes in America*, Antoine Banks demonstrates that anger also fuels our prejudices. When people become angry, they are more likely to use their racial attitudes to inform their political thinking. The experience of anger—whether rooted in political causes or otherwise—helps translate people’s racial biases into their policy attitudes and electoral choices.

Banks argues that many Americans have come to connect feelings of anger to their negative perceptions of African Americans. Even as overt racism among white Americans has declined, many still hold negative views—blaming blacks for America’s racial problems, believing blacks are at fault for persistent racial inequalities across groups, and resenting what they see illegitimate and unearned advantages for blacks in programs like affirmative action. In assigning blame to blacks, feelings of anger and resentment become bundled with racial attitudes, so much so that hardwired connections form between the two in the associative network of people’s stored memories. As a result, when people become angry, their racial attitudes are primed and made accessible to inform the political choice at hand. In a sense, this means that modern racism is both cognitive and affective in character, where negative thoughts about race are fundamentally intertwined with emotional responses of anger.

Because these feelings of anger linger in memory alongside symbolic racism, experiencing anger leads people to be increasingly likely to make decisions based on their racial attitudes. This is true when it comes to racial policies—where feelings of anger strengthen the connection between symbolic racism and opposition to programs like affirmative action and busing. The effects extend to nonracial issues, where anger leads to a stronger connection between racial attitudes and opposition to healthcare reform. Anger can also prime racial resentment to be used in electoral choices, where anger coupled with the presence of Tea Party candidates on the ballot sharpens the imprint of symbolic racism on congressional vote choice.
Banks’s argument is highly original. The supporting evidence, drawn from a range of national surveys and a set of cleverly designed experiments, is compelling. The work stands out for Banks’s careful attention to the psychological mechanisms by which anger and race affect political attitudes.

To a large extent, the empirical chapters all involve testing the same mechanism of interest: anger’s ability to prime symbolic racism across political outcomes. The true art of the book is in how Banks uses his theory to resolve or inform a long list of standing debates in the literature. How can we ascertain whether opposition to racial programs is better understood as prejudice or as ideologically rooted in beliefs about hard work and limited government? Banks shows that anger primes only racial attitudes in forming policy preferences, and does not prime political beliefs. Why do implicit racial appeals in campaign ads work? Ads that prime anger lead people to use their racial attitudes to inform campaign choices, but ads that prime fear do not. Why are nonracial attitudes about healthcare so well predicted by levels of symbolic racism? When people are angry, racial attitudes in memory are activated and made accessible even for political choices where race is not a salient consideration. In demonstrating this pathway for the influence of anger, Banks offers the most compelling explanation yet as to how racial attitudes inform election outcomes and policy preferences even when racial attitudes are not explicitly or implicitly primed.

Banks’s argument adds nuance to existing arguments about implicit bias. Our traditional understanding of implicit racial biases emphasizes how hardwired biases can be automatically and unconsciously applied to political choices. Banks’s narrative helps explain how such cognitive biases might develop and informs how and when political life may activate implicit racial biases.

For scholars of political psychology, the book offers a welcome insight into the roles emotions play in politics. Anger’s effects in politics have been studied only in a limited way, and this book will surely inspire future attention to how feelings of anger, hatred, aversion, and animosity change the ways people engage in politics. Banks leaves open the question of whether other political attitudes might be similarly primed by affective responses of anger. It would seem that anger could also be inexorably linked to other political dispositions in memory, in the same fashion as racial attitudes. However, in his analyses, he finds little evidence that anger serves to activate ideology, partisanship, or core values. Is there then something unique about racial attitudes and their connections to anger in memory? The book suggests there might be. If so, this has interesting implications for how we think about anger in a time of contentious and polarized politics. If this mechanism holds only for racial dispositions and not other political orientations, it would suggest that even in a time of partisan division and acrimony, feelings of anger may not drive people to act in more partisan or ideological ways.
Some questions about the effects of anger relative to other emotional reactions remain unanswered in the book. While prevailing wisdom holds that the racial attitudes of white Americans are rooted in feelings of fear and anxiety, Banks finds only limited evidence of anxiety in shaping attitudes on race. To show anger’s powerful influence relative to the modest effects of anxiety is intriguing, but more could be said about why anxiety does not play a role. Even if people hold less uncertainty about racial politics (such that anger has come to replace anxiety for some), it is not clear why feelings of fear and anxiety held by white Americans seem of such little consequence. Banks suggests that disgust also has an important place in feelings about race. While modern racism is best defined by anger, feelings of disgust are intertwined with a belief in old-fashioned racism. It is a captivating argument, particularly given the limited attention that political psychologists have given to thinking about feelings of disgust, but the argument deserves greater elaboration. How do feelings of disgust play out in politics? How do feelings of anger come to replace feelings of disgust in the domain of race?

Overall, Banks offers an exceptionally original take on how feelings of anger can lead political choices to become racialized. If anger and symbolic racism are fused in the minds of many white Americans, it suggests that racial prejudices will remain a persistent influence in American politics for years to come. In speculating about how this link might be severed, Banks suggests that education might help erode the connection between anger and racial attitudes, and that feelings of shame and guilt might help counteract the effects of anger as well. But perhaps the more likely routes to a less race-biased future will be through those cases where Banks fails to find support for his main mechanism: in issue domains where feelings of equality and fairness are less salient (like foreign policy) or in political environments where candidates are less likely to prime feelings of anger in politics.


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What roles do sex and gender play in American politics?1 Contemporary conventional wisdom and a large body of previous research suggest that sex is an important cleavage in American politics. Men and women political officials act

1. I use sex to refer to biological characteristics and gender to refer to masculine and feminine characteristics; see Hatemi et al. (2012).