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You are Embarrassing Us: Vicarious Embarrassment as a Motivation for Voting Behavior

By

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Thesis

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## **Abstract**

Political scientists have endeavored to integrate psychology literature on human emotions into the political science literature on voting behavior. An emotion that has received little attention is the emotional state of embarrassment. One way embarrassment occurs is when we are embarrassed by the actions of another person, a phenomenon known as a vicarious embarrassment. In this thesis, I attempt to demonstrate that vicarious embarrassment is a causal factor in voting behavior. Using public opinion survey data from 2018, I show that vicarious embarrassment uniquely affects our evaluations of co-partisans. Specifically, I find that vicarious embarrassment is a strong predictor of Republican defections from Trump even when controlling for other distinct emotional dispositions toward Trump and voters' political ideology. I also find that operational liberalism only predicts Trump defection among Republicans when interacted with vicarious embarrassment.

## **Introduction**

Political scientists have endeavored to integrate findings on human emotions into politically relevant contexts. This includes emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear, and disgust. In the remainder of my thesis, I add another emotion to this literature: embarrassment.

The emotion of embarrassment is chronically understudied in politics, with not a single paper on the subject published in any political science journal in the United States to my knowledge. The lack of scholarship on embarrassment occurs despite media rhetoric suggesting that political elites embarrass the public and their constituents through various gaffes, scandals, and policy positions. Media coverage of these occurrences are examples of vicarious embarrassment, when other individuals' actions embarrass another person

In this thesis, I demonstrate that vicarious embarrassment can explain important political outcomes. First, I provide an explanation of embarrassment with an overview of the psychology literature on embarrassment, and then I provide a focused review of vicarious embarrassment specifically. Second, I give a theoretical framework on how vicarious embarrassment might influence the relationship between voters and politicians, and I also discuss the brief literature on embarrassment and politics. Third, I develop hypotheses for how vicarious embarrassment operates in voting behavior and test them with survey data from the American National Election Study (ANES) 2018 Pilot Study. Fourth, I provide evidence that vicarious embarrassment uniquely affects our evaluations of co-partisan political elites. Specifically, I find that vicarious embarrassment is a strong predictor of Republicans' defections from Donald Trump even when holding ideology and other distinct emotional dispositions toward him as a constant.

### **What is Embarrassment and its Causes?**

Embarrassment is an unpleasant emotional state that is brought about by violations of social conventions on the part of one's self or by witnessing such an act by another (Uysal et al. 2014, Buss 1980, Goffman 1956, Miller 1996). Embarrassment arises evolutionarily out of the need for social norm enforcement within tribal groups. Evolutionarily, those who felt embarrassed by their breaking of social norms would be more likely to adhere to such norms in the future, making these individuals more likely to avoid the potentially violent consequences of norm violations. Those who experienced embarrassment were also more likely to have access to reproductive resources because they remained a part of socially cohesive tribal elements with surplus resources instead of single-family units with more limited resources (Marks and Nesse 1994).

Psychologists have several theories that explain the causes of embarrassment. Using Social Evaluation Theory as a basis, theorists have proposed that the underlying cause of embarrassment is the loss of esteem in the eyes of others or themselves (Modigliani 1968, 1971). Another theory advocates a dramaturgical account that argues embarrassment is caused by disruptions in social performance (Silver 1987, Parrot 1988). Later theorists attempted to synthesize these accounts into various embarrassment subtypes using more methodologically heavy approaches.

Sabini et al. (2000) develop and validates subscales that measure the propensity to be embarrassed by three different types of scenarios. One subscale measures embarrassment known as *faux pas* which is caused by a social failing, such as a wrong remark in an inappropriate situation. The second subtype of embarrassment occurs when we unexpectedly become the center of attention. The final subtype is dubbed *sticky situations* which occurs when we are involved in situations that seem to require us to break with social norms of conversation, such as

asking a friend to repay a loan we gave them or discussing our religious beliefs in the workplace. A type of embarrassment omitted by Sabini et al. is vicarious embarrassment. Vicarious embarrassment, also known as second-hand or empathetic embarrassment (Miller 1987), occurs when we are embarrassed by actions performed by other people (Melchers et al. 2015). This type of embarrassment is especially potent when we are close to the offending individual via actual social ties, or identity-based closeness (Singer et al. 2006). In this thesis, I focus on this subtype of embarrassment and its relationship to voting behavior

### **Vicarious Embarrassment**

Within the literature on vicarious embarrassment, there is a common causal story about how it occurs. First, an individual is exposed to an action performed by another person. Second, the individual then codes the action as embarrassing or not on the basis of their conception of social conventions and norms. Lastly, if there is a perceived norm violation by the other person's actions, then the person experiences an emotional state of embarrassment. Crucially, vicarious embarrassment is not simply an imitation of an emotional state felt by someone. Vicarious embarrassment is only the emotional state of embarrassment that is brought by the actions of others. For example, subjects in one study experienced embarrassment when watching a video of an embarrassing American Idol performance where the individual performing displayed no signs of embarrassment. This was true even when the video was edited to remove the reaction of the crowd and the embarrassed expression of the judges indicating the subject was not moved by the reaction of others to the performance (Krach et al. 2011).

When we are embarrassed by the actions of others it is often a result of two causal mechanisms. The first mechanism is when we imagine ourselves in the shoes of an embarrassing individual, a process that reflects perspective-taking or empathetic concern. The second

mechanism is when one imagines how the behavior of others reflects on ourselves, a process that concerns the perceived social penalties we pay as a result of the actions of others (Batson et al 1997). Thus, some vicarious embarrassment implies a baseline empathy between the observer and the offender. However, some vicarious embarrassment manifests when the offender is perceived as representing something of value to the observer, like a social identity they identify with. Parents and their children are a good example of this representation.

When children are misbehaving in front of others, their parents can become embarrassed because they perceive the bad behavior reflects poorly on their competency qua parent or on their familial group. Parents in these situations require more than their child simply misbehaving; it requires that their behavior is witnessed by outsiders. These parents also must engage in some predictive process for how others will view them in light of their child's behavior, a process known as "evaluative mentalizing" (Frith & Frith, 2003). Thus, the experience of vicarious embarrassment requires perspective-taking: either the perspective of the offender or the perspective of potential negative evaluators.

The extent to which an individual experiences vicarious embarrassment is a function of several factors. There is evidence that some people are predisposed to experiencing vicarious embarrassment. In two experiments Miller (1987) finds that some subjects are high in embarrassability and are chronically susceptible to both personal and vicarious embarrassment.<sup>1</sup> Uysal et al. (2014) develops a Vicarious Embarrassment Scale (VES) based on a battery of pre-dispositional questions that attempts to evaluate our innate tendency to experience vicarious

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<sup>1</sup> Miller uses the term empathetic embarrassment instead of vicarious embarrassment. Miller (1996) later acknowledges that not all vicarious embarrassment is the result of empathy or perspective-taking.

embarrassment. The researchers validated this scale by demonstrating an association between VES and the levels of embarrassment felt after exposure to an edited online video.<sup>2</sup>

One's relationship with the offender of a social norm also contributes to experiences of vicarious embarrassment. Psychologists have found that vicarious emotions are felt stronger under conditions of "social closeness" (Singer et al. 2006, Cheng et al. 2010). Social closeness in this sense is a broad conception of what can make one socially similar to someone else. This closeness can be the result of direct social relations. More interestingly, social closeness can occur when a subject perceives that they share past emotional experiences or perceptions of commonality of norms or attitudes with another subject (Müller-Pinzler et al. 2016). Both of these conceptions of social closeness likely modulate the ability for an individual to participate in relevant perspective-taking, empathy, or an individual's sense that the offender of norms will be perceived as representing people like themselves in the minds of those who observed the offense (Krach et al 2011).

Responses to being vicariously embarrassed follow well-defined strategies for avoiding other negative emotions.<sup>3</sup> Our most common defense against vicarious embarrassment is avoidance coping. Individuals will simply avoid the situations and stimuli that cause vicarious embarrassment (Binder & Spoomaker 2020). Other strategies specific to vicarious embarrassment might include dispensing with social closeness to those that offend social norms through rationalization. This includes three methods of rationalization: (1) characterizing the offender as not representative of relevant social identities, (2) changing the salience of the relevant social identities, or (3) in extreme cases changing social identities altogether.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a design similar to the clip used by Krach et al. (2011).

<sup>3</sup> With the notable exception of emotions related to anger such as contempt, bitterness, hatred which promote approach behavior toward offending objects (Potegal & Stemmler 2010).



## **The Applicability of Vicarious Embarrassment in Politics**

Though vicarious embarrassment is studied in the field of psychology, it is not immediately obvious why such a phenomenon is relevant to politics. In this section, I attempt to link aspects of vicarious embarrassment to political contexts. I show that politics possesses all of the relevant ingredients to make vicarious embarrassment possible.

### **Politics and Vicarious Embarrassment**

Considering one cause of embarrassment is the violation of social norms or expectations do citizens have social expectations of political representatives? Here I present three examples of such expectations and norm violations. The first example of a politician breaking with norms and expectations in the public square is a scandal. Though there is much disagreement over how scandals affect approval ratings<sup>4</sup> there is general agreement that some scandals can have negative consequences.

Secondly, policy stances might cause embarrassment among party supporters when a party member believes a policy stance reflects badly on the party as a whole. This is most likely to occur when a voter's policy preferences conflict with the issue positions of their preferred party's candidate because voters tend to believe that their private preferences are also the best preferences for the party to express in public.<sup>5</sup>

Third, strategic considerations may also cause embarrassment. Partisans generally want their party elites to be perceived as publicly competent, morally upright, and within the bounds of social norms to win elections. When a partisan sees an action that might jeopardize their party's ability to win elections, they may be embarrassed even if they are apathetic about the

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<sup>4</sup> See Zaller (1998) and Maier (2011) for an extended discussion.

<sup>5</sup> This is definitely not always the case. Sometimes a voter may be embarrassed when a party member takes a public stance a voter privately supports but could reflect bad on the party. A rational racist might be a good example of someone who might be embarrassed by their party publicly echoing their private opinions.

perceived social norm violation. This is likely to occur among partisans who are deeply invested, emotionally or financially, in the party winning.

### **The Complexity of Social Closeness in Political Settings**

Social closeness is a function of personal interactions, friendships, common experiences, shared attitudes, and perceived norms. As discussed previously, the social closeness between subjects increases the amount of vicarious embarrassment felt in response to someone else's actions (Müller-Pinzler et al. 2016). It is certainly the case that citizens are socially close to politicians. There is a basic closeness that can manifest simply by someone being a political leader due to their representing our town, county, district, state, or nation (Manow, 2008). However, our social closeness to politicians can be much deeper than simple geographic representation. The politicians we vote for stand as public representatives for many preferences we deeply care about such as our preferred political party, policy attitudes, fundamental values, and in some cases our racial and ethnic groups. The potential for vicarious embarrassment is incredibly high given how much politicians represent a whole range of identities and preferences we care about in the public sphere.

Our identities and preferences tend to be represented by the parties we support (Mason 2018). Politicians and candidates from our own party are the public face of the issues and identities that their voters care about and are likely to exhibit high social closeness to their supporters. This makes the potential for strong instances of vicarious embarrassment higher when the subject shares party identification with the offender. As a result, co-partisans also have an increased incentive to avoid vicarious embarrassment in these instances via avoidance and rationalization.

### **Avoidance and Rationalization in the Political Realm**

Vicarious embarrassment via our party's representatives can produce a variety of cognitive responses. First, we can simply avoid viewing the embarrassing party member. When our preferred candidate always stutters during a speech, is under scandal, or otherwise represents our party poorly, we can turn off the television or stop reading the news.

A second strategy may involve changing the salience of partisan identification. For example, a voter who is embarrassed by a Republican candidate's scandal can deemphasize their Republican identity and emphasize other politically relevant social identities so as to maximize social distance from the candidate while minimizing the need to change partisan identities.

A third strategy consists of reinterpreting the offending candidate's social identity. For example, regarding the offending candidate as "not a real Republican" can effectively distance the observer from the offender while maintaining the observers partisanship and partisan salience. Finally, if the cognitive stress from the offender is too much, an observer may change their partisanship to avoid long-term cognitive pain.

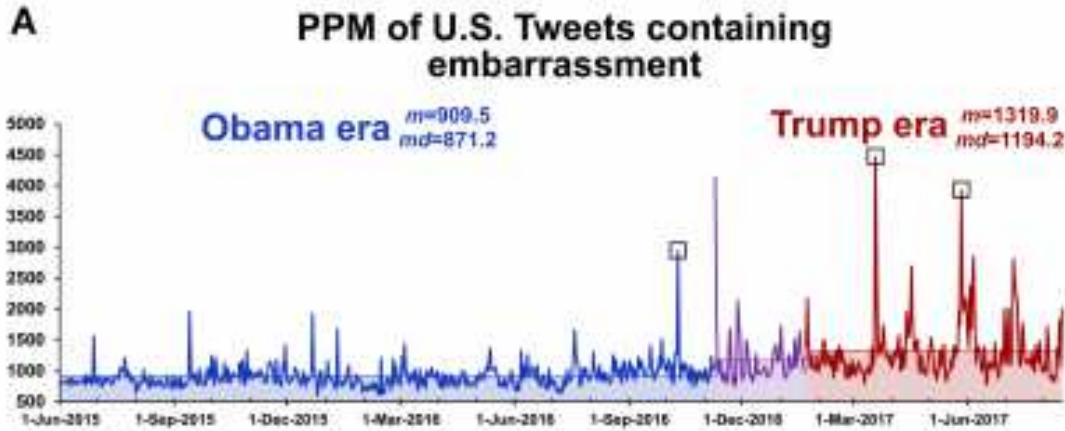
### **Existing Literature on Embarrassment and Politics**

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one article that addresses the relationship between embarrassment and politics. Paulus et al. (2019) studied the proportion of tweets containing the word embarrassment<sup>6</sup> across a period of June 2015 to June 2017.

### **Figure 1:**

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<sup>6</sup> The Authors also included other relevant variations of embarrassment.



Note: From pg.3 of Paulus et al. 2019

The authors find that the top 10 largest peaks in tweets that contain the word embarrassment are all associated with Donald Trump. These peaks tended to correspond with instances of perceived norm violations, such as when the former President appeared to shove the prime minister of Montenegro at a NATO summit or the President's remarks on the Charlottesville rally. The authors conclude that Trump's norm-violating behaviors resulted in an overall increase of vicarious embarrassment in the public. The authors speculate in the conclusion that citizens might be motivated to undertake political action to remove the negative affect of embarrassment. I expand on these conclusions by predicting co-partisan defection with a measure of vicarious embarrassment.

### **Emotions and Political Behavior**

Voter's political behavior is invariably affected by our emotions. Political psychologists have found that fear, enthusiasm, and anger increase political participation (Marcus et al, 2000). In addition, disgust emotions increase support for socially conservative policy positions on abortion and homosexuality (Inbar & Gilovich, 2011)

The effects of negative emotions on voters' political behavior are not always the same even when those emotions are highly correlated. For example, in response to a terrorist attack,

fearful citizens are risk averse and prefer internal security improvements whereas angry citizens prefer risk-taking behavior such as active military interventions (Lerner et al., 2003). Fear also prompts information seeking that attempts to reduce uncertainty (Valentino et al, 2009), while anger reduces information uptake (MacKuen et al., 2007).

Embarrassment is largely a non-factor in political psychological research. As Brader and Marcus (2013) note, embarrassment is largely considered a member of a family of self-conscious emotions that include guilt, pride, and shame. They note that no scholar believes that these emotions constitute a single dimension and that we have good reason to believe that these emotions are conceptually distinct. This leaves room for a great expansion of political science research that focuses exclusively on embarrassment.

### **Questions left Unanswered**

Due to the infancy of embarrassment literature in political science, there are several unaddressed concerns. First, if we accept the conclusion that political actors can cause embarrassment, it does not necessarily follow that embarrassment then affects politics in a meaningful way. In other words, embarrassment as an independent variable is yet to be explored in the literature. Second, we do not know the extent to which the mechanisms of vicarious embarrassment translate into political contexts. In psychology research, social closeness findings suggest partisans will be more strongly embarrassed by co-partisans, however, this has yet to be tested. Finally, the extent to which vicarious embarrassment can be separated from the effects of negative affect in general also remains unaddressed. As a candidate embarrasses a voter, the voter may also be angry, sad, or anxious in response to the embarrassing stimuli.

### **Feeling Thermometer Ratings**

In this thesis, I utilize thermometer ratings to evaluate the effects that embarrassment and other emotions have on political stimuli. A thermometer rating is a 0-100 scale that respondents use to rate their feelings toward candidates and other politically relevant groups. Examples of such groups and candidates on the 2020 ANES include Donald Trump, Blacks, Muslims, Feminists, and Planned Parenthood. Ratings between 51 degrees and 100 degrees indicate warm feelings toward the group or individual. Ratings between 0 degrees and 49 degrees indicate cold feelings. Finally, a rating of 50 indicates indifference.

Widespread use of thermometer ratings began following their inclusion in the 1964 ANES. They were intended to capture the whole content of relevant information that a respondent will use to evaluate a specified political stimulus. Weisburg and Rusk (1970) assume that what is captured in a thermometer rating can be used to establish ranked preferences for presidential candidates. This implicitly assumes that thermometer ratings capture a respondent's subjective sense of utility gained from the evaluated candidate. Modern scholars have articulated a similar view. For example, Abrajano & Poole (2011, p. 33-34) state that:

“We assume that an individual's reported feeling for a politician or a group is generated by the individual's subjective utility function over the relevant issue-policy space in question, along with all nonpolicy attributes, related to the individual's psychological makeup.”

These nonpolicy attitudes include emotional valence toward candidates and other subjective emotional payoffs from the candidates. Thus, general affect toward a candidate makes up some component of a respondent's thermometer rating. The exact mixture of various forms of affect and policy evaluations will of course change from voter to voter. I use feeling thermometers in

this thesis because vicarious embarrassment is assumed to be a component of the affective portion of feeling thermometer ratings.

### Description of Current Study

In this thesis, I attempt to add to the political psychology literature by exploring the feeling of vicarious embarrassment of voters towards Donald Trump. The 2018 ANES pilot study asked respondents how often they felt some emotion (x) as a result of the kind of person Donald Trump is or because of something he has done. The respondents were then given a list of emotions and asked whether Trump had made them feel these emotions: “Never”, “Some of the time”, “About half the time”, “Most of the time”, or “Always”. The list of emotions and summary statistics are provided in Table 1. The inclusion of these eleven emotions provides a unique opportunity to analyze the effect of vicarious embarrassment while controlling for other emotions that may bias findings when omitted.

Table 1: Summary Statistics for Trump Emotional Battery

	Mean	SD	SE
Embarrassment	0.53	0.41	0.01
Anger	0.45	0.38	0.01
Anxiety	0.49	0.38	0.01
Contempt	0.41	0.40	0.01
Shame	0.49	0.41	0.01
Bitterness	0.36	0.38	0.01
Fear	0.40	0.37	0.01
Relief	0.30	0.36	0.01
Proud	0.31	0.38	0.01
Hope	0.36	0.38	0.01
Happiness	0.32	0.36	0.01

Note: All variables range from 1(Never) to 5(Always), N = 1190.

### Hypotheses

I seek to test several hypotheses that theoretically follow from the psychology literature on embarrassment. First, embarrassment is clearly separable from other emotions such as general

negative affect. If the embarrassment variable in the pilot study is actually measuring embarrassment, the embarrassment variable and a measure of negative affect should have differential effects on cognitive recall. Vicarious embarrassment prompts avoidance behavior from those who experience it. If Trump is causing a respondent to be vicariously embarrassed, their opinion on Trump should not be “top of mind” because it elicits avoidance behavior. Crucially this should only occur under conditions of social closeness because embarrassment is not felt particularly strong when the offending stimulus is unrelated to the respondent. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H1: Republicans who are embarrassed by Trump will be inhibited in their ability to characterize their opinion of him. Democrats who are embarrassed by Trump will not be inhibited.*

It may be the case that the Republicans who are embarrassed by Trump are simply more inclined to the Democratic party, either directly through partisan disposition, or because of an omitted variable that predicts more support for Democrats and more vicarious embarrassment towards Trump. If embarrassment is related to social closeness, embarrassment felt towards one stimulus should be unrelated to the embarrassment felt toward another stimulus. In order to evaluate this possibility, I test if embarrassment via Trump is predictive of positive assessments of Democratic stimuli. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H2: Vicarious embarrassment towards Trump among Republican respondents will not have a significant effect on thermometer ratings for Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.*

Also, among Republican respondents, vicarious embarrassment towards Trump should not be reflected in their evaluations of other Republican figures.

*H3: Vicarious embarrassment towards Trump among Republican respondents will not predict party defection in 2018 House, Senate, and gubernatorial races.*



In the psychology literature, social closeness is the largest predictor of the strength of vicarious embarrassment (Singer et al. 2006). I argue this should then be reflected in the affective dimension of thermometer ratings. If a co-partisan is causing a respondent to feel embarrassment, this social closeness should modulate the effects of embarrassment on the offender's thermometer rating via stronger negative effects. Out partisans likely express embarrassment as a component of general negative affect. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H4: Vicarious embarrassment should be a stronger predictor of Trump thermometer rating for Republicans than for Democrats*

If vicarious embarrassment is stronger when the offender is a co-partisan, respondents will use avoidance and rationalization strategies to reduce cognitive pain associated with this embarrassment. With regard to Trump, embarrassed Republicans can enact the following strategies in order from easiest to hardest for them:

1. Avoid thinking about Trump (Hypothesis One).
2. Decrease the salience of their Republican identity and rely more on other identities to determine their political preferences
3. Declare Trump as an out-group member and not sufficiently Republican
4. Declare themselves as an out-group member and leave the Republican party

Hypothesis one sufficiently encapsulates strategy one. If Republicans who are embarrassed by Trump have a harder time recalling or discussing their opinion of Trump, then they are partaking in avoidance behavior. Strategies two and three are jointly testable. If a Republican begins to rely more on other social identities to make political decisions, on average the salience-weighted identity make-up of this Republican will be less predisposed to the Republican Party. Post embarrassment, this Republican would be less likely to vote for Trump in the future. The same

holds for strategy three. Republican respondents who try to describe Trump as unrepresentative of Republicans should be less likely to vote for Trump in the future. Strategy four is untestable given the nature of a single cross-sectional survey that simultaneously asks emotional battery questions and a party ID question. Predictions concerning strategies three and four lead to the following hypothesis:

*H5: Vicarious embarrassment towards Trump among Republican respondents will predict higher levels of vote defection.*

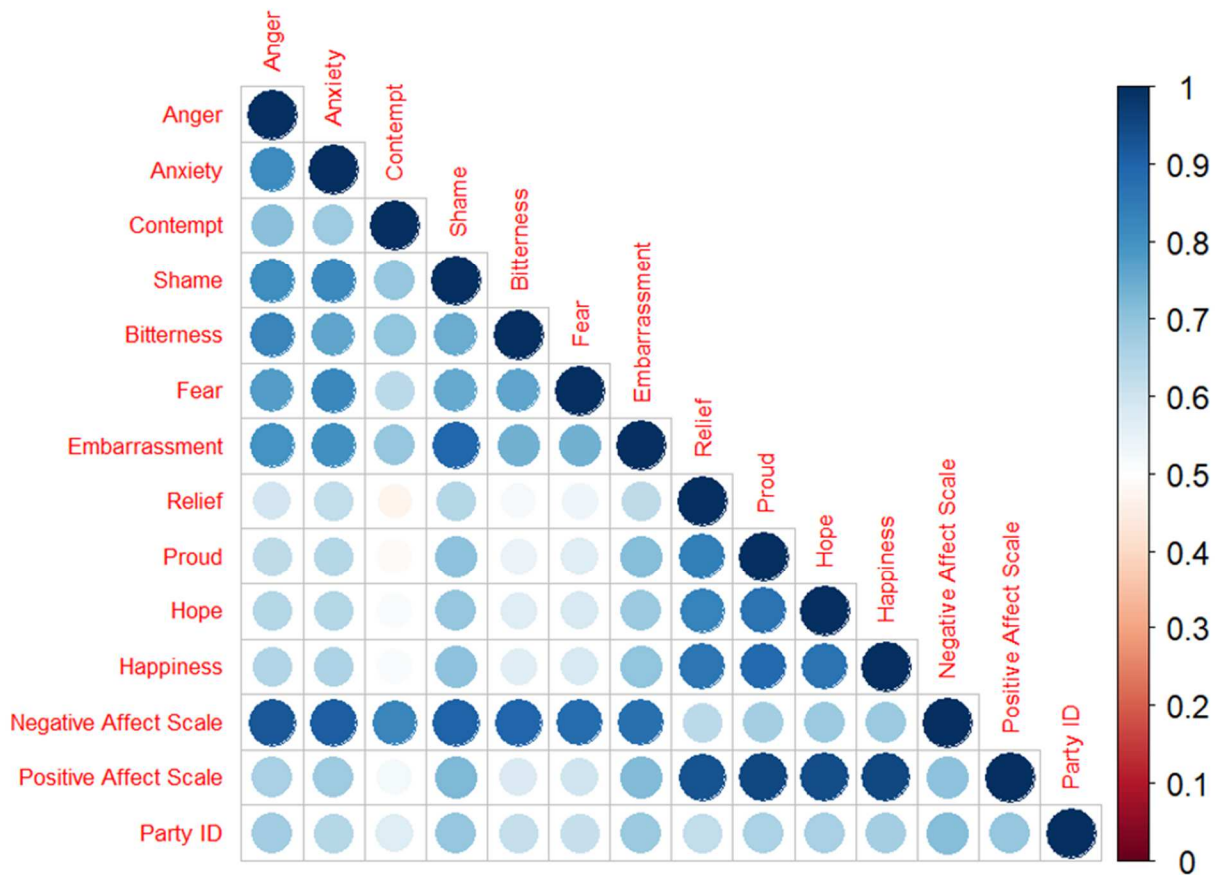
Embarrassment via Trump should also be rooted in some action that Trump takes or a policy position he holds. Vicarious embarrassment is not standing negative affect but is rooted in specific actions and stances that the offending stimulus is partaking in. Though Trump engaged in many behaviors that violated conventional political norms, the 2018 ANES pilot study does not ask any question related to his Twitter use, his unconventional press conferences, or any other instances of social norm violation. However, in so far as vicarious embarrassment is rooted in specific instances of expectation violations, policy questions should modulate its effect on voting behavior more than symbolic ideology. When a politician takes a policy stance, this is an actual moment in time where a voter could be embarrassed. Therefore, an operationally liberal Republican will be embarrassed when Trump takes a conservative policy position because this is a specific moment where expectations are violated. In contrast, symbolic ideology does not correspond to real moments in time. Thus, symbolic ideological disagreements with Trump will not produce vicarious embarrassment. In short, the effect of vicarious embarrassment on voting for someone other than Trump is likely via some specific policy grievance instead of a general sense that Trump is ideologically dissimilar to a respondent. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H6: Vicarious embarrassment towards Trump should be predictive of Trump defection when interacted with operational ideology, but not symbolic ideology.*

### **Emotional Battery Methods Issues**

Before testing the above hypotheses, I must first consider how I will use the emotional battery question in my analysis. Though there are good theoretical reasons for considering many emotions separately, emotions about a particular stimulus suffer from high inter-item correlation. Emotions about political stimuli are also associated with any number of characteristics that predict political attitudes such as partisanship, ideology, race, education, and other underlying psychological factors. Controlling for all of these factors plus an additional eleven emotions in a regression design quickly suffers from issues related to multidimensionality. In short, we need a sound method of reducing the eleven emotional variables via scaling. Figure 1 shows a correlation matrix of all eleven emotions.

**Figure 1: Correlation Matrix for Trump Emotional Battery**



Note: Shapes and colors correspond to absolute values of Pearson correlation coefficients. N = 1190, NAs are removed.

As the matrix makes clear, inter-item correlation is high among these emotional variables. The average inter-item correlation (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) overall is .54 overall, .59 among Republicans, and .67 among Democrats. There is also a high correlation between emotions felt toward Trump and partisanship. However, there is a marked distinction between positive and negative emotions. While all emotions are loosely correlated, the negative emotions of anger, contempt, anxiety, shame, bitterness, and fear are highly correlated with one another. The positive emotions of relief, proud, hope, and happiness are also highly correlated. Using this finding, I aggregate these emotions into an additive negative affect scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .95$ ) and an additive positive affect scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .96$ ). The Pearson correlation of the negative affective scale and the positive scale is -0.68. The Pearson correlation of embarrassment

and the positive affect scale is -0.69 and 0.88 for the negative affect scale. Embarrassment is highly correlated with other negative emotions. Though this complicates the study of embarrassment when distinct from negative affect, I demonstrate in test one that embarrassment is a distinct causal factor in respondents' minds.

### **Test 1: Is Embarrassment Distinct from Negative Affect?**

If embarrassment is indistinguishable from negative affect, then further exploration of its explanatory power is in vain. Hypothesis one proposes that Republicans who are embarrassed by Trump will not hold their opinions of him at the top of their mind. This is an avoidance strategy that will decrease cognitive pain for these Republicans. General negative affect however puts ideas at the top of our minds. We think about the things we hate and the things that make us worried. If embarrassment towards Trump is distinct from general negative evaluations, then embarrassment should inhibit cognitive tasks related to Trump attitudes.

The ANES pilot study records the number of seconds it takes for respondents to answer survey items on the questionnaire. This allows for a measure of cognitive effort expended in answering specific survey items. In general, it will take a respondent longer to answer a survey question when they have not thought about information related to the survey item. This is either due to a lack of information, such as survey items that ask respondents to identify the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or due to active cognitive efforts to suppress information possessed about the survey item. This information suppression response is avoidance behavior that is specifically used as a reaction to emotions such as disgust and embarrassment. If embarrassment towards Trump is predictive of longer response times towards Trump-related survey items, but negative affect is not, then we have good reason to believe that the embarrassment variable is measuring something distinct from negative affect.

In testing hypothesis one, I use the number of seconds it takes a respondent to answer the first four Trump-related survey items on the survey as the dependent variable. Due to the randomized order of the survey, the exact four questions any given respondent sees first are varied. Only the first four questions were chosen because response times are similar for all respondents after four questions. This is likely because respondents have already retrieved their opinions of Trump by the fifth question, and when faced with further questions they do not have to expend further cognitive effort to retrieve their attitudes.

In order to control for other emotions, I include both the positive and negative affect scales created earlier. I also control for other variables that may predict response times to survey items such as whether a respondent follows politics and the total duration of their interview. I estimate three OLS regressions using the entire sample and on subsets of Republican and Democratic identifiers.

The results for these regressions are shown in table 2. I find that Republicans who are embarrassed by Trump take longer to answer questions related to him. A maximally embarrassed Republican takes on average 30 seconds longer to respond to their first four Trump-related questions. This likely indicates that embarrassed Republicans repress their attitudes about Trump and Trump is therefore not at the top of their mind, supporting *H1*.

Crucially, the directional effect of embarrassment for Republicans is contrary to other negative emotions. General negative affect towards Trump predicts faster response times among Republicans.<sup>7</sup> This demonstrates that there is good reason to believe that embarrassment via Trump, though correlated with negative affect, is cognitively distinct from negative affect in its effects on Republican respondents.

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<sup>7</sup> This is true only for a directional hypothesis.

Table 2: Trump not Top of Mind for Embarrassed Republicans

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	(Total Response Time to Trump Related Survey Items)		
	(Overall)	(Republicans)	(Democrats)
Embarrassment	6.64 (15.54)	29.89** (12.93)	2.76 (31.25)
Positive Affect Scale	-0.48 (12.18)	-1.40 (8.80)	2.50 (37.00)
Negative Affect Scale	12.73 (17.99)	-33.09* (17.18)	44.47 (36.24)
Follow Politics	-0.16 (3.17)	3.70 (2.66)	5.43 (8.17)
Total Interview Duration (Seconds)	0.0000 (0.0001)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0001 (0.0001)
Constant	38.33*** (11.82)	37.32*** (8.96)	12.00 (29.81)
Observations	1,245	413	577
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.02	0.01
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.001	0.01	-0.002
Residual Std. Error	104.78	42.51	146.35
F Statistic	1.32	1.73	0.76

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## Test 2: Are Embarrassed Republicans just more inclined to Democrats?

If embarrassment felt towards Donald Trump is just a proxy for positive inclinations toward Democrats, then vicarious embarrassment is simply a proxy for affect towards political parties. In Test 2, I attempt to show that vicariously embarrassed Republicans are not weak Republicans, or Republicans who are more favorable towards Democrats than their peers. In this test, I estimate two families of models. First, in table 3, I estimate the effect of the emotional battery responses on the thermometer ratings for Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. For each person, I estimate a model with all eleven emotions from the emotional battery, a model with the affect scales, and measures of symbolic and operational ideology.

Table 3: Embarrassment towards Trump not predictive of Obama and Clinton Thermometer Ratings

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Clinton Therm (1)	Obama Therm (2)	Clinton Therm (3)	Obama Therm (4)
Embarrassment	-0.89 (5.45)	5.86 (7.59)	-0.09 (4.30)	3.94 (5.89)
Anger	15.05** (6.96)	17.15* (9.70)		
Anxiety	-5.10 (5.47)	3.83 (7.63)		
Shame	-4.91 (7.08)	-7.93 (9.86)		
Contempt	4.29 (3.92)	8.22 (5.47)		
Bitterness	25.76*** (8.48)	8.91 (11.81)		
Fear	-5.97 (6.40)	-1.24 (8.92)		
Proud	-3.59 (4.88)	-5.17 (6.80)		
Happiness	-3.56 (5.44)	-18.97** (7.58)		
Relief	-3.59 (3.82)	-11.95** (5.31)		
Hope	-6.42 (4.60)	0.34 (6.41)		
Negative Affect Scale			10.63* (5.96)	7.98 (8.16)
Positive Affect Scale			-2.42 (3.13)	-15.43*** (4.28)
Symbolic Conservatism			-25.96*** (3.65)	-30.42*** (4.99)
Operational Liberalism			25.03*** (4.90)	45.37*** (6.70)
Constant	19.87*** (2.80)	38.42*** (3.90)	25.22*** (4.26)	42.16*** (5.83)
Observations	412	413	410	411
R <sup>2</sup>	0.21	0.29	0.36	0.45
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.27	0.35	0.44
Residual Std. Error	15.95	22.23	14.17	19.41
F Statistic	9.39***	14.60***	45.34***	66.24***

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01



Table 4: Embarrassment for Trump among Republicans only predicts defection in house races

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	House (1)	Senate (2)	Governor (3)
Embarrassment	-0.10* (0.05)	-0.004 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.29)
Negative Affect Scale	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.35*** (0.11)	0.41 (0.41)
Positive Affect Scale	0.07 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.21)
Operational Ideology	0.05 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.09)	-1.07*** (0.34)
Symbolic Ideology	-0.16*** (0.05)	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.45* (0.25)
Constant	1.97*** (0.04)	2.03*** (0.06)	0.62*** (0.20)
Observations	313	236	411
Log Likelihood	153.69	49.01	-569.45
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-295.37	-86.03	1,150.90

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Second, in table 4, I estimate a logit model that predicts the probability of supporting a Republican candidate in the 2018 midterms using vicarious embarrassment. I estimate three separate models for House, Senate, and gubernatorial candidates. Similar to the OLS models, I control for the affect scales, and measures of ideology.

I measure symbolic ideology using a simple self-placement question where respondents are asked their political ideology. For operational ideology, I create an additive scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ) of four policy questions: Affordable Care Act approval, 2017 tax law approval, assault weapons ban approval and approval for building a wall on the Mexican border.<sup>8</sup>

As seen in table 3 results for the OLS models predicting Clinton and Obama thermometer ratings show embarrassment for Trump among Republicans does not predict

<sup>8</sup> I use these questions because they are the only high salience policy questions on the 2018 ANES pilot study.

significantly warmer feelings for Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton. In all four models, we cannot reject the null hypothesis, that vicarious embarrassment because of Trump is unrelated to Obama and Clinton thermometer ratings. This supports *H2*, providing evidence that vicarious embarrassment towards Trump is unrelated to inclination towards Democrats.

Table 4 illustrates the results for logit models predicting the probability of supporting a Republican candidate. Vicarious embarrassment towards Trump does not significantly predict voting behavior for Senate and Gubernatorial races. However, vicarious embarrassment for Trump does decrease the probability of a Republican respondent voting for a Republican House candidate. This shows partial support for *H3*.

The result for house races may be explained by a couple of factors. House races are less personalized and respondents may have used Trump as a heuristic. Senate and gubernatorial candidates may be able to sufficiently distinguish themselves as Republicans who are not Trump.

### **Test 3: Does Social Closeness Modulate the Effect of Vicarious Embarrassment**

Psychology literature suggests that vicarious embarrassment is felt stronger when the offender is socially close to the target. This implies that co-partisans will embarrass each other more strongly than out-partisans, as tested in *H4*. If *H4* is correct, Republicans should feel embarrassment more strongly than Democrats in response to Trump's actions, and therefore embarrassment should be a larger component of Trump evaluations for Republicans. I predict Trump's thermometer rating separately for Democrats and Republicans. If the coefficient for embarrassment is higher for Republicans, *H4* is supported.

Similar to Test 2 I estimate a model for all eleven emotions in the emotional battery and a model that includes the two affect scales and measures of ideology. Thermometer ratings reflect affective and policy evaluations; thus, a proper model must include both.

Table 5: OLS Predicting Trump Feeling Thermometer using Emotional Battery

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Trump Feeling Thermometer		
	(Overall)	(Democrats)	(Republicans)
Embarrassment	-17.14*** (2.77)	-7.76** (3.11)	-27.25*** (4.87)
Anger	-11.40*** (2.67)	-6.79** (2.74)	-8.04 (6.22)
Anxiety	-3.10 (2.71)	2.35 (3.15)	-8.11* (4.90)
Shame	-10.82*** (2.81)	-6.61** (2.98)	0.82 (6.32)
Contempt	-5.35*** (1.77)	-4.78** (1.86)	-3.31 (3.51)
Bitterness	-0.66 (2.40)	-0.76 (2.28)	-2.39 (7.58)
Fear	-0.22 (2.40)	-1.64 (2.43)	-1.42 (5.72)
Proud	16.83*** (3.07)	21.43*** (4.16)	11.89*** (4.36)
Happiness	15.02*** (3.26)	21.62*** (4.42)	10.71** (4.88)
Relief	12.36*** (2.76)	7.92** (3.90)	7.75** (3.41)
Hope	18.70*** (2.84)	15.24*** (3.88)	16.77*** (4.15)
Constant	42.78*** (1.52)	23.23*** (2.27)	58.48*** (2.51)
Observations	1,228	570	412
R <sup>2</sup>	0.84	0.64	0.67
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.84	0.64	0.66
Residual Std. Error	16.29	12.89	14.25
F Statistic	584.27***	91.28***	72.46***

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Table 5 displays the results for OLS models predicting Trump's thermometer rating with all eleven emotional variables. Vicarious embarrassment is much more predictive for Republicans. A maximally embarrassed Republican evaluates Trump 27 degrees colder even after controlling for all ten other emotions. Embarrassment is the single largest affective predictor of Trump's thermometer rating for Republicans.

Among Democrats, embarrassment is statistically significant, but the magnitude is much smaller than among Republicans. A maximally embarrassed Democrat only evaluates Trump 8 degrees colder than a Democrat who experienced no embarrassment. Embarrassment does not have significantly larger effects than negative emotions such as shame, contempt, or anger among Democrats. Embarrassment is also significantly less predictive than proudness, happiness, and relief.

The magnitude of differences between Democrats and Republicans can arguably be explained by floor effects for Democrats. Democrats already evaluate Trump poorly, so they are restricted in their ability to evaluate Trump more negatively due to partisan effects. However, this does not explain why the makeup of negative affect among Democrats is distinct from Republicans. Among Republicans, the total effect of negative emotions on Trump's thermometer rating is -50.52 degrees. This total effect can be broken down into its constituent parts. Embarrassment constitutes 27.25 (SE = 4.86) degrees or 54% (SE = 9.64%) of the total effect of negative affect among Republicans.<sup>9</sup> Among Democrats, the total effect of negative emotions on Trump feeling thermometer rating is -28.34 degrees. Interestingly, embarrassment only constitutes 27% (SE = 10.97%) of this effect. Floor effects cannot explain why embarrassment makes up a much larger portion of negative affect effects on Trump evaluations among Republicans.

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<sup>9</sup> In this context the total negative affect effect is the sum of all negative emotional coefficients which is -50.52 degrees among Republicans. The proportion of this effect that embarrassment accounts for is 27.35 divided by 50.52. This method attempts to account for floor effects by noting that embarrassment is proportionally more important for Republican evaluations of Trump when compared to Democratic evaluations.

Table 6: OLS Predicting Trump Thermometer with Emotional Battery, Symbolic and Operational Ideology

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Trump Feeling Thermometer		
	(Overall)	(Democrats)	(Republicans)
Embarrassment	-18.57*** (2.36)	-9.72*** (2.75)	-26.73*** (4.24)
Negative Affect Scale	-18.72*** (2.89)	-12.56*** (3.22)	-17.64*** (5.88)
Positive Affect Scale	52.87*** (2.14)	59.84*** (3.54)	42.08*** (3.09)
Symbolic Conservatism	6.58*** (2.19)	0.38 (2.66)	4.83 (3.60)
Operational Liberalism	-21.15*** (2.89)	-15.17*** (3.59)	-13.30*** (4.83)
Constant	48.90*** (2.57)	33.10*** (3.45)	60.34*** (4.20)
Observations	1,226	569	411
R <sup>2</sup>	0.85	0.65	0.67
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.85	0.64	0.67
Residual Std. Error	15.78	12.79	13.99
F Statistic	1,381.84***	204.82***	167.38***

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Table 6 displays OLS models that predict Trump evaluation using affect scales and measures of symbolic and operational ideology. These models display similar results to Table 5. Once again, vicarious embarrassment is much more predictive for Republicans than for Democrats. Among Republicans, vicarious embarrassment is more predictive than the entire negative affect scale, operational ideology, and symbolic ideology.

The composition of negative affect is again different for Republicans and Democrats. Among Republicans, vicarious embarrassment accounts for 60% (SE = 9.96 %) of negative affect effects and 43% (SE = 12.32%) for Democrats. These results provide evidence that social closeness to Trump modulates the effect of vicarious embarrassment on Trump evaluations. Vicarious embarrassment in both models is more predictive for Republicans and constitutes a higher proportion of the effects of negative affect. Thus, these results support *figu*.

#### **Test 4: Do embarrassed Republicans defect from Trump in 2020 hypothetical matchups?**

Republicans who are embarrassed by Trump have been shown to decrease their evaluation of him. This leads these Republicans to experience significant cognitive pain because the leader of their party is someone they are embarrassed by.

An embarrassed Republican may attempt to avoid cognitive pain by decreasing the salience of party ID. If a Republican is relying on other identities to inform political attitudes, on average these identities will be more inclined towards Democrats. This will lead these Republicans to be less likely to vote for Trump on average. Embarrassed Republican may also attempt to define Trump as an outgroup member. If a Republican is declaring Donald Trump as not representative of Republicans, then on average they will be less likely to vote for Donald Trump.

It is important to note that embarrassed Republicans have many reasons to still vote for him and may vote for Trump as the less of two evils. Republicans may agree that Trump is embarrassing, but also agree that his policy outcomes outweigh concern about how well he represents Republicans.

In order to test for the effect of vicarious embarrassment on voting behavior I estimate a logit regression model with Trump defection as a binary dependent variable. In order to construct this variable, I use two questions that give respondents hypothetical 2020 matchups between Trump and Biden, and Trump and Warren. The variable takes a value of 1 if a respondent did not vote for Trump on either of these hypothetical questions. About 18% of Republican respondents defect from Trump under this definition.

Table 7: Logit Models Predicting Trump Defection among Republicans

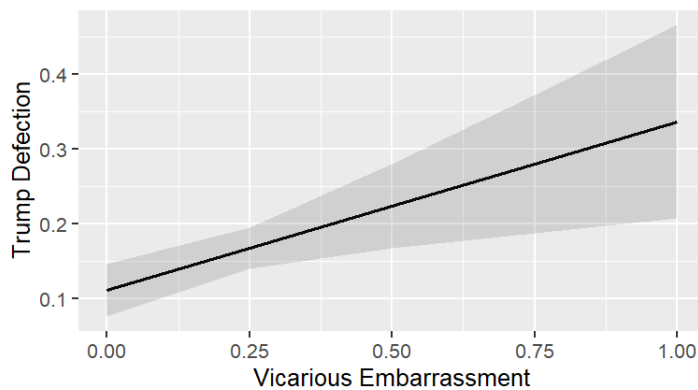
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Trump Defection			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Embarrassment	0.21*** (0.08)	0.23*** (0.08)	0.25*** (0.09)	0.24*** (0.08)
Negative Affect Scale	0.51*** (0.11)	0.31*** (0.11)		0.30*** (0.11)
Positive Affect Scale	-0.53*** (0.05)	-0.38*** (0.06)		-0.42*** (0.06)
Operational Liberalism		0.36*** (0.09)		0.36*** (0.09)
Symbolic Liberalism		0.19*** (0.07)		0.16** (0.07)
All Other Emotions			See Appendix	
College Grad Dummy				-0.05** (0.03)
Strength of Party ID				-0.01 (0.02)
Race				See Appendix
Constant	0.41*** (0.04)	0.21*** (0.05)	0.44*** (0.05)	0.32*** (0.11)
Observations	413	411	413	411
Log Likelihood	-40.72	-20.06	-35.72	-9.89
Akaike Inf. Crit.	89.44	52.13	95.43	47.78

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Model 1 includes only the affect scales as controls. Model 2 further adds measures controlling for ideology. Model 3 includes all emotions on the emotional battery. Model 4 takes a kitchen sink approach and includes the affect scales, measures of ideology, partisan strength, a college graduate dummy, and race.

**Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Defection by Vicarious Embarrassment**



Across all models, vicarious embarrassment predicts Trump defections. Holding all control variables at their means, vicarious embarrassment increases the probability of Trump defection by .21 - .26 across all models.<sup>10</sup> This indicates that embarrassment is highly consequential for partisan defection.

**Test 5: Is the Effect of Embarrassment on Party Defection conditional?**

In this section, I test whether the effect of vicarious embarrassment is conditional on operational or symbolic ideology. Theoretically, operationally liberal Republicans should not be less likely to vote for Trump unless the difference between Trump’s policies and theirs is known and reflected in some affective evaluation. Conversely, a Republican who is embarrassed by Trump is probably likely to vote for Trump if they are operationally conservative. This is because operationally conservative voters lack a viable alternative to Trump.

I test the conditional relationship between embarrassment and operational ideology using four logit models. Model 1 predicts Trump defection using the affect scales, measures of ideology, and the interaction of embarrassment and measures of ideology. If embarrassment and operational liberalism affect Trump defection conditional on each other, then the effect of

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<sup>10</sup> Derived via simulations using sjPlot



Table 8: The Effect of Embarrassment and Operational Ideology is Conditional on Each Other

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Trump Defection		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Embarrassment	-0.12 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.13)	0.02 (0.13)
Negative Affect Scale	0.20* (0.11)	0.03 (0.20)	-0.06 (0.20)
Positive Affect Scale	-0.39*** (0.05)	-0.39*** (0.06)	-0.42*** (0.06)
Operational Liberalism	0.16 (0.10)	0.14 (0.10)	0.11 (0.11)
Symbolic Liberalism	0.16** (0.08)	0.15* (0.08)	0.11 (0.09)
Embarrassment: Symbolic Liberalism	0.28 (0.24)	0.16 (0.32)	0.02 (0.33)
Embarrassment: Operational Liberalism	0.96*** (0.26)	0.80** (0.35)	0.81** (0.35)
Neg Affect Scale: Operational Liberalism		0.31 (0.43)	0.40 (0.43)
Neg Affect Scale: Symbolic Liberalism		0.19 (0.35)	0.32 (0.36)
Constant	0.27*** (0.05)	0.28*** (0.05)	-1.00 (1.59)
Observations	411	411	411
Log Likelihood	-7.41	-6.89	5.47
Akaike Inf. Crit.	30.81	33.77	29.06

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

embarrassment and operational liberalism should be zero with the interaction term included. I control for the interaction of symbolic liberalism and embarrassment to distinguish policy-related embarrassment and embarrassment due to a largely vague sense of ideological difference.

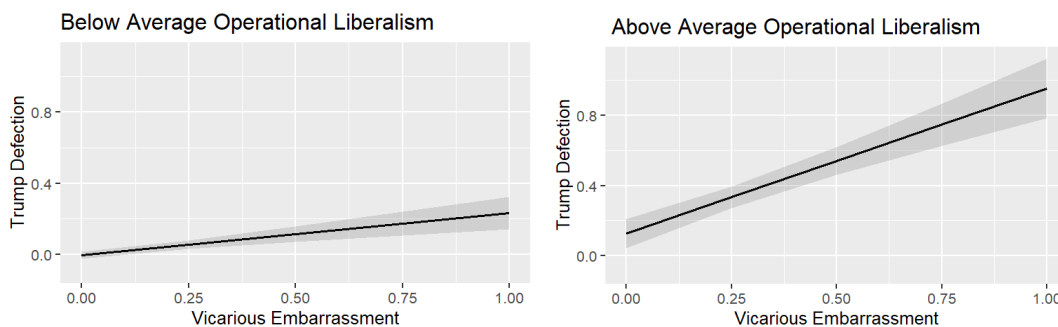
Model 2 adds interaction terms for the negative affect scale and the measures of ideology. This distinguishes the interaction of policy-based embarrassment from policy-based negative

emotions. Model 3 replicates model 2 but with additional controls such as race, the strength of party identification, income, and age.

Table 8 shows the results of the four logit models. In every model, embarrassment is no longer predictive of Trump defection. Operational liberalism is also not predictive of Trump defection in all three models. However, the interaction of vicarious embarrassment and operational liberalism is significant in all three models. This holds even when negative affect and its interaction with ideology is controlled for. In other words, the effect of embarrassment and operational ideology on Trump defection is entirely conditional on one another.

Figure 3 shows the effect of vicarious embarrassment for those above and below the mean level of operational liberalism ( $\bar{x} = 0.23$ ). Among respondents below the mean, a shift from the minimum score of embarrassment to the maximum score increases the probability of Trump defection by .21. Among respondents above the mean, this same shift increases the probability of Trump defection by .71.

**Figure 3: Probability of Defection by Vicarious Embarrassment among Republicans**



Note: Mean of Operational Liberalism is 0.23. For below average plot N = 473. For above average plot N = 373.

Figure 3 also illustrates that vicarious embarrassment towards Trump can induce Trump defection among Republicans when there is some level of policy disagreement. This policy disagreement does not necessarily have to be large. Among respondents whose operational liberalism is above the mean for all Republicans, the mean of operational liberalism is .41

indicating the large effect of vicarious embarrassment can occur among Republicans who are on average slightly conservative.

## **Conclusion**

To my knowledge, there has been no attempt to integrate the psychology literature on embarrassment into the literature on political behavior. In this thesis, I find promising results that support further investigation. Results from the above tests support several initial hypotheses. Vicarious embarrassment is a very important predictor of in-party political dispositions. Embarrassment is the single largest affective component of Republican evaluations of Trump. Embarrassment also significantly predicts Republican defections against Trump. Additionally, embarrassment modulates the effect of policy attitudes on Trump defection, even when negative affect does not. What seems clear is that vicarious embarrassment is a useful predictor of political attitudes. Further research should be conducted in this area that includes: experimental studies that invoke embarrassment, panel data that seeks to tease out party defection, and further observational studies with an emotional battery that does not lend itself to autocorrelation.

Other studies should also analyze vicarious embarrassment related to specific scandals, and candidates that are not Donald Trump. We might find that the effect of vicarious embarrassment is generally conditional on political figures that consistently violate social norms. We could also find that policy disagreement plays a crucial role in the causal power of vicarious embarrassment. Perhaps voters' policy expectations constitute their perception of social norms, making any contrary view from a co-partisan a potential cause of embarrassment and defection. In general, political scientists need a better sense of what leads a voter to be embarrassed by a member of their own party. In the future, political scientists might do well to research embarrassment as heavily as anxiety, fear, and anger.

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