

**Title:**

The Politics of Embarrassment

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## **Abstract**

Within the last year, expressions of second-hand embarrassment on Twitter significantly increased. We show how this relates to the current situation in U.S. politics under Trump and provide two explanations for why people feel this way in response to his actions. First, compared to former politicians, Trump's norm violations seem intentional. Second, intentional norm violations specifically threaten the social integrity of in-group members—in this case, U.S. citizens. We theorize that these strong, frequent and widespread feelings of second-hand embarrassment motivate political actions to prevent further harm to individuals' self-concept and protect their social integrity.

## **One sentence summary**

Donald Trump's behaviors induce second-hand embarrassment and threaten the social integrity of U.S. citizens

## **The Politics of Embarrassment**

Emotions are powerful motivational forces for human behavior. Feelings of guilt lead to reparative actions (Keltner & Buswell, 1997), pride makes people strive for achievements (Tracy & Robins, 2004) and fear due to a potential threat causes us to flee or fight (Ekman, 1992).

These examples demonstrating the relationship between emotion and action refer to firsthand experiences, but something else seems to be at stake when we experience emotions vicariously, on behalf of others. What drives our feelings of embarrassment for other people's wrongdoings or gaffes, and what motivates our actions to intervene? Since Donald Trump's election as the U.S. President, these questions have gained new significance. Here, we take a closer look at the motivational power of second-hand embarrassment and we describe how it may forcefully drive people's political engagement, which is aimed, in part, at preventing harm to people's identity and social group membership.

First-person embarrassment is defined as a transient emotional reaction when one's own public or social image is endangered due to a violation of social etiquette. Examples of situations that elicit these image concerns include physical pratfalls, cognitive shortcomings, loss of control over the body, shortcomings in physical appearance, or failure at privacy regulation. For all of these cases, the public nature of the event is an integral part of the embarrassment experience, as it requires looking at oneself through the eyes of real or imagined others (Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Miller, 1996; Miller & Tangney, 1994). Several recent studies further examined the emotion of embarrassment, but through the eyes of bystanders (Hawk, Fischer, & Van Kleef, 2011; Krach et al., 2011; Miller, 1987; Paulus et al., 2017). These studies delineate how watching the behavioral flaws of others can trigger vicarious emotional states in observers, illustrating that the image-concerns of the unlucky protagonist in the centre of attention are

justified. It follows then that second-hand or vicarious embarrassment is elevated in more empathic people; the more empathic the person, the more embarrassment they feel for others. This increased embarrassment correlates with increased activation in brain regions involved when observing others in physically painful situations (Krach et al., 2011, 2015) and it was argued that second-hand embarrassment may arise because people imagine themselves in the ridiculed person's shoes and simulate the potential threat this would mean for their own social integrity (Paulus, Müller-Pinzler, Jansen, Gazzola, & Krach, 2014). Therefore, second-hand embarrassment signals that another's social integrity is in danger and that help or social support might be deemed necessary (e.g., if one sees an open zipper, one can take action to notify the unaware person). Notably, the same idea accounts for sharing others' bodily pain, where an immediate affective representation of the harm to another's bodily integrity enables people to take action and help (Zaki, Wager, Singer, Keysers, & Gazzola, 2016).

Recent polls (Danner, 2017; Gross, 2017) and a variety of colorful statements on social media platforms suggest that many people feel embarrassed for Donald Trump's behavior. His public performance has been repeatedly judged as cringeworthy and embarrassing (see Figure 1).

Why do people experience such embarrassment on behalf of Donald Trump, especially the more liberal or democratic opposition who presumably do not support him? One would assume that those who experience vicarious embarrassment would rather wish to see him fail. Why don't they express malignant joy or "schadenfreude" about Trump's endangered presidency and the (de)construction of his social and political integrity? At least two factors help to explain this rather counterintuitive reaction:

### **1. The intentionality of norm transgression**

The observed increase in second-hand embarrassment might stem from the social structure of the situation, such as the intentions of the protagonist. Earlier presidents' mishaps and etiquette violations were mostly regarded as unintentional, whereas Donald Trump appears to deliberately transgress social norms, as if he did not care that they exist. A good contrast to the current political climate involves an incident with a former President of the United States, George W. Bush. In the year 2000, while talking to Vice-President Dick Cheney, President Bush spotted New York Times reporter Adam Clymer. Not realizing that the microphones in front of him were on, Bush commented to Cheney: "*There's Adam Clymer, major league a--h-le from the New York Times*". Clearly, our eavesdropping was unintended and President Bush would not have made the comment if he had been aware of the active microphones. Indeed, he soon stated, "*I regret that it made it to the airwaves.*" (Berman & Hill, 2000). This was a prototypical gaffe—it lacked intention and the protagonist expressed post-gaffe regret to signal first-person embarrassment. Nowadays, President Trump often finds himself in similar situations where he violates social etiquette, but crucially, these transgressions appear intentional and he does not express signs of regret. For example, while on the campaign trail in November of 2015, Trump openly mocked the physical disability of a New York Times reporter. When Trump was asked later about this mocking, he claimed that he didn't know the reporter personally and was mocking only his journalism, not his disability (Trump and the reporter had met in person many times and were on a first-name basis for years). Compared to George W. Bush, Trump is fine with wilfully disrespecting prevailing social norms (e.g., mocking a physical disability) and does not show any kind of appeasement afterwards. It is this important attribution of intentionality to the protagonist's behaviour that differentiates the cringeworthy moments of earlier political

climes from the situation we now face with Donald Trump—wilful norm or etiquette violations are now daily business.

Furthermore, Trump's commonplace social norm violations are compounded with his transparent need for social approval. For example, in May 2017 while touring NATO's new headquarters with a group of other political leaders, Trump pushed aside Duško Marković, the prime minister of Montenegro, to move himself to the front of the group (Attiah, 2017). Similar to the previous example, Trump did not express awareness of his social norm transgression<sup>1</sup>, and importantly, this situation also demonstrates Trump's need to be respected and positively acknowledged for his presumed success and achievements. In further support of this, Trump once made each member of his cabinet publicly praise him for several minutes. While these incidents, and the one above, occurred in different contexts, the underlying behaviours are similar, and people hence expressed their second-hand embarrassment on social media platforms. Therefore, it appears that Trump more often elicits second-hand embarrassment because his etiquette violations seem intentional, involving attempts to bolster his image without noticeable signs for appropriate contrition that would placate the public. Empirical studies suggest that this lack of apparent feelings of remorse is contributing to losing support of the people he claims to represent in this way that the expression of appeasement gestures usually helps restoring the social image (Keltner & Buswell, 1997) and reduce the antipathy in the observers who consider the incident a social norm transgression (Semin & Manstead, 1981).

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted, that social norms, etiquettes and values are not universal and might not only change over time but also according to different social contexts. What might be very appreciated in the pub must not be considered adequate at work. In some cases, however, the normative frame that is accepted by the members of the community is obvious – such as diplomatic circuits and the stage of international politics. Here, it seems very unlikely that someone does just not know the rules.

## **2. Identity threat by association or representation**

The literature on social identity and group processes describes that second-hand embarrassment emerges both when observing the misbehavior of unrelated individuals, and also to an even greater extent, when observing the mishaps of in-group members (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005; Shearn, Spellman, Straley, Meirick, & Stryker, 1999). These so-called group-based emotions depend on the social relationship between the observer and the actor—this association renders others' wrongdoings relevant for ourselves (Fortune & Newby-Clark, 2008). Social relationships are established not only through direct social interactions, but also through shared membership in a relevant social category such as religion, gender, family, or nationality (Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2007; Lickel, Schmader, & Spanovic, 2007). If in-group members who identify in the same social category now behave or express opinions that run counter to one's beliefs (e.g., racist attitudes or sexual harassment), the group's social integrity is threatened and one's own social image is endangered. Importantly, this group-based, vicarious shame or embarrassment emerges even when one wasn't involved in, or responsible for, the other group member's norm transgressions (Chekroun & Nugier, 2011; Lickel et al., 2005). In other words, one need only identify with one of the transgressor's social categories to feel this vicarious embarrassment. Coming back to Trump, this theory suggests that people who experience the second-hand embarrassment share some sort of self-relevant social category with him, such as nationality or political party. Furthermore, President Trump is not just an American citizen like others who identify as American. As a leader, he has an outstanding role for the common identity of U.S. American citizens: He is supposed to represent it. This fact may increase feelings of second-hand embarrassment, as we outline in the following.

While Donald Trump was running for the Republican nomination, US-Americans who opposed him, could construct their social identity without referring to him. US citizens' own ethical standards and norms were not affected by Trump because he did not yet represent the whole of U.S. America. Thus, his counterparts could easily express *schadenfreude* for the gaffes he committed during his campaign. This is summarized nicely in an article from the campaign trail in 2016: "*And yet, as the campaign has worn on and Trump has emerged as the leader in the delegate count, another liberal reaction to his rise has emerged: schadenfreude. Trump's nomination could very well lead to the collapse of the Republican Party, which many liberals view as an increasingly debased institution that deserves not merely to lose elections but to be permanently vanquished.*" (citation from an article in *Slate* by Chotiner, 2016). However, after being elected President of the United States, this situation changed. "*People may say things during a campaign, but it's different when you become a public servant,*" Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine told *The New York Times* (Glenn Thrush & Haberman, 2017). Currently, people who (still) identify as U.S.-Americans are linked to Trump, they are members of the same in-group and Trump is the leader of this group. As the first representative of the United States, he has a unique and outstanding status. He is not just one member of the US-American collective, but he is assigned to be the one to form this community. This is how political representation works in a presidential system: The political community needs to be unified by the personal identity of the president (Ankersmit, 2002). Thus, the deliberate trespassing of values and normative standards by Trump is a specific threat to the social integrity of the represented. This threat now causes powerful feelings of embarrassment and shame (Glenn Thrush & Haberman, 2017). Recent political theories posit furthermore that representation is not a static relationship which could be simply secured by institutions. Rather, representation is a "claim" that political



leaders make which necessitates acknowledgment by the represented (Saward, 2010). One's embarrassment or shame on behalf of their representative is a strong rejection of their representative's claim.

Taken together, the intentionality of social norm transgressions and the identity threat experienced by in-group members can trigger forceful feelings of second-hand embarrassment. This powerful vicarious emotion helps elicit action, such as political engagement and demonstrations aimed at preventing further harm to one's self-image and the social groups that one identifies with. Second-hand embarrassment may also simply lead to increases or changes in voting behaviour. Journalists and others have already speculated about the influence of second-hand embarrassment on voting behaviours: "*But numbers like this -- in which large majorities of people in key swing states call the President of the United States an "embarrassment" -- should concern him. We don't tend to emulate -- or, more importantly for Trump, vote for -- embarrassments.*"; (Cillizza, 2017). Ultimately, second-hand embarrassment will boost the search for other forms of representation which may transgress and break the official institutional frame.

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**Figure 1.** Expression of embarrassment on Twitter in the U.S. **A.** Mentions of embarrassment on Twitter between June 2015 and September 2017. The relative number of tweets related to embarrassment increased by ~45% since the start of Trump’s presidency (in red) compared to the last year of Obama’s presidency before Trump was nominated (in blue). The purple region of the timeline indicates the period after Trump was nominated for office, but before his inauguration. *m* indicates the arithmetic mean and *md* indicates the respective median of tweets containing the words ‘embarrassment’ or ‘embarrassing’ or ‘embarrassed’ during Trump’s and Obama’s presidency, including retweets. The y-axis refers to parts per million (PPM) of all tweets sent from U.S. Twitter accounts. **B.** Word clouds demonstrating the association between embarrassment and Trump for three selected dates. Word clouds were computed from tweets (excluding retweets) for days when there was a high volume of tweets about embarrassment (see boxes on peaks in Fig. 1A; 10-Oct-2016: 44,389 tweets; 18-Mar-2017: 39,072 tweets; 26-May-2017: 49,653 tweets). Word clouds show strongest associations with Donald Trump and related political events (e.g., ‘debate’, ‘Merkel’, ‘Nato’) but also references to the U.S. (e.g. ‘country’, ‘America’) or his representational claim (e.g. ‘president’, ‘leader’). Word size is linearly scaled by the word count in these tweets after removing common English words (e.g. ‘the’, ‘over’, ‘take’, ‘after’ and ‘you’) and the search terms ‘embarrassment’, ‘embarrassing’ and ‘embarrassed’ using the wordart.com software. @realDonaldTrump\* refers to @realDonaldTrump and was shortened for display purposes. **C.** Peaks in embarrassment expressed on U.S. Twitter labeled with events and actions taken by Trump within the preceding days. The blue section of the timeline refers to Obama’s presidency, the red section refers to Trump’s presidency, and the purple section depicts the period after Trump was nominated for office, but before his inauguration. MOAB refers “Mother of all bombs”.