Politics, *schadenfreude*, and ingroup identification: The sometimes happy thing about a poor economy and death


*Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40513, United States*

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**ABSTRACT**

Political campaigns are often characterized by the various events occurring that move the tide in favor of one candidate or another. Each event, depending on which candidate it favors or harms, produces either happiness or sadness for those who care about the outcome. This research examined whether such reactions would hold for events that are misfortunes for other people and even when they negatively affect society more broadly regardless of political party affiliation. Ingroup (i.e. political party) identification was examined as an important moderating variable. In four studies, undergraduate participants gave their emotional reactions to news articles describing misfortunes happening to others (e.g. poor economic news and house foreclosures). Party affiliation and the intensity of ingroup identification strongly predicted whether these events produced *schadenfreude*.

When other people suffer misfortunes, observers usually feel sympathy and express it openly. But this is not always true. Sometimes, the misfortunes of others can be pleasing (e.g. Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Gorman, 2006; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). Although scholars claim that this kind of feeling goes back as far as the ancient Greeks (e.g. Aristotle, 350 BCE/1991) and have continued through the present (e.g. Portmann, 2000), the English language has no word for it. As a result, English speakers often borrow the German term *schadenfreude* (Ben Ze‘ev, 2000), which derives from the combined terms *schaden*, meaning “harm,” and *freude*, meaning “joy.”

What circumstances most readily produce *schadenfreude*? Understandably, *schadenfreude* is more likely to arise when people deserve their misfortunes (Feather, 2008; Feather & Naim, 2005; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Portmann, 2000; Singer et al., 2006; van Dijk et al., 2005) and when misfortunes happen to people who are disliked (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Heider, 1958). A less socially appropriate circumstance is when the suffering person is envied (Brigham et al., 1997; Smith & Kim, 2007; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006), though the evidence for this connection is inconsistent (e.g. Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008).

*Schadenfreude as an intergroup emotion*

*Schadenfreude*, as well as other emotions, can also occur at the intergroup level (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Harris, Cikara, & Fiske, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008; Leach et al., 2003; Spears & Leach, 2004). For example, a series of studies conducted by Leach et al. (2003) assessed the effects of domain interest and ingroup inferiority as possible predictors of intergroup *schadenfreude*. Soccer fans in the Netherlands rated their happiness when they read that a rival outgroup (i.e. the German national team) had lost a key match. As expected, the greater the participants’ domain interest (i.e. “I enjoy watching soccer on television,” “I am interested in soccer,” “I have regularly watched/listened to the World Cup”) in soccer, the happier they were when reading about Germany’s loss. Also, greater *schadenfreude* resulted when previous Dutch losses were highlighted beforehand, making the inferiority of the Dutch team salient. Although there was no obvious ingroup benefit for the Dutch ingroup as a result of the German team’s defeat, this defeat may have allowed Dutch participants to feel less inferior in terms of their social identity (Leach, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008; Tajfel, 1981), and, therefore, to be more pleased by the defeat.

In a theory developed by Smith and his colleagues (Mackie, Silver, & Smith, 2004) known as Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET), identification with one’s ingroup is a key predictor of how and when intergroup emotions occur. According to the theory, when people strongly identify with an ingroup they commonly appraise events from an ingroup rather than interpersonal perspective. Specifically, Mackie et al. (2004) suggest that “when social identification occurs, appraisals are intergroup, rather than personally
Politics and intergroup schadenfreude

Politics is one arena where the outcomes of ingroups and outgroups may be so closely linked that an ingroup member might appraise an outgroup setback as directly benefiting the ingroup. Politics is often a kind of “blood sport” in which party affiliation and partisan instincts carry the day more often than bipartisan sentiments. In the context of a political campaign, particularly as election night approaches, all events (fortunes or otherwise) may largely become appreciated for their implications for victory or defeat of one’s own party (especially for those who strongly identify with their party) – even though there may be otherwise negative, undeserved consequences for others. For example, a downturn in the economy would seem to have no positive effects for anyone, and yet for partisans rooting for their challenger to defeat an incumbent President, it might be good news indeed. 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