



Younger, middle-aged, and older adults' memories for the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 November 2011
Received in revised form 29 May 2012
Accepted 3 June 2012
Available online 9 June 2012

Keywords:

Autobiographical memory
Emotion
Lifespan development
Aging

ABSTRACT

Adults, aged 18–88 years, recalled details about the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election shortly following the election and 6 months later. Individuals who felt positive about the election outcome reported a greater quantity of information at both time points. However, across the lifespan, individuals who felt negative about the election outcome demonstrated a greater proportion of detail consistency over time, a finding that had previously been shown only for younger adults. Individuals who felt positive about the outcome showed increased confidence in their ability to retain information accurately, as did individuals who felt emotionally intense about the election. These results indicate that for adults of all ages, positive emotion is associated with a reduced ability to retain details consistently over time; yet people may not recognize this tendency when recalling information, thereby retaining higher confidence in their ability to remember event details if they felt positive about the event.

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Mnemonic benefits for emotional (vs. neutral) events are well-documented in young adults (reviewed by [Buchanan, 2007](#); [Holland & Kensinger, 2010](#)). Emotional experiences are more likely to be remembered than neutral ones, and emotional events are often recalled more vividly ([Talarico, LaBar, & Rubin, 2004](#)). Yet even highly emotional information is not immune to reconstructive memory inconsistencies over time (e.g., [McCloskey, Wible, & Cohen, 1988](#); [Schmolck, Buffalo, & Squire, 2000](#)), despite individuals' confidence in these memories (e.g., [Neisser & Harsch, 1992](#); [Talarico & Rubin, 2003, 2007](#)).

Although several aspects of an event, including its emotional intensity ([Talarico et al., 2004](#)) or personal importance ([Muscatell, Addis, & Kensinger, 2010](#)), can influence how consistently or accurately it is recalled, an event's valence (i.e., how negatively or positively it is perceived) may have an especially important relation to memory across the adult lifespan. For example, event valence has been associated with young adults' memory consistency, perhaps by affecting the type of information processing that is invoked at the time of encoding (reviewed by [Kensinger, 2009](#)). The "affect-as-information" approach hypothesizes that emotions provide critical information about one's environment and guide perception and attention. In particular, negative emotions signal that something in the present environment requires one's attention and therefore

invokes greater detail-oriented and analytical processing. On the other hand, positive emotions signal a benign environment and therefore allow for a greater reliance on heuristics and schemas (e.g., [Clore & Storbeck, 2006](#); [Clore et al., 2001](#); see also [Levine & Pizarro, 2004](#)).

It follows from the affect-as-information approach that if negative events are processed deeply and receive more attention at and after their occurrence, such information should be especially well-remembered at retrieval. Indeed, young adults demonstrate more accurate memory for stimuli that elicit negative emotion (e.g., [Kensinger & Schacter, 2006a](#)) or for stimuli presented while in a negative mood ([Storbeck & Clore, 2005, 2011](#)). These benefits also extend to autobiographical memory: Individuals who felt negative (vs. positive) about the outcome of the O.J. Simpson trial were less likely to endorse false statements about the trial ([Levine & Bluck, 2004](#)), and individuals who felt negative (vs. positive) about the outcome of a sporting event had more consistent memories for the details of the game ([Kensinger & Schacter, 2006b](#); but see [Breslin & Safer, 2011](#), for evidence of greater memory accuracy in sports fans who felt positive about the outcome of a game). For younger adults, an event's valence is also linked to differences in memory confidence, with positive emotion being associated with overconfidence in accuracy ([Kensinger & Schacter, 2006b](#)).

Although age does not appear to affect emotional memory enhancements on either laboratory (e.g., [Denburg, Buchanan, Tranel, & Adolphs, 2003](#); [Otani, Libkuman, Widner, & Graves, 2007](#)) or autobiographical ([Comblain, D'Argembeau, & Van der Linden, 2005](#); [St. Jacques & Levine, 2007](#)) memory tasks, it is unclear

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whether older adults show the greatest mnemonic benefits for negative information in the same way that young adults do. There is some evidence that the memory boost associated with negative information occurs on the later end of the adult lifespan, in line with the affect-as-information approach (see Kensinger, 2008, for a review). Yet these laboratory findings have not been extended into the domain of autobiographical events; only one autobiographical memory study can potentially shed light on how these laboratory findings translate to real-life events across the lifespan. Bohn and Berntsen (2007) asked individuals to retrospectively rate their emotions and recall details regarding the fall of the Berlin Wall. In line with the suggestion that negative emotion might be linked to enhanced memory for details, those individuals who reported feeling negative (vs. positive) about the event had the highest memory accuracy. The sample from Bohn and Berntsen (2007) ranged from 29 to 82 years; although the authors did not consider age in their analyses, the outcome suggests that the mnemonic benefit associated with negative emotion might extend throughout the lifespan.

Although there is evidence that older adults demonstrate the greatest mnemonic benefit for negative (vs. positive) information, this claim is potentially contentious in light of the literature on emotional processing in aging. Socio-emotional selectivity theory predicts that when time is perceived as limited, as in aging, emotion regulation goals (i.e., diminishing negative affect) become dominant (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). As such, older (vs. younger) adults may place a greater emphasis on positively valenced information, for example in attention and memory (reviewed by Mather, 2006). Indeed, there are age-related changes in how quickly older adults forget negative events (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002) and in the proportion of negative vs. positive images they recognize or recall (Charles, Mather, & Carstensen, 2003).

Thus far, the reviewed literature has concerned individuals on either end of the adult lifespan. Far less work has considered the role of emotional valence in memory for middle-aged adults, and the extant data yield no consensus. One laboratory study found an overall benefit for negative stimuli across the adult lifespan (Denburg et al., 2003), whereas another found evidence for a shift toward mnemonic benefits for positive stimuli in middle age (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). Given that autobiographical events are inherently more emotional and personally meaningful than traditional laboratory stimuli (e.g., Cabeza et al., 2004), investigating memory for such events may further elucidate the role of emotional valence on memory in middle age.

The goal of the present study was to examine the relation between emotional valence and memory across the adult lifespan. We sought to distinguish between two alternatives: the mnemonic benefits associated with negative emotion that are evident in younger adults could be unaffected by age (i.e., in line with the affect-as-information approach), or adult development could result in greater mnemonic benefits of positive emotion (i.e., in line with socio-emotional selectivity theory). We probed adults' memories for the details of a real-life, emotional event: the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election. Political elections serve as a unique opportunity to examine how adults of all ages remember a publically and personally significant event whose outcome could either be viewed as highly positive or highly negative (e.g., Levine & Bluck, 1997).¹

¹ In the present study, we probed individuals' memories and emotions regarding the details surrounding the outcome of the election on Election Day. Given that the election, like many real-world events, was prolonged and likely included a range of emotional experiences regarding the candidates in the debates and primaries leading up to and in the months following the election, it is possible that the effects in the present paper were mediated by emotional responses other than those that occurred during the encoding of the election outcome.

By examining an event that could be defined as negative or positive depending on individual preferences, extraneous variables such as amount of media coverage and the duration of the event are controlled (as in Bohn & Berntsen, 2007; Breslin & Safer, 2011; Kensinger & Schacter, 2006b; Levine & Bluck, 2004).

We assessed the link between valence and both memory quantity (the number of details reported about the election shortly after its outcome and again after a six-month delay) and memory consistency (the degree of overlap between the reported details across the six-month delay). A final exploratory goal was to examine the relation among aging, perceived event valence, and memory confidence.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The numbers and characteristics of participants included in each survey and the present analyses are summarized in Table 1. We treated age and self-reported ratings of how negative or positive individuals found the outcome of the election [on a 1 (very negative)–7 (very positive) scale] as continuous variables rather than arbitrarily dividing participants into discrete age or valence groups. However, for ease of reporting in tables and figures, demographic information and summaries of average scores for each dependent variable will be presented with participants divided into three age groups: younger adults (18–35 years), middle-aged adults (36–59 years), and older adults (60–88 years) and three valence groups: negative (responses of 1–3 on a 7-point valence scale), neutral (response of 4), and positive (responses of 5–7).

Time 1 survey. Participants between the ages of 18–88 years were recruited nationally via Craigslist and locally via flyers at Boston College; these participants completed the Time 1 survey and a screening form that inquired about a history of depression, anxiety, or use of medications that affect the central nervous system. Older adults who were pre-screened for exclusionary criteria were further recruited from a database in our laboratory. A total of 395 participants responded to the Time 1 survey. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the Boston College Institutional Review Board.

Time 2 survey. Only those participants who met the screening criteria for inclusion ($N = 346$) were sent a copy of the Time 2 survey. Participants who completed both surveys (i.e., those summarized in the third column of Table 1; $N = 232$) were included in the present analyses.

1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed a survey that probed their memory about the 2008 Presidential Election. Surveys were completed within 2 weeks after the election (Time 1) and after a 24–26 week delay (Time 2). Older adult participants recruited from our laboratory database completed a hard copy of the surveys mailed to their homes; participants recruited online completed electronic surveys, identical to the hard copies, via Survey Monkey (Survey-Monkey.com, LLC, Palo Alto, CA; www.surveymonkey.com). Each survey included questions meant to comprehensively probe the features of the election (e.g., who was involved, when the election took place, and the outcome in terms of the percentages of votes and victory/concession speeches; see Appendix A for a complete list of questions). The questions were designed to elicit specific, brief answers, and thus were typically answered with short phrases or sentences (e.g., “the winner received 55% of the votes”; see Table 2). Both surveys also asked participants to rate emotion and rehearsal variables on Likert scales.

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