Emotions in politics make us rational

Letting your emotions rule your political decisions isn’t normally a good thing. But new research shows that emotions are among the factors that turn us into rational, well-informed members of a democracy.

Traditionally, letting your emotions rule who you vote for in parliamentary elections is considered as being in bad form.

Good democratic citizens keep up to date and well-informed about the subjects debated in the community and vote rationally, while the uninformed citizens and those with an attitude to politics that is without nuances allow themselves to be controlled by opportunistic and charismatic party leaders.

Traditionally, therefore, an emotional attitude to politics and voting is considered as being uninformed. But new research shows that it is our emotions that turn us into ‘ideal citizens’.

“An emotion such as anxiety often means we are better informed,” says Else Marie Holm, who recently defended her PhD thesis, ‘Emotions as Mediators of Framing Effects’, at Aarhus University’s School of Business and Social Sciences.

“If we’re unsure, worried – anxious – we tend to look for more information and think more about the problem.”

A double-edged sword

Anxiety tends to make us uncertain about our attitudes and makes us look at them again. To make us more certain we try to find new information about the subject that concerns us.

In other words, the emotions we feel of anxiety and uncertainty make us behave more rationally.

As only anxiety has this effect, the results of the studies she conducted for her thesis show that we must differentiate between various types of emotion as their impacts differ.

Holm studied how emotions affect our political standpoint and whether emotions can be manipulated.

But anxiety is a risky emotion for politicians to try to manipulate, as you cannot be certain how citizens will vote once they have gathered additional information.

“If anxiety increases the probability that people change their opinions, then you would think that politicians would simply appeal 100 percent to their anxiety,” says the researcher.

“But it’s a double-edged sword – anxiety can lead to a different attitude than the one the politician wants. In reality, anxiety can lead to people getting information from the politician’s opponent – and perhaps change sides.”
She studied the influence emotions have on voters’ political decision-making at a time when emotions have been more or less ignored in the literature about framing political communication.

“Emotions are overlooked in this literature,” she says. “There’s plenty of literature about emotions and plenty on framing political communication, but very little about how political communication affects people’s political attitudes by playing on emotions.”

Rejected asylum-seekers

Holm used three experiments to see how emotions affect our attitudes, whether she could manipulate the people in the test to have greater or lesser emotions, and whether she could provoke different emotions.

“By putting the emphasis in different places in the same text, for example about rejected asylum-seekers, I could control the direction taken by the emotions of the people in the test,” she says.

“Our emotions depend on our assessment of certain situations, and by adjusting the messages in the texts I could provoke anger or empathy.”

In one study, the people in the test had to consider the subject of rejected asylum-seekers by reading newspaper articles. Depending on whether the text focused on young men or a small girl, the people in the test felt anger or empathy.

But Holm also discovered that she could manipulate the intensity of the emotions by making small detailed corrections in the texts. As a result, the people in the test became very angry over rejected asylum-seekers who in reality wanted to exploit the welfare state – or they became more empathic towards a little girl who fled from war and persecution and was also rejected by Denmark.

Cutbacks in help for poor people

Holm conducted similar studies on health insurance and cutbacks in welfare benefits to the poor.

“I could get people to be more empathic by making the poor person a mother who found it difficult to make ends meet,” she says.

“But they became even more empathic when this poor person was turned into a single mother who could not afford warm shoes or Christmas presents for her little daughter. People find it heart-rending when the subject is made more concrete. In this way you can increase or decrease empathy.”

Anger and empathy are often relevant in politics because they play a role in the fundamental questions of redistribution policies – about who deserves or doesn’t deserve to benefit from redistribution.

“Anger and empathy have direct impact on people’s attitudes,” says the researcher. “If voters show anger over young rejected asylum-seekers, the anger is reflected directly in their attitude – as their sympathy is if they show empathy with a rejected asylum-seeker who happens to be a little girl.”

Provoked anxiety

But the third emotion that Holm provoked, anxiety, leads to rational thinking.

“Anxiety – which means a lot in American electioneering, with its mud-slinging – generates a cognitive decision-making process,” she says.
“Anxiety is thus an emotion that strengthens the idealist picture of well-informed citizens in a democracy. Anxiety shows us that you can prick holes in the myth that emotions are a bad thing in a democracy.”

New research shows that we seek more information if we become anxious. (Photo: Colourbox)

Fact box

**How do you provoke anxiety?**

Emotions – and anxiety in particular – are a natural part of our decision-making process. Even if we do not try to provoke anxiety, new information by itself can be enough to give people a feeling of anxiety in some cases.

In most cases, anxiety will cause us to find out whether the new information suits us and our (near) world and thus how we should look at it.

In her study, Else Marie Holm asked the people in the test if they became troubled, uneasy or concerned by the information they were given to read.

She summarised these three emotions under the heading 'anxiety'.

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Else Marie Holm

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