

Why do our feelings about politics matter – and do they matter more now?



It is too simplistic to argue that current heated debates about politics, especially in the context of Brexit and Trump, are due to the fact that our emotions about politics matter more now than before. [Laura Jenkins](#) argues that our feelings about politics have always mattered. In fact, these recent unexpected political outcomes could prove to be an example of what happens when people's feelings about politics are neglected for too long.

It is becoming increasingly fashionable to argue that how we feel about democratic politics matters *more* now than in the past (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) for some examples). The context to this concerns recent unexpected outcomes: Trump, Brexit, and the rise of reactionary and populist politics across Europe. [Some commentators](#) have gone as far as to declare that emotions have won; they have overridden reason. According to this view, the campaigns by Remain and Clinton failed because they focused on rational and logical arguments which failed to inspire; while Trump and the Leave campaign managed to echo particular groups' feelings (i.e. rage, disgust, distrust, hatred and frustration) and successfully redirect these emotions towards elites and minorities.

It is certainly tempting to assert that politics has become more emotional: people's feelings are raw and intense. But this claim is simplistic. One of the main contentions of [my own research](#) is that how we feel about politics has *always* mattered. The way in which we judge any situation is inherently emotional, while appeals on the grounds of interests or ideas of 'the good' are themselves emotional. Moreover, any political engagement or disengagement is motivated by feelings and any political campaign appeals to, influences, and cultivates particular emotions. For example, although I do not examine Brexit or Trump in my research, the Remain campaign was arguably premised on fear of what withdrawal from the EU would mean. Remain supporters themselves have not been immune from displaying rage and even disgust towards particular groups since the referendum, as well as a great sense of grief, loss, sadness, dread, disappointment, exasperation, and despair. There [has also been reference](#) to a brief period of 'regrexit' – a sense of remorse experienced by some Leave voters.

Indeed, I do not believe that there is *one* convincing emotional explanation for either Brexit or Trump's victory; individuals and groups clearly felt different things for different reasons.



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Why, then, does it *seem* that feelings are more important in politics at the present moment, and that people have become 'bewitched' by the rhetoric of reactionaries? One possibility is that feelings have been emphasized in contemporary accounts because the unanticipated happened. Ambiguity and disappointment have provided ripe conditions for commentators to feel uneasy or fearful about the expression of some emotions by particular groups. Another possibility is because some people's feelings about democratic politics had been neglected and prevented 'uptake' for some time.

My research seeks to show that people frequently express a much wider range of feelings about democratic politics than have been commonly recognized – from alienation to disgust to hatred and anger. More specifically, we could do more to acknowledge the sense in which some groups of people seem to have felt, for a long time, that they didn't matter; that they were left behind; that they were invisible; and had little faith that the political system would do anything about their situation. In short, they felt alienated, disconnected, humiliated, angry, frustrated, and hopeless.

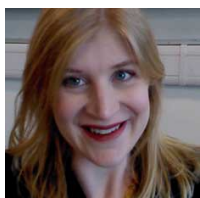
Some of the best explanatory work on the 'mobilisation' of these particular groups comes from ethnographic studies of particular sectors of voters – [Arlie Hochschild's study](#) of poor Trump voters in which she argues that people vote in their emotional self-interest, following their economic despair; and [Lisa MacKenzie's insightful study](#) of Leave voters [among the poor in Britain](#). Holding a grievance towards a political system which has failed to protect or nurture one's wellbeing or perceived interests makes sense. This underlines my conviction that people's feelings and grievances *always* matter. Not everyone who voted for Trump or Brexit displays this particular form of emotional reasoning, however – there are other accounts we need to explore. Yet what perhaps should be the focus of contemporary discussion is what happens [when people's feelings are ignored, dismissed, outlawed, or seen as deviant](#).

It seems unlikely, at this present time of uncertainty, that many people would describe their feelings about politics as hopeful. I argue in my research that this is precisely when a return to hope, rather than despair, is most crucial. It is important to cultivate hope because hope can animate and sustain political action. Indeed, hope has underwritten many progressive campaigns. But hope is not "[immature optimism or a confident disposition, unaware of difficulty or struggle](#)"; rather, it is an emotion "which gives us strength and allows us to continue when things look at their bleakest or the struggle becomes long and arduous." As [Rebecca Solnit](#) explains, hope is found in embracing uncertainty and the unknown. Moreover, hope provides political direction, as well as drive, because hopefulness involves a refusal to give up on the idea of transformative action; on the idea that reality is ameliorable.

Were the Trump and Leave campaigns hopeful? I do not believe that these campaigns were primarily motivated by hope. They do, however, draw on a triumphant and often '[cruel](#)' or [blind optimism](#). Optimism is something distinct from hope; a 'thick' version of it often implies a confidence that good things do or will happen, rather than a belief that things could be otherwise. These campaigns drew on people's vulnerabilities and outlawed emotions but they also understood, crucially, that emotional inspiration is important. The campaigns gave some people something like hope. Or, at the very least, a sizeable group felt that voting was worth a bid [for an alternative to the status quo](#). The biggest lesson of the contemporary period is perhaps that *this* could be what happens when people feel that their feelings and lives do not matter to others.

Note: the above draws on the [author's published work](#) in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

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