

Boredom can lead to more extreme political views

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Credit: King's College London

Boredom may be contributing to a widening of political views among voters, according to a new study by researchers from King's College London and the University of Limerick.

Published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, the findings are based on one experiment and two scientific surveys carried out in the Republic of Ireland.

In their initial experiment the researchers recruited 97 people from a university campus. The participants first indicated their political orientation (whether they considered themselves liberal or conservative) before being randomly assigned to complete either a task deemed to be highly boring or a comparatively less boring task.

Those assigned to the high boredom group transcribed 10 references about concrete mixing, while those assigned to the low boredom group only had to transcribe two of these references. After completing the boring tasks, the researchers asked the participants to describe their political orientation once again. However, this time the participants indicated their political orientation on a seven-point scale.

The researchers found that liberals in the low boredom group were more moderate in their [political orientation](#), compared to liberals in the high boredom group. A similar trend was found for conservatives, though it was not statistically significant as there were only 26 politically right-wing participants, which reduced the study's statistical power.

The study authors also conducted a survey of 859 people living in Ireland and found that people who were easily bored tended to endorse more extreme political views. Another survey of 300 people found that being prone to boredom was associated with searching for meaning in life, which was in turn associated with political extremism.

Dr Wijnand van Tilburg from King's College London said: 'Boredom puts people on edge - it makes them seek engagements that are challenging, exciting, and that offer a sense of purpose. Political ideologies can aid this existential quest.'

He added: 'Boredom motivates people to alter their situation and fosters the engagement in activities that seem more meaningful than those currently at hand.' The authors suggest that adopting a more extreme political ideology is one way that people re-inject meaningfulness into a boring situation.

Dr Eric Igou from the University of Limerick, said: 'These studies indicate that [political views](#) are, in part, based on boredom and the need to counteract these negative, existential experiences with ideologies that

seem to provide meaning in life. The implications of these findings are obvious. Possibly politically radicalised individuals and groups are, at least to some degree, driven by boredom experiences in their everyday lives as an attempt to make life seem more meaningful.'

However, the researchers point out that although boredom appears to play a role in the political climate, it is unclear how big a role it plays.

Dr van Tilburg added: 'Political orientations, or the political climate in general, is of course a complex phenomenon influenced by many variables. Our research tested and found that boredom is one of them, but we did not fully test how big its role is.

'Importantly, it may well be that the importance of boredom in context of the political climate varies across contexts. For example, when there are other very strong factors in play then the influence of boredom may be overshadowed, and vice versa.

'To gain more insight into the magnitude of boredom's role one could test, say, how voters behave in an election and see how that correlates with individual differences in boredom. At present, we do not have such data but this is clearly an interesting future direction for researchers who study [boredom](#) and voting behaviour.'

More information: Wijnand A. P. Van Tilburg et al. Going to political extremes in response to boredom, *European Journal of Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2205](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2205)

Provided by King's College London

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