

Emotions key to deciding elections, not economics or party platforms

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Elections and referendums may be decided by the emotional well-being of voters, new research from the University of Warwick suggests. Led by researchers from Warwick's Department of Economics the study suggests that elections and referendums decided by small margins – such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump – could entirely be the result of voters' emotions, irrespective of their economic circumstances or the role governments play in their lives.

Discussing the findings Dr Eugenio Proto, a co-author of the study, said: "This study confirms the general widespread concern that [voters](#) are not completely rational when they cast their ballot, an issue that needs to be taken seriously into account for the correct functioning of our democratic institutions. "In the context of recent events, observed on the international political scene - such as the vote for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, our result is important, because it suggests that political victory of new entrants could be due to factors unrelated to the assessment of past policies implemented by the incumbent or to the lack of confidence on the future of the economy."

The study of UK voters, conducted using the British Household Panel and involving over 4000 respondents interviewed every year within the period between 1996 and 2008, sought to understand the extent to which citizens consider the past performance of a political party when choosing whether to cast a vote in its favour. By analysing the voting behaviour of individual participants the researchers found that:

- individuals who experience the death of a spouse are around 10% less likely to support the incumbent party, even when elected officials' policies (health care, social welfare) cannot reasonably be blamed for the death
- those who are satisfied with their life are 1.6% more likely to support the incumbent
- a 10% increase in family income leads to a 0.18% increase in an individual's support of the incumbent

Commenting on the study lead researcher Dr Michela Redoano said: "The study provides evidences that not only money but, more generally, wellbeing matters when voters make up their voting decisions. The research also highlights gender differences in voting behaviour: women tend to be less rational than men at the ballot. Women whose husbands die are more likely than men to drop their support for government, even if the death of the spouse has nothing to do with government's actions." Dr Federica Liberini, of ETH, Zurich and fellow co-author the study, said: "The subjective perception of one's wellbeing significantly influences the political decision of British voters. The study shows that events of entirely personal nature affects the voters' ability to reward or punish the incumbent government in a rational manner and that this is true beyond an objective and subjective assessment of one's financial conditions."

More information: Federica Liberini et al. Happy Voters, *Journal of Public Economics* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2016.11.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2016.11.013)

Provided by University of Warwick

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