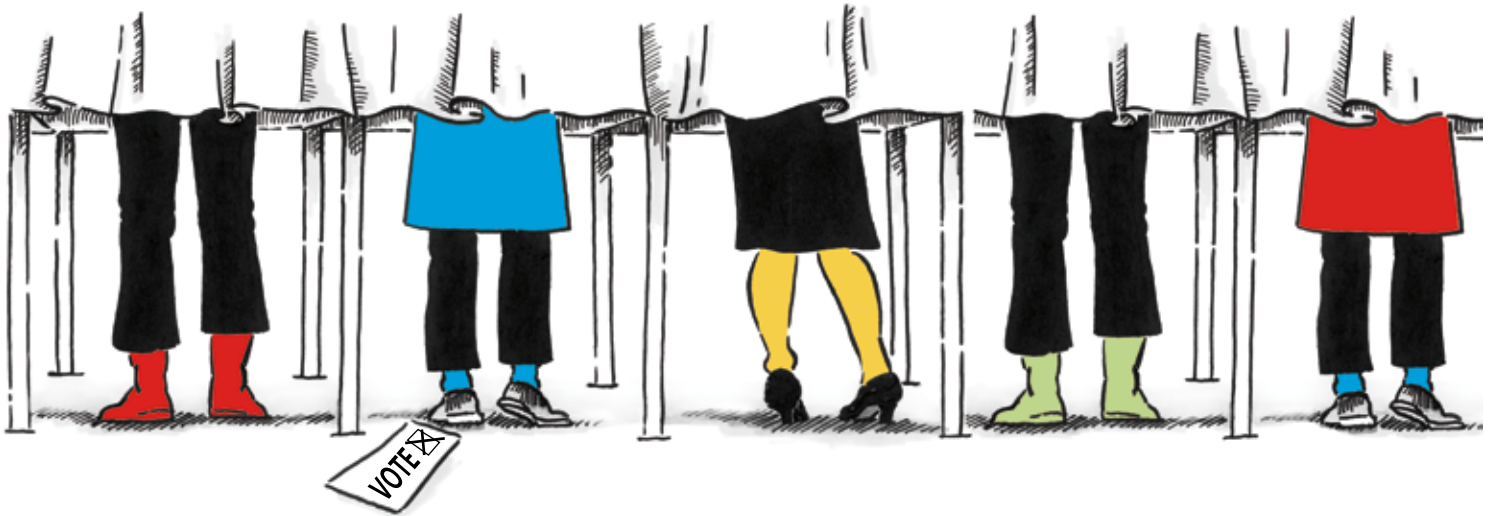


Secrets of the ballot box



Michael Bruter has won a major European research grant to bring electoral psychology to LSE. Here he explains why he wants to get inside voters' heads in the sanctity of the polling booth.

At some point next year, British voters will be invited to cast their vote in what most political scientists expect to be a significant 'realignment election'. Good old election time! You may remember the rather solemn entrance, the ritual questions to verify your name and address, being handed your ballot paper and... and what? It is extraordinary how little political scientists know about what actually goes through the minds of voters while they are in the secrecy of the polling booth, form in hand, ready to cast their vote in what is probably the most intense moment of civic communion between a citizen and their democracy.

This is precisely the object of a €1.2 million project financed by the European Research Council, which I will carry out over the next five years to explore new perspectives in electoral psychology, and create Europe's first and only research structure specifically dedicated to this field.

The project was selected amongst thousands of competing applications across dozens of disciplines. The call for applicants represented an ambitious competition organised by the European Union to support cutting edge research led by leading young European scholars.

What will British voters think about when they decide whether to give another go to a Conservative government 13 years after John Major's historic 1997 defeat, or, instead, to defy all opinion polls and re-elect Labour for an unprecedented fourth consecutive term? We know about the issues many people will have considered in the months that precede the election: expense scandals,

economic and financial crisis, military involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan, and so on. But elections are not reduced to a mere context and a few topical issues. Election after election, we know that up to 30 per cent of voters, once in the polling booth, do not end up behaving as they were expected to just a few days earlier. For many of us, the act of voting retains a certain solemnity, and as a result, some deeper and older psychological attributes sometimes counteract our more epidemic reactions to short term issues and context at the time when it really matters.

The project, which I will direct, with Sarah Harrison as research officer, thus includes an ambitious research plan aimed at capturing what goes on in the minds of voters as – and just before – they vote. It will be conducted in the USA, the UK, Australia, France, Spain, Austria and Hungary and will use an extensive array of cross-cutting methodologies: mass surveys, repeat interviews, experiments, focus groups, and direct observation. It will explore the 'hidden part' of voters' minds, the projection of their perceived civic responsibility, their electoral memory, and the psychological mechanisms at stake when voters decide.

This is an ambitious project. Electoral psychology has the potential to address questions which have puzzled electoral specialists for decades. Ultimately, this project will aim to capture what citizens try to express through their vote in elections and referendums, how they see their role in contemporary democracies and how they relate to their political institutions and systems.

The other essential aspect of the project is that it will create the first and only research structure to focus on electoral psychology in Europe. Attached to the Department of Government the new structure will be interdisciplinary and will be of interest not only to many political scientists, but also to many scholars in social psychology, research methods, communication, history and European studies.

Activities will include monthly seminars with prestigious speakers structured along annual themes, regular research workshops, and large international conferences, the first of which will be held in 2010 and the next in 2014. Some of the seminar series themes for the coming years include electoral psychology and referendums, the decisions of 'last-minute' voters, and the political psychology of protest. The project will provide for one new fully sponsored doctoral student each year and we look forward to collaborating with some extremely prestigious partner institutions in other countries. ■



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