

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

Inside the mind of a voter

Published 18 January 2021



Dr Sarah Harrison is Assistant Professorial Research Fellow in the Department of Government and Deputy Director of the Electoral Psychology Observatory at LSE. She is editor of a forthcoming special issue of *Societies* on “Electoral Psychology” and of a forthcoming book entitled *Inside the Mind of a Voter* (Princeton University Press with Michael Bruter).



Professor Michael Bruter is Professor of Political Science and European Politics in the Department of Government at LSE, and Director of the Electoral Psychology Observatory at LSE.

From the EU referendum of 2016 to the recent US election, it has been a turbulent time for world politics. **Sarah Harrison** and **Michael Bruter** discuss their research on voter psychology and the implications their findings could have on electoral politics.

The last decade has seen seismic electoral change.

At the start of 2010, New Labour were in power in the UK, Barack Obama was the President of the United States and the phrase “Brexit” hadn’t even been coined.

Ten years later, the UK has experienced several fractious elections, two hung parliaments and a divisive referendum. The US has seen an equally schismatic election, with the voting-in of President Donald Trump, who sharply divided opinion, and the more recent election of President-elect Joe Biden, which followed a campaign that perpetuated earlier divisions.



Elections have come to shape and define our condition as human beings. ”

How has voter psychology changed in the last decade?

In our new book, *Inside the Mind of a Voter*, we examine elections in the last ten years in six countries from the US to France and from South Africa to the UK and explore the psychology of voters.

Traditionally, it was always thought there was a cyclical rhythm to elections. This cycle started with an official electoral campaign and ended on election night. After an election, there would be an ‘electoral honeymoon’ with citizens coming together and supporting the outcome of the democratic process.

This shared sense of convergence would provide legitimacy to the political system and rejuvenate citizens’ support for democracy.

However, there is emerging evidence that some elections do not “close” this cycle, particularly if there is no sense of resolution shared by those who supported the winning and losing camps.

In *Inside the Mind of a Voter*, we argue that the 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections were merely the continuation of an electoral cycle which started with the campaign for the 2016 “Brexit referendum”.

Similarly, for many American citizens, the 2020 Presidential election may be part of the cycle that was never closed with the election of Trump in 2016. For many who voted for Hilary Clinton, the result offered no resolution. As a result, we have seen an incredibly tense four years in US politics.

Taking the Hostility Barometer to the US elections

In May last year, we launched a Hostility Barometer USA in partnership with opinion research agency, Opinium. This Hostility Barometer mirrors the one we created and launched in the UK in May 2019 to explore the atmosphere of elections and how voters feel towards each other, and notably those who vote differently from them.



Some citizens see their role as that of supporters and others see their role as that of referees.

Six months before the 2020 Presidential election, our findings revealed that Americans were already feeling the atmosphere had turned negative. Two in five described the mood as divisive (45 per cent), hostile, frustrating (both 44 per cent) or aggressive (43 per cent) and 38 per cent even described it as poisonous.

Moreover, the negativity was not confined to the atmosphere of the election but was often directed towards other citizens who are thought to be opposite voters. Just under half (47 per cent) admitted they feel a sense of frustration, two fifths (42 per cent) expressed distrust and 38 per cent even felt disgust for those who vote for a different political party. Many believed this hostility was increasing, with 41 per cent perceiving a sense of ever-growing distance.

This does not bode well for the country coming together and finding resolution whichever way the election result goes, though in fairness this echoes the situation we have already uncovered in Britain in the first five waves of our Hostility Barometer UK.

On balance, the current situation in the US is so fractious that despite an immense number of US citizens making it clear they are desperate for closure and conciliation, it does not seem very likely it will be forthcoming any time soon.

Solutions to a problem that impacts all our lives

In our book, we argue that to help understand and address these problems, we need to better understand voters’ psychology. Indeed, in many ways, we believe elections have come to shape and define our condition as human beings. They come to interplay with our lives, our personalities, our emotions and the way we interact with others.

What is electoral ergonomics?
Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison
explain in this film on [LSE Player](#).

*Inside the Mind of a Voter: a new
approach to electoral psychology* by
Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison
is published by Princeton University
Press.

Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison
conducted a representative survey
on election day for the US
Presidential Elections 2020.
Analysis of the findings will be
published on the [Electoral
Psychology Observatory's](#) website.

The first anniversary of the
Electoral Psychology Observatory
(EPO), based at LSE, will be
celebrated with a public event
scheduled on 4 February 2021.
More details will be published at
www.epob.org.

**Subscribe to receive
articles from LSE's online
social science magazine.**

lse.ac.uk/rftw

We believe citizens embrace a “role” in elections. Take the analogy of a major sports event like the Super Bowl. If political parties represent teams fighting for victory, we argue some citizens see their role as that of supporters and others see their role as that of referees. This has massive implications for the way we vote, experience campaigns and interact with other citizens. A citizen who casts a vote does not register a “preference” but instead tries to fulfil a (subconscious) function.

The moment we stop seeing a vote as the simple expression of a preference, the core assumption of virtually all existing models of voting collapse and the consequences are tectonic.

Suddenly, elections can no longer be seen as merely “taking stock” and weighing preferences, they become, instead, a complex system where even the role of voters is disputed. In this system, many citizens try to do what they consider to be their best, but get frustrated at others who they see as not just holding different opinions, but as sometimes acting for the wrong reasons and against the interest of society and its future. ■