

The Age of Electoral Hostility

Understanding the Nature, Dynamics, Determinants, and Consequences of Citizens' Electoral Hostility in 27 Democracies

Michael Bruter

Introduction

"ELHO – The Age of Hostility" is an ambitious, and innovative cross-methodological investigation into the rising phenomenon of electoral hostility around the democratic world. Why do so many people hold negative feelings towards those they believe vote differently from them? What are the psychological phases of hostility – from misunderstanding and frustration to contempt and hatred? What is the cycle of hostility when does it crystallise and deteriorate? And how can it be worsened or improved by legal, electoral, and political organisation and behaviour?

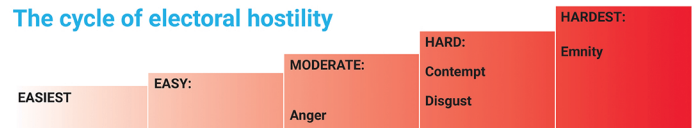


Main Findings

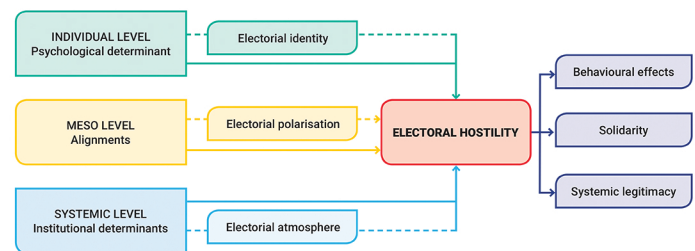
"I hate Brexiteers, they betrayed my future". Those words of an 18 year old on Brexit Referendum Night represent a growing and worrying phenomenon: electoral hostility. Electoral disagreements have long been seen as results of social divisions, but recent research shows that they have become a basis of antagonism in their own right in the US. Two comparative pilots I ran also found electoral hostility widespread in recent French and British elections but rare in South Africa and Australia. In the UK Brexit Referendum, 51 per cent of citizens felt anger towards opposite voters and 46 per cent disgust.

We define electoral hostility as negative feelings (frustration, anger, contempt, disgust, etc) held towards individuals or groups as a result of their effective or perceived electoral preferences. It may occur in the campaign, post-election, and reinforce into self-perpetuating cycles of hostility organised into "stages" which represent further levels of deterioration. While scepticism of political elites is well-studied, hostility towards fellow voters takes electoral negativity to a new level. Electoral hostility may have far reaching consequences, leading citizens to resent one another due to electoral stances and drift apart in increasingly divided societies, but also to the delegitimisation of electoral outcomes and negative attitudes towards solidarity. Unlike existing models of affective polarisation, hostility is not related to partisanship (it can refer to any other aspect of

The cycle of electoral hostility



The model



electoralised political preference such as issues or people), and it can affect people who do not even necessarily care a lot about politics as we model hostility not as a consequence of partisan identity but instead as a new level of degeneration of the increasing negative feelings people harbour towards their political systems and which lead to democratic dissatisfaction, distrust, frustration, and cynicism.

ELHO answers the following research question: What are the causes and consequences of electoral hostility at individual, group, and aggregate levels and how does it develop over time?

The project's innovative methods combine a 27 country multi-level panel survey, visual and physiological experiments, election diaries, family focus groups, a

scoping survey of Election Management Bodies, and campaign and atmosphere coding. The project will also explore possible mitigation in ambitious partnership with psychiatrists, ergonomists, lawyers, EMBs and IGOs.



This and our other ongoing projects also led us to create a new Electoral Psychology Observatory located in the Department of Government.

Impact

As part of the project, we collaborate closely with diverse Electoral Commissions across Europe and the world and also look at the electoral experience of citizens and notably of citizens with disabilities including mental disabilities and learning impediments.

Publications

Bruter, M. and Harrison, S. 2020. *Inside the Mind of a Voter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Harrison, S (editor). *Electoral Psychology*. Special issue of *Societies*.

Bruter, M. and Harrison, S. 2017. "Understanding the Emotional Act of Voting". *Nature: Human Behaviour*. Vol 1.

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