

It's the emotions, stupid! or the politics of emotions

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<http://anglodeutsch.eu/its-the-emotions-stupid/>

[James Carville](#) will be remembered as the strategist during Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign that gave us what has become the political mantra: "*It's the economy, stupid!*" as a reminder of what to focus on. But a generation later, as we enter a new political phase, facts (e.g. the unemployment rate, GDP growth, exports, contribution of immigration, etc.) are no longer so important. Furthermore, expertise, evidence, independent analysis, etc. do not seem to carry as much weight as subjective feelings or emotions. This is the politics of emotions and perhaps it is time for "*It's the emotions, stupid!*" to enter the political lexicon.

Post-factual politics / politics of emotions

The Brexit Referendum was the first serious and persistent post-factual political campaign in Britain. This was not necessarily something new but rather a culmination of a process which has been evolving for some time. It was already at an advanced stage of development during the Scottish referendum in 2015, where the emphasis of the campaign was very much on tapping one particular emotion: fear. The campaign was unrelenting in its focus on the negative implications of Scotland leaving the UK.

The fear-based campaign, mainly by those seeking to retain the status quo, did not go entirely according to plan. Despite the British government milking the fear factor for all it was worth, it was not sufficient to persuade the Scottish electorate to remain in the Union. The polls were fairly consistent in showing that despite the unrelenting emphasis on the negative, the majority of adults in Scotland were still tending towards voting in favour of seceding from the UK. It was only in the last few days of the campaign that a shift towards remaining part of the UK occurred, coinciding with the British government changing tack and unashamedly bribing the voters with all manner of concessions. Even so, it just about managed to gain a majority for the Union to remain intact. The highest recorded turnout (85%) in the UK resulted in a narrow vote (55.3%) against Scottish independence.

The recent EU referendum Remain campaign, led by Mr David Cameron and his then heir apparent, Mr David Osborne, clearly failed to learn the lessons of that narrow, last-minute turnaround in the campaign. The key strategy devised by the Remain campaign leading to the ballot on the 23 June 2016 was more of the same, otherwise known as "Project Fear". All the possible negatives, especially the economic ones, of voting to leave the EU were magnified and pushed for all they were worth by the Remain campaign. Vast amounts of data analysis and facts were deployed with the tradition emphasis on "*it's the economy, stupid!*" These arguments were reinforced up by various statesmen, such as Barack Obama, as well as reputable institutions such as the OECD, World Bank, IMF, economists, etc.

George Osborne, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer (Minister of Finance) was tasked with carrying out the economic analysing and publicising the [Treasury's assessment of the implications of Brexit](#). The basic conclusion was that Brexit would tip the economy into recession, 500,000+ people would lose their jobs and wages would decline, as would house prices. In 15 years, the economy would be 6.2% smaller,

resulting in a loss of £4,300 for every household. The expectation was that this would put the fear of god in people and deliver a government victory.

It was plausible, it was fact-based and it preyed on people's worst economic fears. No effort was made at all to make a case for remaining in the EU; I cannot remember a single discussion or comment or a positive nature that was ever pushed by the Remain campaign. The result is well-known: 52% voted to leave, 48% voted to remain. It was undoubtedly the single most momentous political result of recent times and will affect Britain and the rest of the EU for the foreseeable future.

The lessons of the Scottish Referendum, combined with the post-factual approaches deployed by Donald Trump across the Big Pond, were clearly analysed much more carefully by the Leave Campaign than by the Remainers. They too decided to focus on people's fears but from a very different angle. It was not based on sophisticated econometric models that almost no one understands to magic a 6.2% reduction in GDP and thus a loss of £4,300 in the next 15 years. The Brexiters' approach was very simple - it was exaggerated, it was not fact-based and it pandered directly to people's fears and concerns today. If Remain's focus was characterised as "Project Fear", the Brexiters' approach can be summed up as "Project Lies". It was underpinned by a determination to dismiss and discredit all government and/or independent analyses, facts and expertise as being somehow biased because they had to be benefiting from EU funds.

The Brexiters concentrated primarily but not exclusively on the fears of the non-working, working and lower middle classes in the UK. Fears of immigrants (from the EU, though they account for less than 50% of all immigration), fears of job losses (though the UK has almost full employment – 4.9%) and stagnating wages (though almost all studies suggest otherwise), fear of losing control over our lives (i.e. the EU / European Parliament / European Commission making laws and regulations instead of the UK Parliament), all combined with a hefty dose of resentment towards the elites (taking more than their fair share of the economic pie). This was all combined with arguments about the NHS (an exaggerated £350m-a-week currently going to the EU which would be ploughed into the NHS instead – not a penny has been redirected so far), the housing crisis (blamed on EU immigrants and wealthy foreigners, though Britain has failed to build adequate housing for many decades), etc.

Emotions / fears / concerns galore

History has shown over and over again, that strong emotions / fears / concerns can be exploited by those who offer change in the form of simple but evocative messages; Donald Trump has demonstrated the power of simplistic but populist messages, using Twitter, regardless of grammar or facts. The reason why these emotion-laden messages are so powerful is that they are not at all abstract (such as the Treasury / OECD / IMF / World Bank models) but embedded in people's biases and/or experiences.

There is plenty of evidence that for decades the non-working, working and lower middle classes in many Western countries have been lost economic ground, while the elites have prospered from the ongoing forces of globalisation, greatly accentuated recently by the austerity drives (see below). Inequality has grown, wages have stagnated, tax policies have favoured the better off, while those dependent on key elements of the welfare state, including the middle classes (child benefit, tax credit, etc.), have systematically lost out as the impact of austerity has spread out. This has not been helped by the privately educated/ elites controlling successive governments, yet failing to recognise or deal with the problems

faced by normal individuals and their families.

Referendums may work quite well for specific issues, such as whether to allow abortion or same sex-marriage but they are not at all geared to answering complex issues, such as whether to remain in the EU in the form or a simple “yes / no” answer. So when the opportunity arose to give the government / elites a bloody nose, it was obviously just too good an opportunity to pass-up, despite (or partly because of) the messages being put out by Project Fear.

Having gone through with the referendum, the new Conservative government cannot simply backtrack from the outcome of the vote. Doing so would fatally undermine democracy in Britain and unleash potentially far worse than what we are currently witnessing in the form of the current wave of populism. This populism seeks to take advantage of the fact that many people are no longer interested in facts and figures or weighing-up the pros and cons of different arguments. They are much more minded to follow their instincts or biases, as vented by people such as Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Marie le Pen and quite a few others in Italy, Poland, Hungary, etc.

Raw emotions as politics (according to Home Office figures, 1,000 Syrian refugees were resettled under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme in 2015. 1+ million refugees were accepted by Germany)

This strain of post-factual politics of emotions is not predicated on the traditional political dividing lines of left (Socialism/Social Democracy) or right (Conservatism/Republicanism) – it is cross-cutting in nature. The trigger issues are broad and generic yet connected with emotional impulses strong enough to transcend traditional party lines and similar allegiances. This was evident in the Brexit campaign, it was seen in the US Presidential election and strains of it are evident in France and other European countries. It is here to stay.

The emotive themes of the post-factual politics of fear are fairly common, regardless of which country is in question. This includes fear of powerful elites (e.g. Brussels/Washington D.C.), foreigners (EU / Mexicans, refugees, etc.), globalisation (trade deals, China, etc.), terrorism (Al Qaida, IS, etc.), cultural change (Islam, immigrants, refugees, etc.), etc.

No amount of logic, analysis or expertise can counteract the emotional triggers that many people have to such themes. A clear example of this was the deliberate dismissal of “experts” during the Brexit debates. Michael Gove made the situation crystal clear whenever confronted with facts/figures/experts that did not align with the case he was making for Brexit with the following: “[People in this country have had enough of experts.](#)” Truth be told, that particular soundbite had the ring of truth about it. People would much rather trust their own experiences / emotions / prejudices than listen to what experts have to say, unless those views conform with their world view and preferably in easily digestible messages (not exactly something that experts excel at).

The main themes include the following:

- Control of own borders
- European Union
- Patriotism/Nationalism
- Immigration

- Refugees/asylum
- Muslim culture
- Terrorism
- Trade / Globalisation
- Elitism / 1%
- Lower real incomes.

Other themes could have been added to the list, such as same-sex marriage, transgender, abortion, global warming, etc. which are all highly emotive, but the list illustrates the general issues. In the case of Donald Trump, a whole new set of additional issues could have been added such as racism, xenophobia, bigotry, misogyny, narcissism, etc. One can only hope that Trump's particular strain of post-factual populism is not the future of politics, though I fear it already is.

Variations on a theme

Almost all the themes are negative in nature; they instill anxieties and fears in people. The only exception is nationalism / patriotism which, generally leads to positive feelings such as pride in one's country. History is replete with examples of how easily both positive and negative feelings can be manipulated, misused and abused. Patriotism is particularly strong in the US, with its melting pot but less so in Britain, with its former empire. The Germans, the culprits of two World Wars, are rather more interested in forging a European identity, though this is has been slowly changing in recent times.

There are clearly variations. The European Union (EU) does not figure large in people's perceptions in the USA but is something that the UK has been in two minds about since the formation of the EEC in 1958: there has always been an ambivalent relationship involved. The opposite applies to Germany: it has traditionally had an unquestioning stance to the EU where traditionally the French have made the strategic decisions (Marie le Pen would call for a referendum to pull France out of both the EU and the Euro) and the Germans have paid for them. This started changing during Gerhard Schröder's Chancellorship and accelerated with the Euro crisis, and the advent of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which initially wanted out of the Euro but under new leadership has evolved into an anti-immigrant/refugee/Islam party and could eventually become anti-EU.

The perception in Germany was initially that it was paying for the economic and other economic mistakes of other EU countries, especially the Mediterranean ones. This evolved into concern over the dangers to the Euro risks for Germany itself, followed by a blistering critique of the European Central Bank's policy of near zero interest rates and quantitative easing. The country is also experiencing angst about its capacity to absorb over 1 million mostly Muslim young men that the other EU countries (with the exception of Austria and Sweden) were completely unwilling to share. More recently, this has transmuted into concern about terrorism and attacks on German soil.

A clear trend is evident: the politics of emotions is tapping into fears and concerns about immigration generally and refugees and asylum seekers specifically. The key immigrants in the USA are the Mexicans, something that the US has a long history of, not all of it proud, such as the forcible deportation of 500,000 - 2 million people during 1929 to 1936. Trump milked this theme to the maximum extent possible with his talk of building a "big beautiful wall", of making Mexico pay for it and of getting rid of illegal immigrants from day one of his Presidency. None of this was based on fact but it hardly dented his

popularity among large segments of the population, including many of Hispanic descent.

The referendum debate on immigration in the UK has verged on the xenophobic and racist, despite the fact that EU immigration involves mostly white European migrants. Immigration was and remains the most vivid expression of people's concerns. In this respect, Germany is different to other nations by virtue of its role in the past in respect to groups such as Jews, Roma, disabled, etc. For this reason, there is no indication at present of Germany reacting badly to EU migration (but see discussion below about recent influx of refugees), though it is happening on an unprecedented scale which dwarfs the immigration in countries such as the UK (1,13 million in 2015). This may change in time, though the ageing population structure of the country is a countervailing factor.

The ire of the Germans, particularly evident during 2015, was focused on the implications of Germany absorbing 1.1 million asylum seekers and refugees and the still relatively large numbers expected in future (the forecast is [300,000 in 2016](#)). It all started well, with Germans going out of their way to be welcoming but quickly deteriorated as the cultural and economic strains became apparent. To be fair, the wave of intense concern, particularly notable during the New Year period, has waned as the sheer numbers being received by the country have abated in 2016. A blip was still evident during the summer due to various terrorist and other incidents.

In the UK, known for its open racism during the 1950s to 1970s (recall private landlord adverts: No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish), recent anger towards EU migration started initially with a focus on the Poles and then extend to the Romanians (especially Roma) and pretty much all EU immigrants have implicitly been targeted during and since the referendum in June 2016. Who knows if and when this feeling may be extended to all other migrants, regardless of origin or the length of time they have lived and worked in the UK. The populists of the post-factual era are sure to milk this particular negative sentiment, especially during the drawn-out period of Brexit negotiations that will last at least until 2019. This is all the more likely because the British government still has no plan for Brexit and the other EU nations are highly unlikely to offer Britain a good Brexit deal. The risk of other countries following suit is just too great for this to happen.

Pressing the sore spot

The next two themes are particularly emotive, namely fear of terrorism and the influence on Muslim culture on Western societies. This is a particularly rich vein for post-factual politics, since this is probably where the most intense fears reside. I have shown that people's [perception of the size of the Muslim population is totally out of proportion compared with the reality](#). The following illustrates the [data](#) for the three countries in question:

Country	Muslim Population	% of Population	% 2030
Germany	4.1 million	5%	7.1%
UK	2.8 million	4.6%	8.2%
USA	2,6 million	0.8%	1.7%

These data refer to 2010 as I could not find more recent comparable information for the three countries.

Since 2015, there would have been an increase of approximately 1.1 million Muslims in Germany alone (i.e. 6.3% of the population) and this will continue, albeit at a lower rate. Overall, the Muslim share of EU's total population was 5% in 2010 and is expected to increase to 8% by 2030. The fact that the Muslim population remains relatively small seems to cut little ice with many people, especially the older age groups. There is intense concern about the possible loss of cultural identity, combined with strong doubts about the willingness of the Muslim communities to integrate. This is and will continue to be a powerful emotion to tap into; many are intent on exploiting it.

Fear of terrorist attacks is at least as powerful, if not more so. The reality is that the chances of dying in a terrorist attack while on a plane is 1 in 25 million and the overall average chances of dying in any kind of terrorist attack worldwide is [1 in 9.3 million](#). There were at least 155 Americans killed by police officers in the United States in 2011, which means that people are about 10 times more likely to be killed by a law enforcement officer than by a terrorist. Worldwide, people are 517 times more likely to be murdered, 500 times more likely to die in a car accident, 41 times more likely to die in natural disasters and 1.8 million times more likely to die of heart disease than being killed in a terrorist attack. However, none of this matters because negative emotions trump facts (pun intended) - every time.

But I am falling again into the trap of talking about data / statistics / evidence in the post-factual political age.

The combination of fear of cultural change as a result of the perceived "Islamification" of Europe and the clear association with terrorism is such a potent mix in people's minds and there is little antidote to it, other than public education. Unfortunately, not only is this imperfect, it also takes a hell of a long time to permeate minds and influence public perceptions, time which the proponents of post-factual politics will put to use in the pursuit of a simplistic but emotionally charged agenda.

The last set of themes listed above concern an amalgam of globalisation/trade deals/deteriorating incomes/elitism. In this particular case, I can relate to the panoply of emotional pulls what populists in the post-factual era are latching on to.

There is increasing evidence produced by academics such as [Thomas Piketty](#), who argues that the rate of capital return in developed countries is persistently greater than the rate of economic growth and that this not only causes wealth inequality, but that inequality will also increase in the future unless redistribution occurs through a progressive global tax on wealth.

This is intensifying the "them and us" divide and connects with a range of themes relating to the stresses and strains caused by international trade and globalisation, combined with growing social polarisation / inequality. This is the discourse of the 1% / elites taking a disproportionate bite off the economic pie compared with the non-working/working population (globally speaking, anyone with an [income of EUR 30,000](#) p.a. belongs to the 1%). The lower and middle-income groups have also experienced the brunt of the effects of austerity, combined with the increasing job insecurity, resulting in deteriorating real incomes and state benefits. This led to a pronounced backlash against the elites, including the political and financial professions. These trends more than compensate for the countervailing influence of the remarkably low levels of unemployment (4.9% in USA/UK and 6.1% in Germany, September 2016) which pertain today.

What of the future?

So what does the post-factual, feeling based politics mean for Britain, Germany, Europe and indeed the rest of the world?

It means that are all in for a roller coaster political ride for the foreseeable future.

And it also means that the democracies discussed in this post are in deep trouble, unless the global economy not only starts growing strongly soon, but the resulting economic benefits are much more equally distributed in the future.

But the chances of both happening any time soon are about as high as the likelihood of being caught in a terrorist attack.