Before Participation: Emotions and Politics

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Are Voters Rational?

A lot of academic energy has been spent on the question of *how* people vote. An equally interesting question is *why* people vote and participate in politics in the first place. In this article I will outline the misperception of political participation as a purely rational act, the role of emotions and morality in group formation, and conclude with a section on what this means for contemporary politics in Europe. The observation that political participation is not only a means of individual utility maximization is especially important with regards to the youth vote, for young people show a specific tendency to be influenced by emotional appeals in politics. Whether it is the success of Barack Obama in the United States the initially strong electoral showing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the rise of right-wing parties in Europe – in all these cases emotional arguments played a central role in mobilizing the youth vote, while European Union politics seem to lack precisely the emotional aspect to get young people to vote (Von Drehle 2008; Keeter, Horowitz, und Tyson 2008; Martini, Kaye, und York 2012).

In the past this avenue of questioning suffered considerable neglect due to the dominance of the rational-choice approach in the social sciences, especially in economics and political science. According to rational-choice theorists, voters participate in elections, if their individual well-being is at stake, meaning that they will vote for the candidate who promises them the largest economic benefits.In recent years, however, a number of studies has cast considerable doubt on the validity of this general claim. While there are particular instances where voters behave in ways predicted by rational-choice approaches, especially if the potential material gains or losses

are "substantial, imminent, and well publicized" (Kinder 1998: 802), these cases seem to be the exception much more than the rule. That people have a potential tendency to vote against their economic interest has been puzzling for social scientists (Caplan 2008), who operate under the paradigmatic framework of methodological individualism. Such behavior becomes more understandable if we look at human beings not only as rational, but also as social and emotional beings. Past studies have tended to neglect the role of sentiments and expressives (Graham 2010), and there is only a limited number of studies that applies these approaches in the e-participation context. What seems to be a common trait, however, is that strong emotions often have a positive effect on participation. Anger, for example, can turn into greater voter turnouts at elections (Valentino et al. 2011). The desire to stay informed about politics is correlated with feelings of anxiety and unease (Jones, Hoffman, and Young 2013), while positive emotions like optimism change and intensify the perception of our political surroundings.

One of the most worrisome trends in modern democracies is the decreasing participation of young people in elections and political processes (Galston 2004; Levine and Lopez 2002). Although there is an ongoing debate about whether political participation in general is declining, it is definitely true for the younger population in Western democracies (Galston 2004, 265; McDonald and Popkin 2001). The inactivity of young people in the traditional venues of politics is problematic, because it increases the risk that dissatisfaction and frustration with the political system will be channeled into potentially violent directions. In this paper I argue that one reason for the decline in political participation is the neglect of emotional factors as an important element in the willingness of individuals to engage in politics. There is a growing body of literature that highlights the importance of emotions in analyzing mass political behavior (Jones, Hoffman, and Young 2013; Nabi 1999), indicating that appeals to reason and rationality will not be sufficient to re-ignite individual engagement with politics.

One of the most surprising findings in recent years was that it is not the disengaged citizens that react most strongly to emotional appeals, but that it is actually the engaged citizens who are influenced by emotional cues (Jones, Hoffman, and Young 2013). In general, however, there seems to be a positive correlation between states of emotional elevation and political participation (Brader 2005; Valentino et al. 2011) Certain research even suggests that the desire for emotional experience itself is a potential motivator for political participation. According to

this argument, the actual politics are only secondary, as long as the act of participating would satisfy the individual emotional need for identity and belonging to a community (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). In times where an increasing number of young people feel drawn towards radical political or religious movements, further research in this area is of high importance.

In his *What's the Matter with Kansas*, (Frank 2005) author Thomas Frank argued that the voters of Kansas continue to vote against their economic self-interest because they have been "duped" by conservatives to vote for them on moral issues like abortion and gun rights. Although there was a debate about the factual correctness of that claim, it does strongly reflect the modern perception of voting behavior: rational voters act according to their material benefits – if not, they seem to be acting irrationally. This logic, however, can be overcome if we take a close look at more recent findings from social and evolutionary psychology (Marcus 2002, Westen 2008) and identity economics, two fields that have considerably expanded our notion and understanding of human behavior. George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton (2011) point out that voters do not only have "economic interests but also an identity and norms and ideals, and incorporating these into the model would lead to quite different predictions […] Candidates who appeal to voters' ideals and norms may be elected even if their economic interests are contrary to voters' economic interests" (Akerlof/Kranton 2011, Kindle Location 2034). If this behavior is more widespread than originally anticipated, its dismissal as being merely "irrational" will not serve as a sufficient explanation. It is important to understand the driving psychological forces behind the non-material motivators of human action.

Individuals do not define themselves by material possessions or the desire for such alone, but they also adhere to cultural norms in order to satisfy a psychological desire of being recognized as the member of specific groups (Fukuyama 2006, Hogg and Abrams 1988, Tajfel 2010). Experimental psychology had continuously robust findings that the identity choices of individuals play directly into fields like investment choices or risk aversion, showing that the rationality of certain behavior cannot be defined without taking the social and cultural context into account (Benjamin/Choi/Strickland 2007). The role of identity plays such a strong role that people behave differently when they are acting under reminders (even subtle ones) of their ethnic or sexual identities (Hoff/Pandey 2006, Hoff/Pandey 2004, Spencer/Steele/Quinn 1999,

Steele/Aronson 1995).The research of the last decade has made clear that economic self-interest is a very weak predictor of policy preferences (Haidt 2013, Kindle Location 1562).

The original assumption that human beings are "primordially individualistic and that they entered into society at a later stage in their development only as a result of a rational calculation that social cooperation was the best way for them to achieve their individual ends," (Fukuyama 2012: 29) is increasingly contested. Supported by anthropological, evolutionary and genetic research, Francis Fukuyama makes a different case: "It is in fact individualism and not sociability that developed over the course of human history. That individualism seems today like a solid core of our economic and political behavior is only because we have developed institutions that override our more naturally communal instincts" (Fukuyama 2012: 29). While this institutional accomplishment had many positive effects in the course of human history, some fear the potential consequences of excessive individualism. The neo-institutional economist Avner Greif argues that Western institutions "may have undermined themselves in the long run by creating excessive individualism and materialism"(Greif 2006: 26).

The natural sociability of human beings is an important element in the concept of political participation: Only if people are "actually social" can we hope that they will make decisions for the common good and not only their narrow economic self-interest. If someone views her-/himself as part of and is dedicated to a larger community, it becomes much less irrational if this individual weighs her/his personal interests against those of the group. The desire to belong to a group is in fact often so strong that it overrides our more self-centred instincts, because belonging satisfies a need for identity and emotional security.

Morality binds and blinds

Contrary to the original assumptions about human nature by philosophers like Hobbes and Rousseau, human beings are not primarily individual, but tribal. We have genetically and biologically evolved to form groups, or, in the words of Edward O. Wilson: "People must have a tribe" (Wilson 2013: 57).

This statement, however, should not be taken as a form of biological determinism. On the contrary, the human desire to form tribes and tribal like structures is a general prerequisite for the

emergence of modern societies, but it does not tell us the definite shape, size, and mode of interaction within societies. There is an inherent inclination of human beings to form societies, but the organizational features and defining principles are not pre-determined and vary between societies.

Prehistoric human interaction was limited to kin- and family based societies, for these constituted the main circles of trust on which an individual could rely. Family ties between individuals secured a mutual interest in common survival. It was only after the appearance of cultural activity that new forms of thought like religion and ideas of a common nationhood developed. Cultural activity as it is understood here, describes the creation of collective identities around objects of collective worship and the investing of these objects with intrinsic and emotional value. These objects not only appear in material form (e.g. physical places of worship) but also in imaginary form like obeying moral values and the dedication to common causes like a nation, religion, or ideological belief (Anderson 2006). This identity is not only derived and maintained by following norms, but also by the fear of being shamed as a violator of those norms (Appiah 2010). Culture, therefore, creates a shared collective identity, which defines the scope and intensity of the circle of trust exceeding one's family (Fukuyama 1996).

Communities depend on mutual trust and the recognition of a shared identity, something that has to be socially constructed and evolved, giving rise to the most complex cultural artefacts like religions, nationalisms, ideologies, and their respective codes of behaviour and moral rules embodied in institutions like political parties or religious communities. The shared following of specific norms and the understanding of symbolic rituals connected to these norms create a communality that serves as the basis for mutual trust – a necessary condition to solve collective action problems that occur when societies exceed immediate kinship and try to organize themselves in groups that are no longer characterized primarily by blood-relations.

The propensity to community and identity based on shared worshiping and the acceptance of social rules that spring from the respective cultural code (e.g. not to eat pork as a follower of Islam or Judaism) is deeply embedded in the human psyche (Akerlof/Kranton 2011). It is one of the reasons why we don't know of any historical "primitive" societies without religion, and why there exist archeological clues that suggest that protohuman groups like Neanderthals may also have had religious beliefs (Fukuyama 2012: 36, Wade 2009). Consequently, scientists like

Francis Fukuyama and Steven Pinker argue that "a propensity for religious belief seems to be hardwired into the human brain" (Fukuyama 2012: 37, Pinker 2009: 554–558).

The stability of communities and the willingness of people to participate, however, is strongly tied to the ability of communities to create lasting emotional connections to its members. Contrary to the intuitive belief that ease of participation is the key factor, it turns out that successful and lasting emotional ties are erected if they demand something from potential members. It is at this point where the concept of morality and moral ideas comes into play: One of the key sources of mutual trust is the adherence to specific moral rules – the binding glue for communities without kinship. In a number of studies, Richard Sosis found out that communities, which impose strong moral and sacralized rules (whether it be in the realm of dress code, diet, or other forms of behavior) on its members last longer and create stronger loyalties than less rule-bound communities. Most interestingly, it was not the content of the rules but their sacred character that made most of the difference (Sosis/Alcorta 2003, Sosis/Bressler 2003). In other words, the concept of the sacred is still relevant in politics, especially when it comes to the ability of political movements to bind their followers to a common cause. Sacred in this context means the establishment of a truly emotional bond to one's community that goes beyond an individual cost-benefit analysis. The economist Robert Frank calls this "strategic irrationality," designed to overcome commitment problems and allow effective collective action (Frank 1988). This binding, however, comes at a price: As Jonathan Haidt points out, "Morality binds and blinds" (Haidt 2013). This means that the bond to one's community is rather *emotional* and therefore often escapes rational analysis by those who are part of such a community. While this does not mean that reasoning is impossible, it becomes considerably more difficult to convince group members of their potentially irrational behavior, if their identity is tied to this group and its sacralized rules. In order to establish lasting communities, members need to believe in and follow certain moral rules despite their seemingly irrational character. Doing so establishes modes of participation that characterize the nature of the group and makes it possible for members to be recognized as such by others.

Human beings have a strong willingness to ignore facts and objective truths if they should conflict with their emotional beliefs or what their political orientation (e.g. liberal or conservative) holds sacred (Haidt 2013: 37), thus making purely rational arguments about the

core assumptions of one's culture extremely difficult. Once human beings establish an emotional bond with a specific political idea or worldview, they tend to filter information according to whether it is reinforcing or contradicting their original belief. Those facts, seeming to validate the previously held opinion, will be preferred to those, who could shed doubt on it. The human capability to reason is still present, but it is used in order to justify our emotional attachments. Haidt (2013) employs the comparison between a politician (emotionally held beliefs) and his press secretary (ability to reason): While the latter has a mind of his own, his main job is to justify the behavior of the politician. Reason and emotion often function in a similar way, with our ability to reason and logic used to ex-post justify positions we already had.

It would exceed the scope of this chapter to investigate how moral positions emerge in the first place, but we do know that traditions and culture play a central role (Graham/Haidt/Nosek 2009, Graham et al. 2011, Haidt 2001, 2013). It seems that morality (the following of specific rules) might be universal and genetically preconditioned, but the content of these rules (i.e. what is seen as moral) is culturally variable (Barkow/Cosmides,/Tooby 1995).

Historically, there is significant evidence that the desire for collective identities can trump material or individual interests. Recent studies about the collapse of the Soviet Union showed that "demonstrations that championed regime liberalization but did not raise ethno-nationalist demands for the most part gained relatively minor resonance with society" (Beissinger 2002: 76). Even the drive toward democracy in former Soviet republics was only instrumental to fulfill the deeper need for reinforcing a suppressed national identity via independence – democracy was a means, not an end (Slater 2009: 222) to express one's commitment to the national cause. Similar developments are underway in China, where the most rapidly developing areas are also rapidly Christianizing, creating not only a middle class but a strongly ideological and emotionalized *Christian* middle class. It was no coincidence that the pro-democracy movement that was put down by the Chinese authorities in Tiananmen Square in 1989 was led by Christian students (Ferguson 2011: 306–308). That the Chinese government is actively trying to revive Confucianism with its values of respect for the older generation and its emphasis on a harmonious society (Yang 2007) is not driven by nostalgia, but the active fear of a cultural fragmentation of the state.

Contrary to the idea of an emerging global culture, the world is experiencing a resurgence in traditional (religious) and modern (secular) belief systems that span from religion (Islam, Christianity or Hinduism), to old-school nationalism (e.g. the Front National in France) or New Age ideologies (extreme environmentalism). The resurgence of "Missionary Politics" (Lindholm/Zuquete 2010, Zuquete 2007) is one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century: For the last decades, the world seemed to become more rational and predictable to the Western eye (De Mesquita 1994), when in fact ideologies and the political forces of group identities have been resurgent.

Emotions in Contemporary Politics

Given the role of emotional attachments in group formation and group participation, it is important to realize that states are not only interested in participation *per-se,* but to make sure that participation takes place within an institutional and emotional matrix that does not threaten the legitimacy of the state and its institutions. Liberal democracies are especially challenged by the dilemma their own basic principles produce: How can a truly individualistic and liberal society demand a collective emotional attachment to specific norms and values? The problem of how to bridge reason and emotion in the realm of politics is a constant theme that can be found in the quarrels between Aristotle and Plato (see Herman 2010), the differences between Rousseau and Burke (see Ferguson 2011), and in more modern times in the writings of Leo Strauss (for example in Strauss 1978), Allan Bloom (Bloom 1987), and Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama 2006).

Yet it was especially since the 19th century that this debate became ever more accentuated: Across the Atlantic William James (James 2011a, 2011b) was lecturing on the importance of *The Will to Believe* and the necessity to maintain the high spirits of a warrior class without the violence in *The Moral Equivalent of War*. In Great Britain, Thomas Carlyle (Carlyle 1869) was moving into a similar direction in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. In one of the first functional treatises of religion, Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 2008) was mainly concerned with collective identity and social cohesion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The tension between culture and individual was probably best expressed by Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud 1961). German intellectuals especially wrestled with this question, causing

them to develop the distinction between a materialistic and rational *Zivilisation* (Civilization) and its moral and emotional counterpart *Kultur* (Culture) (Kroeber 1952).

Fritz Stern demonstrated that this debate was not purely philosophical (Stern 1974). Stern coined one of the most fitting expressions for the prevailing mood among many of the West's 19th century philosophers: cultural despair. He argued that the panic that modernity could lead to a loss of culture and collective identity has to be seen as a major element in the rise of Fascism, a view that is now generally accepted and extended to other ideological phenomena of modernity (Griffin 2010, Payne et al. 2008). In light of those studies it becomes easier to understand the resurgence of radical Islam, for in many parts of the Muslim world religion is the main safeguard against a feared loss of identity.

Contemporary Europe is increasingly faced with a similar challenge, since due to economic and demographic changes populations across the continent are uprooted in their traditional understandings of identity. Given the fact that especially the younger generation is showing a decline in their willingness to participate in politics but look for alternative ways of expression, one has to ask whether this might be connected to the lack of emotions, as I was outlining above.

For the time being, however, it seems as if more radical parties have a better understanding of how to connect to (especially) the younger parts of society. What one negatively calls populism is the appeal to the emotional side and collective instincts of potential voters, something that finds more and more fertile ground if the more conventional and traditional parties do not find better ways to get back into the "emotional" game. Especially in times of economic crisis and cultural discontent the salvation rhetoric of these movements finds more resonance, something we can see on the right as well as on the left. The 2008 campaign of Barack Obama and its strong emotional content – playing decisively on the feelings of the electorate to vote the first African-American President into the White House – was not without populism: The main slogan itself ("Hope and Change") was characterized more by its ability to elicit an emotional reaction than a concrete political message.

The fact that the European Union has almost entirely denounced the use of symbols and rituals that could create an emotional attachment is not a minor issue. Such abandonment did not eliminate the desire for emotional bonds as such; it only motivates people to look for them elsewhere. The current failure to create an emotionally charged European identity is a crucial

element in the scepticism many Europeans feel and the increasing appeal of EU-critical political movements. If we define populism as the art of the emotional in politics, it is not populism itself that is the problem but that it is used mostly by specific and often illiberal as well as antidemocratic political forces. For ambitious projects like European integration to prevail, however, it will be necessary not only to appeal to reason, but also to the emotions of those who shall be convinced. Without changes in political communication, it should not come as a surprise that openly extremist political movements like Jobbik in Hungary or IS recruiters in European cities will continue to find supporters among Europe's younger generation. To recharge the core ideas of liberalism like tolerance, open-mindedness and the respect for a civil discourse will not be successful if they are not transformed into values that will be held not only rationally, but emotionally.

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