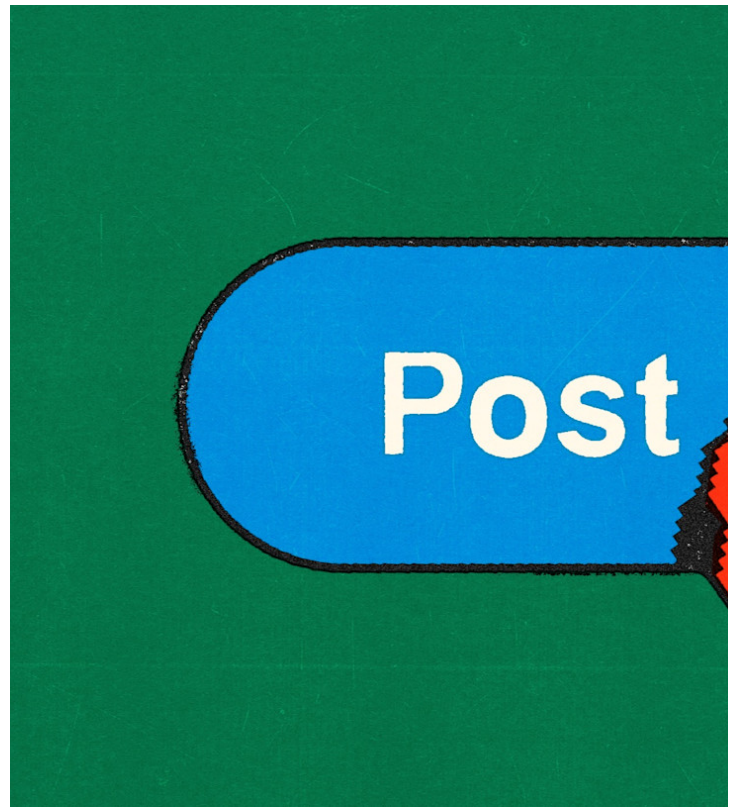


Undercover Economist

Rage in the age of X

It feels like politics is more fraught today — is it?



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There is a gap between the calm, rational decision-makers we often aspire to be and the overwrought, sentiment-tossed creatures we often are. Rarely is that gap wider than in the political arena. Policy seems like it should be a matter for cool, evidence-based deliberation, but politics is soaked in emotion.

This is not wholly to our collective advantage. Emotions often lead us astray. The behavioural economist George Loewenstein, in a 1996 paper titled “Out of Control: Visceral Influences on Behavior”, noted that extreme visceral emotions often lead to self-destruction. There is the alcoholic who is willing to abandon her children for the sake of the next drink; the suspect in a long interrogation who will sacrifice years of freedom for a glass of water and the chance to sleep; the arachnophobe who will risk injury in a scramble to escape from a toy spider that he knows perfectly well cannot hurt him; the road-raging driver who knows, somehow, that he is doing himself no favours even as he swings the punch. In the grip of emotion, we are not our best selves.

We are also often unreflective about this fact. “People underweigh, or even ignore, visceral factors that they will experience in the future, have experienced in the past, or that are experienced by other people,” writes Loewenstein.

Hard experience suggests this is true, but we also have some light-hearted experimental evidence on the visceral emotion of gluttony. Daniel Read and Barbara van Leeuwen ran a study in which participants chose between snacks ranging from apples to Mars bars. If the snack was for immediate consumption, people chose the chocolate bar. If told they were pre-ordering for next week's follow-up, they chose fruit. A week later, offered a chance to change their minds, they caved and grabbed the Mars bar again.

The point — familiar but deep — is that we are consistently inconsistent, intending good things for the future, surrendering to our animal selves when the future arrives, and then somehow expecting to do better next time. What is true for snacks may also be true for how we choose to engage in politics. In principle, favouring the apple of thoughtful discussion, while in practice seizing the Mars bar of furiously retweeting angry influencers.

Intuitively, it seems that politics is more emotionally fraught than it was a generation ago. Is that right — and if so, why? A recent working paper from Eva Davoine, Stefanie Stantcheva, Thomas Renault and Yann Algan trawled through posts on X. They used a large language model to evaluate the emotional content of tweets from US citizens on political subjects including abortion, immigration, tax and inequality, and democracy itself. (Stantcheva and her colleagues went to some lengths to check that the people behind the accounts really exist.)

Two findings immediately emerged. The first is that of all the emotions expressed in tweets, by far the most common is anger. Other emotions, positive and negative (fear, disgust, gratitude, hope, joy) barely appear, but anger is everywhere.

The second is that anger is on the rise. The data starts in 2013, when Barack Obama was president, and for years about 25 per cent of political tweets were angry, and about two-thirds expressed no clear emotion. Anger started rising in 2016 and by 2020, between 40 and 50 per cent of political tweets were angry. That is partly because some calm tweeters have quit and been replaced by some angry ones, but mostly it is the same people as ever, tweeting more angrily than they once did.

Who are the angriest tweeters? People at the political extremes, both left and right; people who follow a lot of politicians and political influencers; and, interestingly, people over the age of 65. The boomers are furious, at least the ones doing politics on social media. (Women express more anger than men, and Republicans more than Democrats, but, in both cases, the margins are small.)

The researchers also look at the “supply” of anger from politicians and find, again, large increases since 2013. They also find strong political cycles (politicians in opposition are much more likely to express anger) and that while there was a sharp rise in angry tweets from politicians, there was a far more muted rise in angry speech on the floor of Congress.

That contrast between social media and traditional speechmaking is instructive. It's quite possible that people are angry in response to real problems, and it's also possible that people are angry because the defining political figure of the age, Donald Trump, both uses and generates anger.

But it may also be that anger is on the rise because the medium of political discussion encourages it. Stantcheva and her colleagues find that angry tweets by citizens are nearly 90 per cent more likely to be retweeted than non-emotional tweets, while angry tweets from congressional politicians are nearly 50 per cent more likely to be retweeted. If social media rewards anger, people will respond to the incentive.

This may also explain the rise of populism. A recent study by George Ward, Sandra Matz and others found a correlation between negative emotions — fear, anger, depression, sadness — and support for populists and populist causes including Brexit in 2016 and Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020. The causal chain is too stretched to claim confidently that social media caused Brexit and Trump, but it is perfectly plausible to suggest that Twitter was fertile soil for populist seeds to sprout.

There is nothing new about anger in politics. “Before the Hate had proceeded for thirty seconds,” wrote George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), “uncontrollable exclamations of rage were breaking out from half the people in the room. The self-satisfied sheep-like face on the screen, and the terrifying power of the Eurasian army behind it, were too much to be borne.”

Orwell wasn’t just trying to imagine the future, but refracting the vicious propaganda of the 1930s and 1940s. He knew very well that we are not our best, most reflective selves when we are angry — ruthless politicians will exploit that.

George Loewenstein argued not just that we are often powerless in the face of strong emotions, but that we are in denial: we tend to tell ourselves that visceral feelings will not get the better of us, when all too often they do.

Better to avoid temptation. A well-stocked bar is no place for a recovering alcoholic. It’s always easier to diet if the Mars bar is in a far away supermarket rather than the kitchen shelf. And if you’re interested in politics, John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* is always worth a read, but at all costs stay away from Bluesky and X.

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