

EMOTIONAL DEMAND AND EMOTIONAL NEGLECT IN POLICY-MAKING

Insights on the influence of citizens' emotions on policy-making from a policy workshop

Joint Policy Brief



This policy brief draws on discussions and insights from the policy workshop “From Research to Policy: Emotions and Policy Making in Practice”, held online on 21 November 2025, organised by PROTEMO.



**Funded by
the European Union**

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Full title: Emotional dynamics of protective policies in an age of insecurity

Acronym: PROTEMO

Grant Agreement No.: 101132433

Project website: www.protemo.eu

Full title: Politics of Grievance and Democratic Governance

Acronym: PLEDGE

Grant Agreement No.: 101132560

Project website: www.pledgeproject.eu

Full title: Moral emotions in politics – how they unite, how they divide

Acronym: MORES

Grant Agreement No.: 101132601

Project website: www.mores-horizon.eu

Editor:

Georg Wenzelburger

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KEY FINDINGS

- Although still under-researched and under-theorized in theories of democracy, members of the policy workshop acknowledged that emotions are important ingredients of policy-making. Researchers and practitioners emphasized that relevant information for democratic and responsive policy-making is not only based on cognitive aspects, such as policy preferences, but also linked to emotions.
- Research shows that citizens who are anxious, avoid uncertainty and in need of security demand protection by the state – independently of whether protection relates to climate change, vaccination policies, migration policies or protection from crime.
- Political communication scholars indicate that emotions are often strategically used by policy-makers, for instance in speech-writing.
- At the same time, it seems that when confronted with citizens’ emotions on a certain issue, political actors often emphasize the need to respond in a “rational” way to emotions, based on factual information and concrete policy measures.
- Discussions with policy practitioners point out that it is crucial to find ways how the competence of politicians in understanding and responding to citizens emotions (expressed

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1. INTRODUCTION

Policy-making is often seen as a rational process where preferences of citizens about a certain issue are responded by public policies. In the empirical political science literature, much ink has been spilled on researching these preference-policy-linkages, and empirical results indicate that, indeed, changes in preferences are correlated to changes in public policies (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Stimson et al., 1995). If citizens demand an increase in social welfare spending, public policies will react, with a certain time lag, with higher spending on social affairs (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010, 128-129). For democracies, this finding has important implications. If we consider that “democratic responsiveness”, that is “when the democratic process induces the government to form and implement policies that the citizens want” means for “democracy to be of higher quality” (Powell 2004, 91), this preference-policy linkage forms the backbone of how representative democracies in the Western world work.

At the same time, however, and perhaps even more so in recent years of “grievance politics” (Flinders & Hinterleitner, 2022), every-day observations also show that democratic politics is not only a matter of rationality. Instead, emotions loom large in politics – although their influence has only rarely been studied (although it has been argued that feelings can be elements of representation (Pitkin, 1967) policies also respond to public moods (Stimson, 1991)). In sum, we can conclude that emotions have been underestimated as important ingredients in representative democracy, at least from the scientific angle (Wenzelburger, 2025).

Against this background, three projects of the EU Horizon Call on “the emotional politics of democracies” (HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01-04) – MORES, PLEDGE and PROTEMO – have brought together social scientists and people from the policy arena (NGOs, public administration and politics) to discuss the role of emotions in politics in a joint workshop. The aim of the discussion was to exchange ideas about how emotions matter for

politics and policy-making by bringing together fresh findings from the projects and insights from practitioners. The following considerations are therefore based on this exchange and should be seen more as starting points for further discussions between practitioners rather than ready-made recipes for concrete actions.

The main insights from the research presented and the discussions indicate that:

- Citizens send emotional signals to politicians that are often overlooked because factual knowledge is prioritized;
- Citizens’ emotions, especially fear and anxiety, are related to an increased demand for protection by the state;
- Emotions are increasingly used by politicians, for instance in parliamentary speeches, especially so in recent years and used as a strategic vehicle to influence the public;
- Political decisions have an emotional affect which is often overlooked by politicians themselves.

Note: This policy brief draws on presentations by Zsolt Boda (MORES), Sofie Marien, Thomas Legein, Karen Celis (PLEDGE), and Georg Wenzelburger (PROTEMO) as well as the following discussions with policy practitioners.

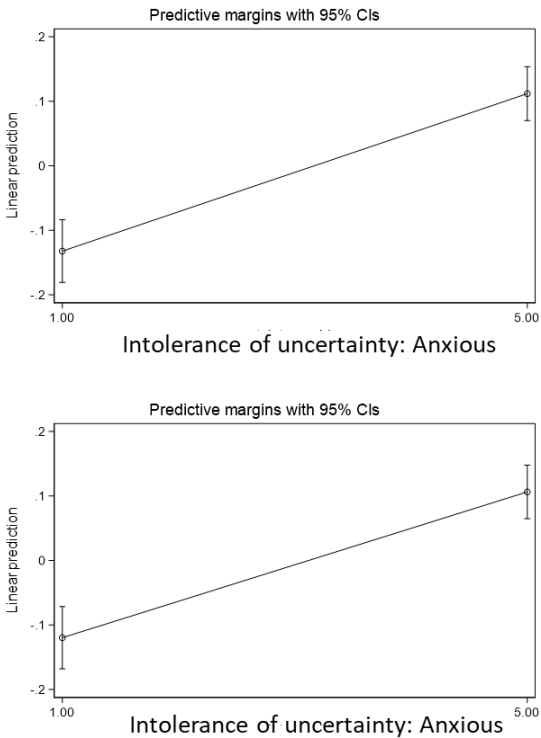
2. HOW EMOTIONS MATTER: KEY INSIGHTS FROM CURRENT RESEARCH

Emotions, policies, emotions, policies, ...

Ongoing research indicates that emotions and policies are related in a complex manner. On the one hand, insights from an 11-country survey led by PROTEMO shows that people that state that uncertainty makes them feel “uneasy, anxious, or scared” demand more protection by the state. Interestingly, this protection can come in different disguises: Anxious people want more protection across-the-board, be it through policies related to climate protection and vaccines or through to tougher penal and

migration policies. This general association between the emotional state and demand for protection is shown in Figure 1 (upper graph: climate and vaccine policies, lower graph: migration and penal policies).

Fig. 1: Emotions and demand for protection



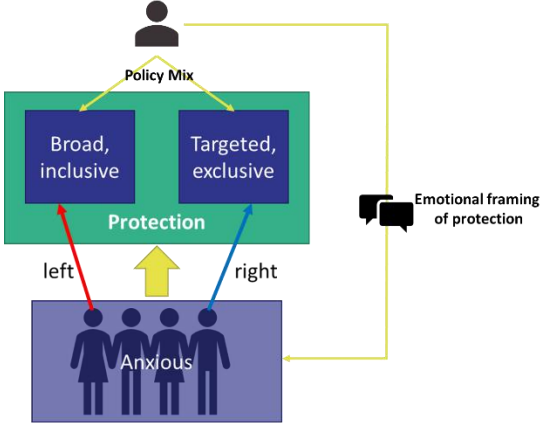
Source: Ongoing research from PROTEMO

At the same time, research conducted by MORES also shows that emotions are used strategically by policy actors in speeches when they talk about policies and that this emotionally laden content generates emotional responses by citizens. When participants in an online experiment were stimulated by emotional frames, for instance, hope and empathy in frames increased support for more open migration policy whereas anger and fear decreased it.

Given that research from the PROTEMO consortium has shown that emotions are strategically stirred up or downplayed by emotional policy entrepreneurs (Maor, 2024), these insights reveal that we need to take into account a circular model which considers the fact that emotional demand cannot only be the starting point for the policy process and

responded to by policies or political communication, but that they are also results of policies and framing.

Fig. 2: Emotional demand and feedback



This relationship can lead to a self-reinforcing process where emotional manipulation may lead to emotion-driven policy bubbles (Maor, 2016) – and PROTEMO research indicates that such dynamics should be especially prominent in policy areas that are linked to security and protection. As illustrated in Figure 2, anxious citizens seek protection by the state, which can come through inclusive (climate, vaccines) and exclusive (crime, migration) protective policies. As the policy-mix of this response is open to political debate, emotional framing of protection moves centre-stage. Depending on party competition and electoral considerations, politicians may frame a certain policy as protective – which then feeds back on people’s attitudes and emotional needs and make them feel safe or even more unsafe. If the latter is the case, they will ask for even more protective policies, which may then create policy bubbles and policy overreaction in terms of protective policies.

How to acknowledge emotions?

Taking these observations from current research as starting points, the question of how emotions can be responded to in the policy-process in a sound manner looms large. On this question, fresh insights from PLEDGE research about emotion-sensitive democratic innovations comes into the picture. Starting from the insight

that emotional reactions of citizens often signal needs, values, losses and hopes, PLEDGE research points out that it is important to design channels through which politicians can see citizens' emotional reactions to political decisions. Instead of gathering knowledge from social media, which is unrepresentative for the emotionality of people and highly toxic, the PLEDGE project emphasizes the need to generate safe spaces in which citizens can articulate their emotional needs freely. Research from the MORES project shows for instance that on Facebook, angry posts will generate more angry responses which means that emotions trigger similar emotions and provide an unrepresentative picture of emotionality if taken as a source for policy-making.

Hence, creating alternative spaces where citizens can freely share emotions and communicate these findings to policy-makers can become a way to provide a better picture of how people react to political decisions. This is even more important, because focus groups have shown that citizens often have a hard time to talk about emotions when they are directly asked. At the same time, creating such spaces where deliberative rules are conducive to emotional reflexivity, allowing people to share or just live their emotions safely allows them to see that they are not alone and makes them feel recognized and foster solidarity. This is also the starting point of PLEDGE's research which seeks to find out how emotions can be dealt with collectively in a pro-social and solidaristic way in order not to hide them underneath.

On the level of politicians, both researchers from the project as well as practitioners from the field pointed out that emotions are often seen as irrational and therefore irrelevant to the policy process. Both in elite interviews conducted by PROTEMO researchers and in the daily experiences that members of NGOs shared in the workshop discussions, it became clear that policy-makers as well as members of public administration seem to shy away from taking emotions seriously as a relevant source for policy-making.

Discussions also revolved around the question on whether there seem to be implicit norms as to which emotions are allowed to certain groups in society, depending on gender, minority status or other characteristics. While empirical data will still be gathered by the respective projects, first insights seem to show that it is even more crucial to provide safe spaces to express emotions for these groups so that they can feel acknowledged, recognized and protected, but there is a lack of such opportunities for these groups in society.

Finally, the media was also emphasized as a channel through which emotions could affect society and politics. At the same time, journalistic practice often tries to be factual. As one participant of the workshop who creates programs for training journalists explained:

“Emotions are always the tricky part for journalistic work, because we always like to talk about fact-based things, and I think there is a misunderstanding that you can have something without emotions.”

Therefore, it was discussed that also for journalistic training programs there should be an emphasis on the fact that “emotions are information” (quote from the participant) and the participant estimated that it is crucial for democracy and the fight against dis-information that journalists learn how to understand and include emotions professionally in their reports, because dis-information sources always use emotions. Findings from MORES on the case of Hungary actually indicate that emotions and democratic backsliding may be interrelated as the emotionality of political speech (in particular from the opposition) in Hungary increased after the leader of the right-wing populist party, Victor Orbán's party, came to power. This might indicate that when liberal-democratic regimes come under stress, the opposition discourse becomes more emotionalized.

3. TAKE EMOTIONS SERIOUSLY!

Discussions during the workshop revealed that participants do acknowledge the crucial and increasingly important role that emotions play in

current politics and societies. At the same time, it still seems that in the field of policy advice and in the policy-making sphere, emotions are widely seen as secondary to factual knowledge. According to the discussions, this seems to be true for both most actors directly involved in policy-making, in the communities around the policy sphere as well as in the media. Hence, a very first take-away from the workshop exchange between research and practitioners simply comes down to the insight that the role emotions play in politics needs to be taken more seriously.

Secondly, and building on this general insight, a more comprehensive understanding of emotions in policy-making could include several aspects:

- finding ways to tap into the emotional needs and demands of citizens;
- preparing the journalists to be sensitive to emotions when reporting about society and groups in society;
- giving marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society the possibility to share their emotions in safe spaces;
- opening up policy-makers and advisors to take into account emotions and to see the emotional repercussions political decisions can have.

Touching on these diverse aspects, the discussions during the workshop have also shown that while research on these topics is still in its early stages, there seems to be an increased sense among participants that acknowledging emotions can be an important ingredient to build more resilient democracies.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the early indications from ongoing research, the conclusions to be drawn from the joint online policy workshop of MORES, PLEDGE and PROTEMO with practitioners mainly come as a number of questions that can serve as a guideline for emotion-sensitive policy-making and policy-advice. From the presented research and exchange with practitioners, the following

key questions may help to open up policy-making for emotions:

6 key questions for emotion-sensitive policy-making and policy advice

- What emotional needs of citizens are related to the question that is addressed by the policies?
- Whose emotional needs are addressed by the policy and whose are not?
- Are there specific vulnerable groups the emotions of which are not considered by the policy?
- Where does the evidence on emotions come from? Is it a representative, balanced source or are there emotional bubbles building up?
- Which emotions does the communication about a policy include?
- Which actors may have an incentive to manipulate or stir up emotions of people on the matter the policy seeks to respond to?

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