



EMOTIONS AND POLICYMAKING

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UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONS
OF PROTECTIVE POLICIES

PROTEMO Policy Briefs



This policy brief draws on discussions and insights from a policy workshop examining how emotions affect the policy process, held in Saarbrücken, Germany on March 11, 2026, and organized by PROTEMO with the support of the state parliament of Saarland (Landtag des Saarlandes).



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KEY FINDINGS

- Feelings of insecurity are defining the current political context, and this affects politics and party competition, which increasingly involve questions of protection.
- The policy process regarding these protective policies is often influenced by emotions, both from citizens and policymakers, which makes it difficult to engage in consensus-building about appropriate policy solutions but instead invites emotionalized polarisation.
- As social media increasingly dominates the media landscape and also changes the rules of the game for traditional media in terms of speed, attention and framing, emotions are becoming more important for politicians that want to communicate. However, politicians cannot ignore social media and feel that more emotional communication is necessary if they want to be seen and to reach a wider audience. This places them in a difficult situation.
- At the same time, politicians emphasize that it is mainly through face-to-face interaction where emotions can actually be taken up and responded to in a meaningful way.
- Moreover, this more emotionalized communication on social media feeds back into the policy-making process itself – for instance, through more emotionalized debates in Parliament – and may endanger the established mechanisms of compromise-building and consensus.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, European societies have been witnessing a **series of severe crises in a very short period of time**. Only some years after the 2008 global financial and Eurozone crisis had hit European countries severely and challenged European solidarity (Truchlewski et al., 2025), the so-called “immigration crisis” confronted national politicians with the intricate question of how to cope with rising numbers of migrants seeking protection and the European Union with the task of how to find a common policy accommodating very different national views (Bello, 2022; Scipioni, 2018). With this unresolved question on migration still lurking, the Covid global pandemic (2019-2022) followed, leading not only to a health emergency but also to economic and societal disruptions. Finally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the changing geopolitical contexts with a changed role of the United States and wars in the Middle East further contributed to what has been termed a “polycrisis” (Rakowski et al., 2025).

As political psychologists have shown, such an **environment of rising insecurity leads individuals to seek protection by the state to respond to their fears and anxieties** (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Emotions can work as mechanisms that relate threatening events or an environment perceived as unsafe to policy demands for protection, which then increasingly dominate politics (Bonansinga, 2022; Flinders & Hinterleitner, 2022; Kinnvall, 2014). However, while we know how politicians use emotions in their rhetoric and how they affect public opinion and citizens’ behavior (Bakker et al., 2021; Brader et al., 2011; Marcus, 2002), while we start to understand the mechanisms between grievances, emotions and political attitudes (Capelos et al., 2022) and while scholars have also shown how emotions and the rise of populism correlate, we lack empirical insights on **how emotions enter the policy process and political decisions about public policies** (Wenzelburger et al., 2022). Although hypotheses on how emotions may affect policy-making have

been developed building on established theories of the policy process (Maor, 2024, 2026; Pierce, 2021; Stempel, 2025), robust empirical evidence of how emotions play out in policy processes and decision-making on public policies is still rather scarce.

This policy brief aims at addressing this gap by **exploring how Parliamentarians think about the influence of emotions on their daily policy-making work**. The empirical evidence on which this policy brief draws has been collected **through a practitioner’s workshop with Parliamentarians** of the State Parliament (Landtag) of the German region of Saarland. Using the regional level in a federal state such as Germany has two important advantages. First, in the Federal Republic of Germany, State Parliaments are important actors as they have **distinct policy-making competencies**, for instance in the area of the police, culture or education. At the same time, given that the Parliament is situated at the regional level, politicians may be closer to the “ordinary citizens” than national-level politicians and therefore have **more direct interactions with them, being in a better position to perceive their emotions**. This makes the insights from this workshop highly valuable when exploring what politicians think about policy-making in a more emotional political environment.

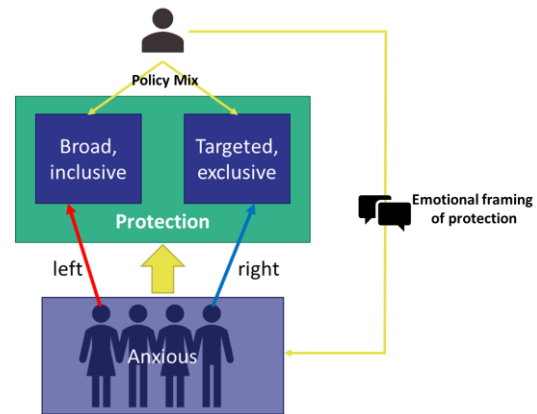
2. EMOTIONS AND POLICY-MAKING

How can emotions influence the policy process? The starting point of our discussions harks back to the model of emotion-enhanced understanding of political representation (Wenzelburger, 2025b). In such a model, four different relationships between citizens and representatives exist:

- 1) **Substantive responsiveness** occurs when politicians respond with policies to preferences of citizens (Pitkin, 1967).
- 2) **Rhetorical responsiveness** takes place when politicians use political communication or visuals to address citizens policy preferences for instance through political speech (Brettschneider, 1996) or parliamentary actions.
- 3) **Emotional responsiveness** can be defined as a rhetorical response to citizen's feelings, affective states or emotions.
- 4) And **entrepreneurial responsiveness** occurs when politicians attach a policy proposal to respond to an affective state or emotions of citizens.

If we relate these insights to **the case of protective policies**¹, it is clear that a key question is by means of which policies and/or communicative activities politicians seek to show that they provide protection to citizens who feel insecure and anxious. PROTEMO research has already shown that different types of protective policies are supported by citizens, as long as they provide protection – with some differences in support depending on people's political attitudes (see Fig. 1, see PROTEMO policy brief 1, "Emotional demand and emotional neglect in policy-making").

¹ Policies can be considered protective "based on the quality of the policy, because political leaders frame them as such, or because few opposing policies effectively challenge them" (Albertson & Gadarian,



At the same time, however, it remains unclear **how emotions such as fear and anxiety are actually transported into the policy process**. Indeed, two steps are involved in such a process (see Fig. 2). First, representatives need to perceive emotional signals of citizens in a coherent way and link them to concrete policy ideas or political action. Second, they need to take them into considerations when they develop, put forward, discuss, change and decide about policy proposals or other ways of political action (such as communication, visuals or parliamentary activities).



2.1 Perceptions of emotional signals

On the **first part** of this two-stage process, the insights of the workshop suggest that policy-makers indeed take up citizens' emotions through different channels. Practitioners report that they do so when they meet citizens directly and it is during these direct interactions that they can also try to respond to emotionalized citizens by pinpointing policies that may address the source of the citizen's emotions. One politician reported for instance that a first important step is to simply **listen to the emotions and the problems linked to them** and that citizens are

2015, 100). Hence, protective policies are transversal and may cut across traditional policy areas (Wenzelburger, 2025a)

often simply happy if they have the impression to be heard.

“Otherwise, my experience over the past few years has been that the first thing to do is listen. And not to bombard people with the important messages we’ve been told to convey, or with our positions on the various issues. But simply to listen.”

In a similar way, a politician reported that **taking seriously the citizens’ emotionalized messages and responding to them – directly or by mail – while indicating that their points will be channelled into the policy process** usually leads to a positive reaction, even if this does not necessarily mean that the demand can be satisfied

“And in my experience, when you [...] provide feedback, it really helps to boost satisfaction. When people realize, “Okay, here’s someone who genuinely cares about me and my problems—and who also gives me feedback.”

At the same time, politicians also indicated that a concrete policy measure can sometimes not be explained to citizens when situations are too emotionally heated. When a person is simply too angry and not ready to hear a substantive argument, practitioners indicated that they simply need to cope with the situation and wait until a less polarized discussion becomes possible.

2.2 Emotions in the policy-making process

On the **second part** of the two-stage process, practitioners strongly argued that **they perceived an increasingly emotionalized environment of political competition and political communication which also affects the policy-process itself**. They illustrated this with a recent debate in Parliament where speakers of the two biggest parties were very much engaged and – according to the politicians participating at the workshop – going too far in their emotionalizing the debate. The politicians

interpreted this as a result of the way how politics is discussed today in an environment dominated by social media.

“And then I see representatives from both major democratic parties in this chamber who, in my view, attack each other unnecessarily harshly in front of the cameras [...] At which point I say: Well, if you play on the emotions of the viewers like that, then we shouldn’t be surprised when, in the public debate, the distinction between our communication and that of the non-democratic parties [...] gets lost. Because we should be talking to each other on a factual level: “In this case, I just see it differently, because that’s the factual argument”. So that’s the one point where I have to say, I think that in politics – because it’s then picked up on social media and in the press – there’s too much focus on emotions.”

They indicated that at least three dynamics in their view contribute to an increasingly emotionalized environment. First, the overflow of information and news in social media networks incites politicians to resort to more emotional communication in order to be seen and to reach a wider audience. Second, also traditional media seems to increasingly care about the online public similarly emphasizing emotionalized news. And third, politicians pointed out that the speed in which the media environment works is increasingly making the slow decision-making processes in German politics aimed at finding compromises between parties and other actors difficult. The fact that arriving at political decisions takes time and compromises are a positive outcome seems to be difficult to communicate in such a context. Hence, from the practitioner’s perspective, an emotionalized communication in a high-speed media environment clashes with the structure of established policy-making processes:

I mean, we’re confronted every day with issues and problems on which we may not yet have formed an informed opinion.

And so we feel increasingly pressured to form an opinion as quickly as possible. And a lot gets left behind in the process. [...] Thirty years ago, I think politicians had much more time to form a well-founded opinion on an issue than they do now. Because now, it's expected that you'll be able to speak on any topic within, it feels like, half an hour. And let's be honest, if you're really grappling with an issue, you can't be ready to speak or have formed an opinion in half an hour.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMOTIONALIZED POLICY-MAKING

According to the Parliamentarians participating at the workshop, the main challenge for policy-making is to shield the internal consensus-oriented process that characterizes decision-making in the German consensus democracy from becoming too confrontational due to the fact that politicians need to emotionalize their political communication in order to be seen in social media (and, to a smaller extent, also traditional media). Politicians report different emotional dynamics which are currently putting the usual way of policy-making under pressure.

First, Parliamentarians experience that a proper explanation of political choices and political issues is almost impossible in the highly emotionalized communication environment that characterizes social media.

For one thing, well, social media is making our attention spans shorter and shorter, right? It's already hard enough to listen to politicians for two minutes, isn't it? If I have to explain a complex issue to them in 15 seconds, I can't really do much more than play on their emotions, right? And the second thing is, headlines perform better on social media, too. So, I have to take the most extreme position possible.

Therefore, politicians find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, they see the need to interact in social media debates to explain decisions; But, on the other hand, they know that messages without an emotional stance will rather not be heard and explanations based on factual reasoning quickly be pushed back by emotional outbursts of social media users.

Second, coming back to the question of how politicians perceive citizens' emotions, workshop participants indicated that this emotional excess on social media has negative consequences on their perceptions of what citizens feel and what their emotional needs are.

So, just like you said, in face-to-face conversations I get the feeling that emotions are much more restrained. And people just think twice about what they say to your face, about how they insult you. It's completely different on social media. And I actually think it's a shame, because... Well, personally, I feel like I've become totally desensitized to it over the last few years, ever since I've been in the state legislature. At first, I really did respond to a lot of things and often tried to explain and discuss them. But now, as you say, I sometimes think to myself, "Why should I respond to that? It's not going to be a rational discussion anyway."

Hence, actual interactions on social media seem to be impossible – while politicians feel that emotions can actually be taken up in direct interactions with citizens.

I've rarely had someone tell me face-to-face: "Nothing you say is true. You're lying." And yell at me. And, I mean, if someone says something to my face, I respond, and I think you can actually have a conversation there. Whereas on Facebook, 80 or 90 percent of the time, I just dismiss them as internet trolls.

Third, Parliamentarians discussed that the way how politics is reported about, mainly in social media but partly also in traditional media, shows a distorted picture of politics. They have the impression that negative emotions, scandals and polarization are transported in social media as being a major feature of politics – while the need to come to agreements and the search for workable solutions and compromises between political parties, processes that are key to democratic politics in the German consensus democracy, are not reported on. Therefore, citizens get a wrong impression of what politics is about which leads to distorted expectations of what politicians should do.

Finally, this impact of the changed media environment seems to spill over on real-life politics. Parliamentarians said that finding

compromises and supporting them publicly as viable solutions to a given problem would clearly enhance citizens' trust in politics. Indeed, in direct interactions with citizens, Parliamentarians pointed out that such explanations can actually convince citizens. However, this seems to be lost in the current environment where the question of who has won and who has lost in a political and emotional game is the only thing that creates resonance in social media and, relatedly, on which traditional media will report. Importantly, these changed dynamics in the public sphere may also spill over to the policy-making system: when only emotionalized speech and simple winner-loser-arguments prevail, this may endanger finding compromises even between traditional parties like the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats who have excelled in working together while being political opponents in the Federal Republic of Germany. One politician actually said that maybe in this environment, the consensus-oriented type of politician might be outdated.

So, the question I'm asking myself and many other colleagues are asking is whether a certain type of politician is simply going to be needed in this decade, or perhaps in the coming decades, given the geopolitical landscape and so on. So, is it not just about the simple answers the AfD provides? Or is it also about the fact that people are currently yearning for someone like Trump? Or, in the past, it was Gerhard Schröder, who was did "basta-politics" and said, "This is how we're doing it now".

4. CONCLUSIONS

This policy brief reports insights from a practitioners' workshop with politicians from the German State Parliament of Saarland that dealt with the question of how emotions enter the policy process. **Exploring how Parliamentarians think about the influence of emotions on their daily policy-making work** from a practitioner's point of view enriched our understanding on the relevance of emotions in the current era of polycrisis and increased insecurity. Several key take-aways can be taken from the workshop:

First, politicians acknowledge the **increasingly emotionalized context of politics** and relate it not only to the current situation of crisis and rising feelings of insecurity, but also to a changed structural context of policy-making that has to do with the **transformation of the public sphere** through social media.

Second, workshop participants reported that **taking up citizens' emotions and providing political responses them works mainly well in direct interactions**. When politicians meet individuals directly, they can hear them out, let the emotions calm down and, eventually, provide an explanation. This does not seem to be possible on social media, where workshop participants reported to stop interacting with individuals when they become emotional. Parliamentarians also reported that citizens repeatedly were content to expressed what they felt when meeting with them and were happy when politicians responded to their feelings and concerns for instance by sending an email back or by promising to pay attention to a demand in the policy process. Hence, according to the practitioners, **for responding to feelings and emotions, direct interaction seems to be key**.

Third, given that social media plays an increasingly important role in political communication also affecting the rules of the game for traditional media, negative emotions are perceived as dominating political communication in social networks. The

Parliamentarians participating in the workshop were highly critical of this tendency, **because communicating emotionally about politics in terms of conflict, polarization and winners and losers provides a distorted picture of policy-making and downplays the value of compromise**. Hence, for the politicians, the emotionalized environment of politics that has been spurred by the **changed dynamics in the public sphere risk to endanger, in the long run, the established mechanisms of compromise-building and consensus in German politics**. Partly, because politicians that seek consensus may be less important in politics compared to "strong leaders", and partly also because citizens will learn through media exposure that politics is about winning and losing and not about finding compromises – which, in turn, favours a certain type of politician and may also lead to less consensus-oriented behaviour of political actors within the policy process.

As a consequence of these dynamics, politicians strongly favoured a **stricter regulation of social media** and also emphasized the **need to preserve the culture of compromise** in German politics. Finally, from the workshop it seems primordial to develop ways and arenas in which **direct interactions about politics between politicians and citizens, but also between citizens become possible**. It seems to be in such places where **emotions can be articulated, attended to and turned into a discussion about actual ways forward that are politically feasible**.

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