

Election 2020: The effect of voters' happiness



(Image: Pixabay)

In 1945, after leading his country, and western democracy, to victory against an axis of fascist powers, Winston Churchill lost the post-war election in a massive 10.7% swing to Labour. Churchill was seen as a popular war-time leader, but his Conservative party had presided over phenomenally high levels of employment before the war (some estimates put unemployment as high as 20%). Possibly voters went for a change to avoid the risk of a repeat of that negative experience.

On 19th September 2020, probably, Jacinda Adern is going to learn if her government's handling of various crises, most notably the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent massive economic and jobs fallout (also climate change, wealth and social inequality and the radical transformation of the world of work driven by automation, and accelerated by remote working), will also lead to the same rejection of the incumbent government.

What influences voters choice? There is strong evidence of 'economic voting' – people vote for the incumbent government if the economy has gone well before the election.

But is it the economy that really matters – or what the economy delivers? A growing economy produces jobs, and if population doesn't out-strip it, that should mean more people in jobs – a big source of wellbeing. A growing economy could mean more investment in the services that voters value – education and health and police on the street.

A radical initiative recently is to go for the real bottom line – if it's emotions that matter, why not measure voter's feelings? And does that influence voting? The results suggest – yes, happy voters reward incumbent governments by voting them back in.

A review by George Ward of MIT in the 2019 World Happiness Report shows happiness outperforms GDP growth in explaining the support of incumbent governments at elections. 'Emotional voting'

explains around 9% of voter choice, while GDP growth explains around 6.5% (there may be some overlap between the effect of these).

That indicates that both economic voting and emotional voting matter, but there is still at least 85% explained by things like who your buddies vote for, what a celebrity said last week, the candidate's good looks or the weather.

There is more evidence of the significance of emotions in driving voting behaviour. Federica Liberini and her colleagues followed up people in the United Kingdom who had recently lost a partner – their reduced happiness resulted in an increased tendency to vote against the government of the day. This might not seem logical, in the sense that domestic affairs are a different realm to national politics, but it does indicate that emotions, in this case unhappiness, influence voting.

Mike Carter is a journalist who in May 2016 walked from Liverpool to London – just before the Brexit referendum. He travelled through deprived areas, met unhappy people who felt left behind by the rest of the county, who frequently blamed immigration for their economic problems, and who consistently told Carter they would be voting “out”. No surprise for Carter then when the country voted for Brexit in June.

The impact of unhappiness on voting for radical change is demonstrated empirically by Yann Algan and his colleagues tracking the voting of French people in the 2017 French presidential elections. The chart illustrating this looks like a ski slope – on the left, at the extreme of unhappiness – the votes for radical populist Marie Le Pen are piled up, and then they drop off to minimal as voters report more happiness. This is true for different income groups – though the less well-off are more inclined overall to vote Le Pen – their ski slopes are at higher altitudes than those who are wealthier.

So how happy will the New Zealand electorate be feeling come September? In a positive scenario, by mid-September we will have been out of lockdown for five months, unemployment will be at record levels (and many of these people will have no hope of seeing a return of the jobs they had pre-pandemic), many business will have failed, there will be a drop in people's perception of their wealth as home values drop.

I'll let you do the weightings – but these factors could be in play:

Reasons to be happy	Or not happy
Health of whanau	Death or sickness of loved ones
Secure job and future career prospects	Unemployed, future of casual work or no work
Financial security for those with good jobs or job prospects	Financial hard-ship – job-loss, business-loss – for self or whanau
Satisfied with how New Zealanders and Government have worked constructively to manage the situation and reduce health and financial risks	Unhappy about the behaviour of 'idiots' and others who have taken advantage of others in the situation, without suffering appropriate consequences
Pleased with the Governments well-signaled and consistent emphasis on health and financial support	Unhappy at the Government's inflexibility about providing business the opportunity to provide services (and jobs)
Confident about the future	Anxiety about job or business prospects in the near future
Consider Jacinda is up for leading New Zealand in the new normal	Think Simon would be a better leader going forward

Just one qualification – elections can be influenced by voter's perception of external threat. Two US elections have not conformed to the 'economic voting' rule. John F. Kennedy won in 1961 – campaigning on the threat presented by a militant Soviet Union. Jimmy Carter also went against the

economic voting prediction – campaigning against the corruption of government by entrenched elites. We have seen recently the power handed to politicians who are able to heighten threat perceptions and mobilize negative feelings. There is good evidence that when more authoritarian voters see a threat (such as immigrants or contagion) they will support leaders who promise strong leadership.

This could be part of the (temporary) bump in support for President Trump as he talked tough about the United States response to Covid-19.

It will be interesting to see if Adern is able to balance kindness with the demonstration of toughness. Perhaps the recently demoted David Clark provides an example of Adern trying out this tough persona. More interesting – after we're out of the lock-down, how will 'we're all in this together' play on election day?

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