

[Voiceover] [00:00:00]:

We've had it, we've now had it. They have every reason to be angry. We lose at every single facet. A rigged economy.

Tim Phillips [00:00:08]:

Today on VoxTalks Economics the political economy of anger. Welcome to VoxTalks Economics from the Centre for Economic Policy Research. My name is Tim Phillips, and every week we bring you the best new research in economics. So remember, subscribe. Follow us on Instagram. You'll find us at VoxTalks Economics. On social media and in interviews, voters and their representatives sometimes seem full of rage at the moment. Is the current rise in populism driven by this anger, or is that conclusion too simplistic? Klaus Desmet of SMU is one of the authors of a new discussion paper that investigates the relationship between our feelings of anger and the way we vote. And he joins me now. Klaus, welcome back to VoxTalks Economics.

Klaus Desmet [00:01:09]:

Hello, Tim.

Tim Phillips [00:01:10]:

How do we define anger? Is it different from other emotions?

Klaus Desmet [00:01:16]:

So anger is defined as a negative emotion, but it has some very specific characteristics. For example, you're likely to feel angry if you blame a person or a group of persons for a negative event you face. Another characteristic of anger is that it emboldens you to act. And this call to action tends to be accompanied by a sense of certainty that your action will achieve its desired goal. And you're actually likely to think that this desired goal is justified. And so in that sense, anger is actually quite different from some of the other negative emotions. So let me give you a few examples. If there's a negative event that you can blame on situational forces rather than on a specific individual or a specific group, you'd probably feel sadness rather than anger. Or if there's a negative event that you blame on yourself, that would generate shame rather than anger. Or if there's a negative event, but you're not quite certain what the causes of that negative event, that may create feelings of anxiety or fear rather than anger. So all of these are negative emotions. Anger is one of them, but it is an emotion that has very specific characteristics.

Tim Phillips [00:02:42]:

And in theory, why might this distinctive emotion, anger, why might it influence the way that we

vote?

Klaus Desmet [00:02:53]:

Psychologists, of course, are not just interested in describing anger. They're interested in understanding how anger, or other emotions for that matter, affect behavior. And so from what I said before, because anger involves attributing blame to an individual or a group, because it involves a call to action, a call for a solution, one can actually easily imagine that it might motivate people to vote one way or another.

Tim Phillips [00:03:23]:

Well, one way or another, should we expect anger to influence our voting in a particular direction or for a particular ideology?

Klaus Desmet [00:03:33]:

You dig a little bit deeper into the nature of anger. It probably resonates more with populist anti-elite ideology than with the more traditional left-right political divide. So again, these populist candidates, they tend to blame the elites for the problems of society. They instill a sense of certainty in their voter base that they have the capacity to change things. And this confidence that action can be effective makes angry people willing to make risky decisions. So, for example, if you're angry, you might be willing to bet on an outsider with little or no experience. Angry individuals also tend to be less interested in the details of an argument and more in whomever is actually making the argument. So if you're angry, you may trust your candidate, even if his or her discourse is not fully coherent. Angry people are also more likely to stereotype the out group. So when you hear some of the outrageous language that we tend to associate with populist candidates when they're referring to their opponents, that actually resonates with people in a state of anger. So because of all these reasons, it makes us think that it might influence people more to vote in a particular direction. And that direction would be in the direction of populist candidates.

Tim Phillips [00:05:03]:

Yes. What has previous research taught us about that relationship between anger and voting? What don't we know?

Klaus Desmet [00:05:11]:

There's been a lot of talk about so-called American rage to actually borrow the title of a book by political scientist Steven Webster. And from previous research, there is definitely some indication that anger may be related to voting, not just for Donald Trump in the U.S. But also for Ukip in England, for the National Front, or the National Rally in France, etc. But what we know

much less about is whether anger actually acts as a channel distinct from other negative emotions.

[Voiceover] [00:05:52]:

If you're interested in populism, then listen to our conversation from September 2023 with Kevin O'Rourke called; Should History Change the Way We Think About Populism? Also in July 2022, we discussed the changes in European politics with Moritz Schularick and Massimo Morelli in the episode; Causes and Costs of Populism.

Tim Phillips [00:06:21]:

You are studying the effect of anger on electoral outcomes in the U.S. Now, if you watch the news, a lot of politicians in the U.S. seem to be tapping into the anger vote. So how selective were you? Which ones did you choose?

Klaus Desmet [00:06:38]:

So, because of this possible relation between anger and populism, we mainly focused on three electoral outcomes. One is the vote share for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primary. A second is the vote share for Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primary. And a third is the vote share for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. And in addition, we actually also looked at a fourth outcome, which is quite interesting, which is the excess vote share of Donald Trump in 2016 over the Republican candidate Mitt Romney in 2012. And this last outcome is useful because it isolates the support for populism. It compares a populist Republican candidate to a traditional Republican candidate.

Tim Phillips [00:07:33]:

Yes. And I guess whatever your opinions are about Mitt Romney, he certainly wasn't a person who tended to channel anger, was he?

Klaus Desmet [00:07:40]:

That's right. He was more of a classical Republican. He was not tapping in this anger that sometimes is present in American society.

Tim Phillips [00:07:51]:

So to do this, you need to find data on how angry people are. How do you measure that?

Klaus Desmet [00:07:58]:

There's actually a very interesting source of data here. The Gallup Daily poll collected between January 2008 and January 2017 data on anger and other emotions by interviewing 1000 different individuals every day. And they asked people about their feelings. So they would ask them, did you experience anger or any other emotion yesterday? And then people would answer these questions. And so overall, if you add it up, we have data or observations for about 3.5 million individuals on how they felt anger, worry, sadness, stress, happiness, life satisfaction. All these different feelings and emotions.

Tim Phillips [00:08:50]:

Wow. What can we learn about America's angry people from this data?

Klaus Desmet [00:08:55]:

So there's two first things that we learn. One is that you can say, well, who are these angry people? Well, they're more likely to be male. They're more likely to have low levels of education and income and they're also more likely to be located on the extremes of the ideological spectrum. A second thing we learn is something that psychology already taught us, which is that not all these negative emotions are the same. So let me give you a few examples. Of the people who expressed that they were worried, only a quarter also experienced anger. And of the people who said that they were sad, only one third was also angry. This tells us that anger is really a distinct emotion from other negative emotions. And so that gives us some hope that we can isolate the specific effect of anger on how people vote.

Tim Phillips [00:09:57]:

And when you're doing this research, are you trying to capture how angry individuals choose to vote or are you trying to capture the voting outcomes in America's angriest places?

Klaus Desmet [00:10:13]:

Our research actually captures the latter. We're looking at the voting outcomes of angry places rather than of angry individuals. And the reason is the following: although we have these very nice individual level data on anger, the Gallup Daily poll unfortunately does not ask people who they voted for. But of course, because we have this information on emotions of 3.5 million individuals, we can easily construct a measure of the share of angry people at the level of these 3000 plus counties in the U.S. Now, what's important here is you could think, well, there's more angry and less angry individuals everywhere so that the average anger of a county is likely to be similar to the average anger of any other county. Well, it actually turns out that that's not the case. When you look across the U.S. geography, there are actually enormous differences in the level of anger. The average share of angry individuals in counties at the 90th percentile is 15%, whereas the average share in counties at the 10th percentile is 7.5%. So in other words, you compare the nineteenth to the 10th percentile, it gives us a ratio of two to one. There are some

angry places, and in fact, the three most angry counties in America are in the Appalachians on the border between West Virginia and Virginia. And then you could say, well, what do we know about these angry places? Is it randomly distributed across space? Well, no, it actually turns out that the geography of anger is correlated with the types of characteristics that you would probably expect. So anger is more pronounced in denser urban places. It is more pronounced in places with high unemployment. It is less pronounced in places with high levels of education and social capital. All of this tells us that we're looking at something meaningful when we measure the level of anger across counties in the U.S.

Tim Phillips [00:12:18]:

Just that map alone strikes me as being extremely useful information, especially for anyone traveling around in the U.S. Is anger positively related to the populist vote share?

Klaus Desmet [00:12:31]:

So when we just look at anger and not at other emotions, the short answer to your question is yes. So more angry counties voted more for Trump in both the general election and in the Republican primaries. They voted more for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries. And the magnitude is significant. To give you a sense, a ten percentage point increase in the share of a county's population that reports experiencing anger is associated with a 2.5 percentage point increase in Trump's vote share in the general election. Now, given how close the election was in many places is actually not a trivial act.

Tim Phillips [00:13:16]:

But we're talking about this in emotional terms, talking about people voting because they're angry. Could we be thinking about it in terms of the things that make people angry, like the poverty or the unemployment, rather than anger?

Klaus Desmet [00:13:33]:

That's, of course, a key question. So in the example you just gave, if we want to isolate the effect of anger per se on the populace vote share, we of course, need to compare, say, two counties with the same level of poverty and unemployment, but one with a larger share of angry people than the other. And that's precisely what we do. And in fact, we don't just condition on poverty and unemployment, but on many other factors that could impact both anger and the populace vote share. So without being exhaustive, we also control or condition on inequality, racial diversity, population density, the share of people working in manufacturing, et cetera. So the way you should interpret our result is you take two counties that are identical in all dimensions except in their degree of anger, and then what we find is that the more angry county votes disproportionately for populist candidates.

Tim Phillips [00:14:38]:

You looked at other emotions as well as anger, didn't you? Which ones are also important about determining populist vote share? Are they as important as anger?

Klaus Desmet [00:14:51]:

We looked at different emotions, at other emotions. And that's actually where the results become a bit more intriguing and maybe a little more interesting. So we looked at other negative emotions, say, stress, worry, sadness. We looked at positive emotions such as happiness, and we also looked at the degree of life satisfaction, which is a measure that goes on a scale from zero to ten. They ask people, how satisfied are you with your life in general? And people give an answer on a scale from zero to ten. And so one key finding is that other emotions also matter for how people vote. And maybe more importantly, the key finding is that lower life satisfaction seems to be a more important driver of the populace vote share than anger per se. In other words, once we control for life satisfaction, we can no longer say that there is a separate role for anger in driving the populace vote share.

[Voiceover] [00:15:52]:

We've had it. We've now had it.

Tim Phillips [00:15:58]:

But can we say at the end of your research that it's supporting this very popular narrative that anger fuels populism or is it undermining it?

Klaus Desmet [00:16:09]:

Maybe a little bit of both, right? So the glass is in some sense, both half full and half empty here. More angry counties vote more for populist candidates, both on the right and on the left. But once we control for other negative emotions and life satisfaction, anger no longer seems to be a separate or distinct driver of populism. And so in that sense, this focus on American rage, on vote or anger, et cetera, is probably a little bit overdone. Populism is not only or not just an expression of anger and resentment. Instead, it seems to be a more complex expression of malaise and dissatisfaction of people with the world.

Tim Phillips [00:16:54]:

It would have been great, wouldn't it, if Gallup had asked that extra question about who did you vote for? If we had that individual level data. If someone collects that individual level data in the future to help us to understand how negative feelings are influencing voter behavior, what might you learn?

Klaus Desmet [00:17:15]:

Let's maybe first talk about what the possible drawback is from not having these individual data. So when you find that angry places vote disproportionately for populist candidates, you're tempted to conclude that angry individuals vote proportionately for populist candidates. And probably you're right, but you can be sure. And the reason why you can be sure is because of something that political scientists call the ecological fallacy. And the ecological fallacy refers to the possibility that it might actually be the non angry voters in the angry counties who voted for Trump. That's the possibility. Now, unfortunately, we cannot directly investigate this potential ecological fallacy because we don't have individual data on both emotions and on voting in the 2016 elections. Now, we did something sort of imperfect because we do have individual level data on Obama's favorability for the 2008, 2016 period. And in that context, we find that both more angry counties and more angry individuals were actually less favorable towards President Obama. And so, at least in that related context, there does not seem to be any indication of the so called ecological fallacy. But that said, of course, we'd love to get better individual level data on different emotions and on voter behavior, because it is, of course, important to understand whether it's anger, sorrow, despair, or any other emotions that might explain at least partly the rise of populism. And then, of course, to also understand which conditions might lead people to harbor these feelings and these emotions.

Tim Phillips [00:19:11]:

Let's hope we can get some of that data, because these are fascinating questions. Thank you for explaining what you have been able to find out about it. Klaus, thanks for talking today.

Klaus Desmet [00:19:22]:

Yeah, thanks Tim, very much.

Tim Phillips [00:19:33]:

The paper is called; Does Anger Drive Populism? And the authors are Omer Ali, Klaus Desmet and Romain Wacziarg. It is discussion paper 18266 at CEPR.

[Voiceover] [00:19:48]:

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