



# Politics 'beneath the surface'

Tabitha Baker asks whether reflective emotional literacy can help ease political tension and social polarisation

**P**olitics can be the most polarising subject for families, friends, colleagues, and classmates. Although 'being political' can spur lively debate and complement democracy through active participation in civic matters, it can also have challenging consequences for everyday social ties in the home, workplace or online. With the rise of the self-help industry and mind-management books that seek to develop and educate us on the inner workings of our minds and responses to emotion, might we take a similar self-reflective mind management approach to political tension?

Psychologist academics have touched on this recently in works such as Professor Brian Hughes' *The Psychology of Brexit* and Professor Drew Westen's *The Political Brain*. However, an untapped and potentially undervalued resource of psychological insight into our political responses may lie within the psychoanalytic field of the 1930s.

The psychoanalytic field at that time was responding to the rise of authoritarianism and fascism after World War I, perhaps making it a pertinent area for today's context, given the downward trends in world-wide democracy. Since then, most notably, Stephen Frosh, Lynne Layton, Frantz Fanon, Erich Fromm, Yannis Stravakakis and other prominent writers have bridged psychoanalysis, politics and society, introducing psychoanalysis as Political Psychology. Such approaches have illuminated the rich

tapestry of insight that can be provided when going 'beneath the surface' of the conscious mind.

## **Defence mechanisms**

To illustrate this, I will first outline Anna Freud's concept of defence mechanisms. Anna Freud developed her father Sigmund Freud's work and characterised defence mechanisms as unconscious tools employed by the ego (the self) with the aim of reducing internal stress. She hypothesised that people frequently employ these automatic mechanisms to alleviate inner conflicts, particularly those arising between the superego (our morality) and id (our instincts). The defensive function of the ego manifests in many ways when enacted by a threat of uncomfortable or unsettling emotions, to avoid negative psychological effects of anxiety, loss, and uncertainty. By acknowledging and recognising these processes, it is thought that we can enhance our self-awareness and attain a fresh comprehension of our behaviours.

Defence mechanisms that have potential relevance for understanding political division are projection, displacement, and splitting. Projection can be defined psychoanalytically by simply denying the existence of unconscious both positive and negative impulses and qualities and instead attributing them to an 'other' (object, person or group). Displacement refers to the way that emotions are redirected from an unacceptable target to a more acceptable one. Splitting (developed by

Melanie Klein) refers to the way a person sees things, including people or situations, as either all good or all bad, with little or no middle ground or nuance. This involves extreme and polarised thinking, often without considering the complexities, or grey areas in between and can lead to a distorted view of reality and relationships, as it does not allow for a balanced and realistic perspective.

Ultimately, people may enact these defence mechanisms as a form of emotional and identity protection, a defence against anxiety. For example, during economic crises, citizens enacting displacement might blame and target a minority group rather than understanding the complexities and failures of a government's economic policies. When perceiving immigration as a threat, a citizen might also enact splitting, and over-simplify the external world in a polarised manner, for example assuming that all migrants attempting to enter the United Kingdom are dangerous, when in reality, this is largely untrue and their situations are often terrifying and complex.

Certain political messages and ideas may attract support because they meet some of our basic psychological needs, i.e.:

- to defend against anxieties (whether they are material or imagined fears and threats)
- to manage difficult feelings (the emotions that arise from these fears and threats)
- to seek potential attachment figures (which might be achieved through political leaders)
- to provide a sense of belonging and purpose (which might be achieved via a large group or collective identity).

These needs are not abnormal, but universal, though they vary in intensity between individuals. For example, political speeches or campaigns may be effective if they can speak to one or more of these needs and promise to meet it.

### **How we move forward**

Only by becoming aware of the defensive ways in which we respond to political ideas and messages can we start to bridge political divides and polarisation in our social spheres. To do this, empathy-based reflection and awareness are required to understand our diversity of experience and thought, as I will share in the four recommended reflections below:

- We all have different experiences; therefore, everyone is starting from different points of political and social awareness;
- People's personal experiences shape their views and there is a reason behind the opinions that people hold;
- We should be flexible with our perceptions and challenge our pre-existing ideas;
- We must try to recognise our own defence mechanisms and emotions that are tied to our politics.



**Dr Tabitha Baker** is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Bournemouth University and researches political sentiment in periods of change and crisis. She designed the unit 'Psychology of Politics' as part of the BA Politics programme at Bournemouth University. She holds a Master's of Arts in Political Psychology and gained her PhD in 2022 with her thesis titled 'The Psychosocial Relationship between National Identity and Political Sentiment in England: 2016-2020'.

Such reflections have been put into practice in my own work, as a Senior Lecturer in Politics in higher education. Considering how we might address the political polarisation and division our society faces, I had the opportunity to contribute to re-designing an undergraduate politics programme. A module focusing on sociology and psychology was designed and introduced, and is now delivered to first year Politics students, to introduce them to psychological concepts and encourage them to apply these to political contexts. Students are taught skills in reflexivity, where their first assessment involves an essay asking them to reflect on their 'Political Self'; this consists of a reflection on their personal history, events, thoughts and emotions that are tied to their own politics.

By doing so, students can articulate clearly new knowledge about themselves, situations of conflict in which they may have found themselves and their actions. In particular, using political psychology to help them explore their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, has given them more insight into the political ideas they hold and enhanced understanding of their motivations and values. By giving students time in the classroom to develop their reflexive skills and facilitating political conversations between themselves to become more empathically aligned, this allows for respectful dialogue on sensitive and sometimes contentious contemporary issues such as poverty, war and conflict. For example, students have written on topics such as disagreements with family members on Brexit, out-grouping other social groups, ideological identities, and social class.

This of course, will not completely solve the issues of polarisation and division we have today. But reflective and emotionally literate political citizens may edge us towards a more sensitive and empathic approach to political discussion and debate in public and private spheres, as we head into the next election cycles on both sides of the Atlantic.