

This is your brain on politics

October 2 2008

U.S. presidential candidates have been stumping for nearly two years with their every move being analyzed and reported ad nauseum. Logically, voters should be able to tap into lots of information when they make their decisions come November. But it turns out there's a lot more going on when we step behind the curtain to cast our ballot.

Though it is impossible to know for sure whether people actually vote along party lines, for example, many psychological studies have shown that political affiliation plays a large role, not just in the voting booth, but when people must decide how they feel about political issues, as well. Emory University political psychologist Drew Westen and his colleagues previously published a study in which they correctly predicted people's views on political issues based solely on their emotions.

The psychologists quizzed participants to gauge their knowledge of Clinton and the details of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Then they asked emotion-based questions based on how they felt about Clinton as a person, how they felt about the Democratic and Republican parties, and how they felt about infidelity in general.

Months later, before the Congressional impeachment trial began in December 1998, they called the participants back and asked them a series of questions. Using only what they knew about the respondents' emotions, the researchers were able to correctly predict their views on impeachment 85 percent of the time. Knowledge meant little: when they factored in what the respondents actually knew about the situation and the Constitutional requirements for impeachment, they only improved

the accuracy of their predictions by three percent.

Westen said in his book *The Political Brain* that only when asked about the economy did people sway from their opinions. "There we found some connection to reality, but it was still swamped by their feeling about the incumbent party and whether that party was theirs," he says. What's more, Westen believes that we become even more partisan as we age because we are faced with partisan decisions again and again.

The researchers also used neuroimaging to look at the neural responses of individuals who described themselves as partisan. They showed the participants one of three groups of slides: one group about their party's candidate, one about the other party's candidate, or one about a neutral control subject. In each group, the first slide revealed a position the politician had taken, and the second depicted a contradiction — something the candidate had done or said that seemed to be contrary to what the first slide was saying. Not only were the participants unable to see the contradiction for their own candidate, but the neuroimaging showed that they were regulating their emotional response.

The psychologists specifically saw large areas of activation in the prefrontal cortex, which indicated emotional influence on reasoning, and in the posterior cingulate cortex, associated with forgivability. Essentially, participants detected the contradiction in their reasoning, but they weren't allowing it to affect their opinion. Westen describes this as "motivated reasoning."

There's more. Westen showed the participants yet another slide, this one offering a rationale for the earlier contradiction: large areas in the ventral striatum became active, suggesting that participants were rewarding themselves for working through the problem. This combination of the suppressed negative emotions and reward for reaching a biased conclusion "suggests why motivated judgments may be

so difficult to change," Westen wrote. "They are doubly reinforcing."

But how do we become partisan in the first place? It turns out that, because it is impossible to know everything there is to know, humans use cognitive shortcuts when necessary to help them make a lot of life's decisions. Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer observed rule-based behavior in a typical office setting. She had researchers ask if they could cut in line to use a copy machine. When they simply said, "Excuse me, may I use the copy machine?", only 60 percent of the subjects complied. When the researchers gave a reason — "Excuse me, may I use the copy machine because I'm in a rush?" — 94 percent said yes. Langer tested this one more time with the phrase, "Excuse me, may I use the copy machine because I need to make some copies," and again 93 percent of respondents agreed — despite the fact that "I need to make some copies" is not really a very good reason for cutting in line.

The way Langer and fellow psychologist Robert Cialdini described it, people hear the word "because" and assume that there is a good reason. That is to say, the word "because" is a shortcut people use to distinguish between good arguments and bad.

Threats to mortality have also shown to increase the appeal of the conservative party, even among liberals. For instance, a 2004 study by Florette Cohen and colleagues asked participants whether they preferred George W. Bush or John Kerry in the upcoming presidential election. Some participants first filled out a survey about how watching television made them feel and others filled out a questionnaire about how death made them feel. Those who had been emotionally primed with thoughts of death were strongly in favor of Bush, whereas those who had been primed with thoughts of television were strongly in favor of Kerry. This finding is consistent with what's known as "terror management theory," which holds that people use ideology to protect themselves psychologically from paralyzing fears of dying.

Whether or not terror management theory is the cause, general elections are actually won by courting the independents — the one-third of the population that votes based on the options presented them each year. How do these people decide? A lot of them use shortcuts too. Some will obviously look at the issues, the economy, and the current state of the country and make an educated decision. But again, some people just don't have the time. These people turn to their guts — or at least a more automatic part of their brain.

Research has shown again and again that people prefer that which is familiar to them. In *Influence*, Cialdini writes about two studies that demonstrated this point. In one, experimenters on a college campus asked students for a dime to make a phone call. The experimenters were dressed in either "hippie" or "straight" clothing (this was the 1970s), and they were more likely to get a dime from students who were dressed the same way. Similarly, marchers in an anti-war demonstration were more likely to get people to sign a petition when they were dressed the same way as the people they were propositioning.

Another major way that politicians try to shape their own image, whether by branding themselves or their opponents, is through television commercials. A lot of research on political commercials has been done by Ted Brader, a professor of political science and political psychology at the University of Michigan. Brader studied hundreds of commercials and classified them into two groups: fear-inducing and feel-good.

.

Brader wanted to test the effect of these audio and visual cues on both types of ads, so he had people watch a 30-minute local news segment under the guise of it being an experiment studying what people learn from the local news. Halfway through the news, participants saw one of four different commercials. Some saw a "feel-good ad" either with

strong emotional cues, such as children playing outside or sitting in a classroom, or muted ones, such as aerial pictures of a city or pictures of buildings. Others saw an "attack ad" with either the proper negative cues or with muted visual and audio cues similar to the ones in the feel-good ad.

After the news segment was complete, he asked the participants to rate how they felt. Those who had seen the negative ad with the menacing music and imagery reported being the most anxious, worried and afraid, and those who saw the positive ad with the cheerful imagery reported feeling the most hopeful, reassured, and confident. What's more, participants who saw the positive ads in general — and, in particular, the ones who saw positive ads with emotional cues — reported being more interested in the campaign than those who saw the negative ads.

It turns out that voters are actually quite perceptive, and most can gain a lot of knowledge through these short, 30-second television clips, meet-and-greets, or televised debates — so every interaction counts.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

Citation: This is your brain on politics (2008, October 2) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-10-brain-politics.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.
