

Thinking like a president: How power affects complex decision making

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Presidential scholars have written volumes trying to understand the presidential mind. How can anyone juggle so many complicated decisions? Do those seeking office have a unique approach to decision making? Studies have suggested that power changes not only a person's responsibilities, but also the way they think. Now, a new study in the December issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, indicates that having power may lead people to automatically think in a way that makes complex decision-making easier.

Psychologists Pamela Smith, Ap Dijksterhuis and Daniël Wigboldus of Radboud University Nijmegen stimulated feelings of powerlessness or power in a group of volunteers by having some volunteers recall a situation when other people had power over them and other volunteers recall a situation when they had power over other people. Then they were given a complicated problem to solve (they had to pick among four cars, each varying on 12 different attributes).

The experiment was designed so that there was a "correct" solution—that is, one of the cars had the most positive and least negative attributes, although the optimal choice was not obvious. Both the "powerful" and the "powerless" volunteers chose among the cars, but some spent time consciously thinking about the problem, while others were distracted with a word puzzle.

Previous research has shown that most people can solve complex

problems better if they engage in unconscious thinking, rather than try to deliberately examine and weigh each factor. The conscious mind is not able to consider every possibility—attempts to do so bog the mind down in too much detail. Unconscious thinkers are better at solving complicated problems because they are able to think abstractly and very quickly get to the gist of the problem—they do not spend a lot of time focusing on insignificant details of the problem.

The results showed that the "powerless" volunteers performed better when they were distracted—that is, when they unconsciously thought about the problem. More interestingly, the "powerful" participants performed equally well regardless of whether they were in the conscious thinking or unconscious thinking group.

These findings indicate that powerful people's conscious deliberation is very much like the unconscious processing of the rest of us—more abstract and better when it comes to complex decisions.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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