

Politics and the brain: Attention perks up when politicians break with party lines

February 22 2021, by Deann Gayman



Haas demonstrates to a participant what will be happening inside the fMRI machine at the Center for Brain, Biology and Behavior in 2017, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: Craig Chandler | University Communication

In a time of extreme political polarization, hearing that a political

candidate has taken a stance inconsistent with their party might raise some questions for their constituents.

Why don't they agree with the party's position? Do we know for sure this is where they stand?

New research led by University of Nebraska-Lincoln political psychologist Ingrid Haas has shown the [human brain](#) is processing politically incongruent statements differently—attention is perking up—and that the candidate's conviction toward the stated position is also playing a role.

In other words, there is a stronger neurological response happening when, for example, a Republican takes a position favorable to new taxes, or a Democratic candidate adopts an opinion critical of environmental regulation, but it may be easier for us to ignore these positions when we're not exactly sure where the candidate stands.

Using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or fMRI, at Nebraska's Center for Brain Biology and Behavior, Haas and her collaborators, Melissa Baker of the University of California-Merced, and Frank Gonzalez of the University of Arizona, examined the insula and anterior cingulate cortex in 58 individuals—both regions of the brain that are involved with cognitive function—and found increased activity when the participants read statements incongruent with the candidate's stated party affiliation. The participants were also shown a slide stating how certain the candidates felt about the positions.

"The biggest takeaway is that people paid more attention to uncertainty when it was attached to the consistent information, and they were more likely to dismiss it when it was attached to the inconsistent information," Haas, associate professor of political science, said. "In these brain regions, the most activation was to incongruent trials that were certain."

"If you definitely know that the candidate is deviating from [party lines](#), so to speak, that seemed to garner more response from our participants, whereas if there's a suspicion that they're deviating from party line, but it's attached to more uncertainty, we didn't see participants engaged in so much processing of that information."

Haas said these trials didn't examine what the voter might decide to do with this information, but that participants were paying more attention to incongruent statements overall.

"We didn't look at whether they're less likely to vote for the candidate, but what we show is increased neural activation associated with those trials," Haas said. "They are taking longer to process the [information](#) and taking longer to make a decision about how they feel about it. That does seem to indicate that it's garnering more attention."

The research raises a possible answer to the perennial question of why politicians are frequently less explicit in their opinions, or why they may flip-flop on a stated position.

"Our work points to a reason why politicians might deploy uncertainty in a strategic way," Haas said. "If a politician has a position that is definitely incongruent from the party's stated [position](#), the idea is that rather than put that out there, given that people might grasp onto it and pay more attention to it, it might be strategic for them to mask their true positions instead."

The article, "Political uncertainty moderates neural evaluation of incongruent policy positions," was published Feb. 22 in a special issue of *Philosophical Transactions B*, "The political [brain](#): neurocognitive and computational mechanisms."

More information: Ingrid J. Haas et al, Political uncertainty

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