

Powerful emotions affect how voters seek political information

May 27 2008

Angry and anxious voters tend to tune into the presidential race but their strong emotions might actually distract them from paying attention to the facts.

New findings by researchers at the University of Michigan and the University of Texas examined the emotional state on political-information seeking. They focused on the impact of negative emotions—fear vs. anger—on interest, information-seeking and learning about politics.

"While strong emotions can enhance attention, they might also interfere with information-seeking by distracting people from the task at hand," said Nicholas Valentino, a U-T professor and the study's lead author.

The researchers conducted two experiments in which respondents sought information on the Internet about 2004 presidential candidates John Kerry and George W. Bush. The people answered questions on a computer that either induced a specific emotional state or a control condition to reduce all emotional arousal.

The first experiment found that anxious, angry and enthusiastic people claimed they were more interested than people in a controlled, relaxed setting in the presidential campaigns and would pay closer attention to the debates. Anxiety produced the strongest impact on attention. However, all three emotional states led people to take less time looking for information that was made available to them.

Anger might distract people during complex cognitive tasks, which might make them less likely to seek more information, said Vincent Hutchings, an associate political science professor at U-M.

"So even though people claim to be more interested they are less able to concentrate on the task at hand," said Hutchings, the study's co-author.

The second experiment also suggested that typical campaign coverage can trigger powerful emotions which can lead to hasty, uninformed decisions.

The researchers said the findings indicate concern about fear-mongering in politics—which Democrats and Republicans accuse the other party of committing—may be overblown.

"Outrage, perhaps, is more damaging than fear if we hope to foster an informed citizenry," Valentino said.

The study appears in a recent issue of Political Psychology. Valentino and Hutchings wrote the report with Antoine Banks and Anne Davis, both U-M political science graduate instructors.

Source: University of Michigan

Citation: Powerful emotions affect how voters seek political information (2008, May 27)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2008-05-powerful-emotions-affect-voters-political.html>

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