

# The hidden psychology behind voting behaviour

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With less than a week to go before American voters are asked to choose between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in arguably the most important US presidential election in a generation, scientists and psychologists are shedding light on the underlying factors of what drives an individual's decision to vote for one candidate or party over another.

Voters are bombarded with weeks, if not months, of conflicting messages and policy promises from politicians eager to triumph at the ballot box over their opponents. Whilst of course many individuals do take time to inform themselves thoroughly on the issues, and factors such as education, healthcare and socio-economic status are all important, there are other, more subconscious factors at work that drive certain [voters](#) to swing one way or the other.

## **The disgust factor**

Yoel Inbar, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto has argued that voters may be swayed unconsciously by being exposed to ideas or things that trigger feelings of disgust. In one experiment, he placed participants on a 'disgust scale', asking them to rate their agreement with stomach-wrenching statements and situations and then quizzed them on their political ideology.

He discovered that those more easily disgusted tended to be politically conservative, and explains this phenomenon by linking political and moral associations to prehistoric human biology. When humans first started to spend more time in ever-growing social groups, they developed behaviours that would minimise the risk of contracting disease, known by psychologists as the 'behavioural immune system.'

'The attitudes that flow from the behavioural immune system are things we tend to think of as socially conservative,' comments Inbar. 'They are about avoiding groups that you are not familiar with, about adhering to traditional social practices, and they are also about sexual restrictedness.'

Another experiment undertaken by Inbar and his colleagues found that priming people to feel disgust made participants more likely to shun certain minority groups, such as homosexual men. Consequently, the implication is that political campaigns that utilise tactics and language to stimulate disgust amongst voters (such as by claiming that an opponent's policies 'stink') may indeed have a deeper influence on some groups of voters than others.

## **The identity factor**

In a recent study published in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Science*,

researchers from Duke University argue that casting a vote is for many people a way to reinforce a particular sense of self or belonging to a certain social group (a progressive, a Christian, or a member of a minority group for example).

'It isn't always clear how a particular policy will affect one's own interests; for example, how can I judge whether a trade deal will increase my own salary or improve my local economy?' explains psychology and neuroscience professor Scott Huettel. 'It can be much easier to recognise that supporting a particular candidate reinforces my own identity, whether as a patriot, a global citizen, or something else.'

Consequently, the team argue that traditional voter prediction methods, based on policy issues, are inadequate as they don't reflect how voters actually choose their candidate.

Instead, they suggest that policy preferences and identity compete - some voters will be more influenced by identity, and others will be more influenced by policy. Determining which group a voter falls into can lead to more accurate predictions: 'We argue that identity factors are their own category, and that strengthening one identity factor increases the importance of all identity factors for that voter,' says Huettel.

## **Fear and negativity**

Other well-documented factors that trigger subconscious voter biases are the use of fear and dislike. A study of 46 people from Nebraska found that individuals more affected by frightening images and unexpected loud noises tended to have more right-wing views. This highlighted the growing trend of politicians using fear scenarios – such as the threat of terrorism or economic instability – as a means to influence certain groups of voters.

Professor Jon Krosnick from Stanford University has also shown in his research that when candidates emphasise the negative qualities of their opponent, it can increase the turnout amongst their supporters. He found that dislike is an immensely compelling reason for someone to cast their ballot. 'If you dislike at least one of the two candidates, then you are really motivated to participate – so in other words, it's really disliking a candidate that motivates turnout,' he says.

This is indeed likely to be a major factor in the upcoming U.S. election, with both Clinton and Trump being highly polarising to large swathes of the American population.

Moreover, both campaigns have indeed been using a combination of all of the above factors to try and stimulate voters' deeper psychological impulses that they hope will benefit them on 8 November... and with less than a week to go, it really is too close to call.

Provided by CORDIS

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