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Your Most Important Role in a Democracy: Thinking for Yourself

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Democracies are only as strong and effective as the citizens who put decision-makers in office. In the ideal situation, citizens elect leaders who make decisions that are in the best interest of the people and the nation. However, this is not always the case. Democracies can go awry when citizens unknowingly elect leaders who make decisions or institute policies that are not in their best interest. In this essay, I discuss research findings from social psychology that can inform us about how political strategists can manipulate voters into voting for candidates that may not be the best leaders for the people or the nation. My objective is to raise awareness and discussion about how citizens in a democracy can make themselves stronger, more thoughtful and more effective voters who resist the influence of political strategists and think for themselves.

Free Will and the Fundamental Attribution Error

For over half a century research by social psychologists has repeatedly shown that the social situations in which we find ourselves play a significant predictable role in shaping our decisions and behavior. In large part, this is because situational cues affect our emotions and emotions influence our behavior. There is no doubt that we are each unique individuals with the free will to make our own distinct decisions. However, in the United States our strong values regarding individuality and free will consistently cause us to underestimate the extent to which emotional cues in situations influence our behavior and decisions. The tendency for us to ignore the influence of the situation on our behavior is so common that it is referred to by social psychologists as the “fundamental attribution error.” That is, we attribute our own (and others’) behavior to values, personality or rational choice when, in fact, it’s our emotional reactions to cues or stimuli in situations that usually have the largest influence on our behavior and decisions.

Ignorance about the power of situational cues to affect our behavior makes us vulnerable to influence tactics. For example, imagine how a used car dealership

might be designed to invoke feelings of trust rather than suspicion in order to increase car sales. Research suggests that cues as subtle as the color of paint on the walls can influence our willingness to trust and thus to make a purchase. Alternatively, consider how a car salesperson might behave to evoke feelings of trust. Research suggests that he or she has a very short window of time (about 30 seconds) to build your trust—first impressions are critical in this game.

A poignant example of the extent to which emotional cues in social situations influence our behavior and decisions is seen in the work of Judith Rich Harris.¹ Harris is a scholar who reviewed decades of research on why teenagers make particular choices, for example, why they might choose to study hard in high school, rob a bank, take drugs, etc. Most of us believe that these choices are the result of individual values and personality characteristics developed through upbringing and early childhood experiences (for example, strict or lax parental discipline). Harris found that the best predictor of teenager behavior was the behavior of the teenagers’ closest friends. Put teenagers in a situation where close friends are going to college, or smoking cigarettes, or taking drugs and social psychologists can predict with a high degree of accuracy that most will make the same decisions. Research consistently shows that our free will is heavily influenced by the will of our peers. Our emotional need to belong frequently overrides our desire to be an individual. In fact, belonging to a group is so important to us humans that it predicts our feelings of well-being.²

A less personal example of the situational cues influencing our emotions and behavior in predictable ways is seen in a high-school pep-rally. One of the best known principles in social psychology is that if you put a large group of people in a room (e.g., a gymnasium) with loud cheerful music, streamers and balloons flying and people clapping their hands in unison, the positive exuberant energy becomes contagious. Soon it will be almost impossible not to smile, experience the energy and feel a sense of pride and “oneness” with the crowd. This would be the perfect time for a political candidate

to step on stage and tell the crowd in a well calculated and persuasive tone exactly what the crowd wants to hear—that not only does its team have the power to win the state championships, that they each have the power to change the world if they vote for this candidate. In this situation, the enthusiasm, positive emotion, and sense of pride are transferred to the candidate. Given that this situation cues such predictable emotions and outcomes, doesn't it make sense that political rallies almost always include cheerful music, balloons, streamers, and synchronous clapping?

The Central Role of Emotion in Decisions

As I've discussed, a key reason we are susceptible to situational influence is that our preferences and decisions are strongly influenced by emotional cues in those situations. Mark Buchanan,³ concludes that we are so susceptible to emotional influence because our brains are the product of millions of years (99% of human history) of living in nomadic hunter-gatherer groups of a few dozen people. Therefore, our brains evolved not to solve math problems or to choose between the most sophisticated of political arguments, but to solve the most pressing problems faced by our ancestors, for example, hunting for food, finding mates, determining who could be trusted, and maintaining one's membership in the group. To meet these needs, the earliest part of our brains to evolve was the emotion center which enabled our primitive ancestors to make fast decisions via emotional cues from the environment. The more finely tuned their ability to pick up cues in the environment the more likely they were to survive and to pass on their genes. Today, our brains have evolved and include a cognitive thinking center that is connected to but separate from the emotion center of our brain. The cognitive center enables the cognitive intelligence required to solve the problems we face today. The connection between the cognitive center and the emotion center enables us to think about and analyze our emotions so that we are not slaves to the simple "flight or fight" instincts that affected the primitive behavior of our ancestors. Today, we can if we try hard, analyze whether our emotions are leading us toward behavior most useful for the future and then override those emotions if we choose.

However, brain research shows that when we make decisions the emotion center of our brain is triggered before the cognitive center of our brain.⁴ Emotion gets cued so quickly (remember it had to in order to save the lives of our ancestors from surprises in their environment) that it occurs outside our conscious aware-

ness. Brain researchers tell us that we are as unlikely to stop ourselves from experiencing an emotion as we are to block a sneeze. Our decisions are first influenced by our emotions; our cognitive thinking kicks in second and is all too frequently used by us to justify and support the decisions we make via our emotions.⁵ This means that the positive emotions we feel about the political candidate at the rally are followed by our cognitive analysis that we must be feeling good about him because his values are similar to our own.

In sum, our emotions play a primary role in our behavior and decisions. In situations where our emotions are cued behavior becomes predictable. Thus, a used car salesman, a friend, and a politician can sway our behavior by influencing our emotions. The good news is that awareness is our best defense. Because pathways connect the emotion center to the cognitive center of our brains, our cognitive abilities can recognize, understand, and, if necessary, override our emotions. This can keep us from falling prey to the emotional manipulation.

Voting Behavior

Partly for the reasons discussed above, Brian Caplan,⁶ an economist, argues that democracies are not inherently good. He points out that, in theory, democracies keep leaders from implementing socially harmful policies. In reality, citizens like us frequently elect leaders who adopt policies that are harmful for the majority of people. This is because voters are susceptible to irrational, that is, emotional thinking. According to statistics, democracies should be safeguarded by large numbers of voters and what economists, like Caplan, call the "miracle of aggregation." This means that if well informed voters vote in consistent directions and uninformed voters (even if they are 99% of the population) vote randomly (that is, like the role of a die), the randomness of the uninformed votes keeps them from having a systematic effect on the pattern of votes coming from informed voters. Thus, even in a democracy filled with predominantly uninformed people, desirable leaders should still emerge victorious in elections. Problems emerge when voters are systematically misinformed. That is, when large numbers of voters are misinformed by politicians and pundits who structure situations, speeches, advertisements or headlines in the media so that they steer voters away from understanding the real issues in the election and toward feeling particular emotions about candidates.

Sophisticated marketing techniques are designed by social scientists (for example, political marketing

specialists) who understand the power of emotional cues to affect the choices of the unaware. They sell us candidates like they sell us trucks, cereal, or beer, for example, through advertisements that show people just like you supporting their candidate for emotional reasons. Another growing tactic involves emotionally persuasive e-mails sent out as chain letters so that you receive the emotionally persuasive message from your own friends and family. Also, the images presented on ads and in e-mails are perpetuated by the brief but emotional “talking points” that steer voters back to the emotional image rather than to the important and more complex issues at stake in an election. Or, they steer voters toward one highly charged emotional issue (for example, abortion rights or gay marriage) that also steers thinking away from the problems or policies that matter most to the nation.

These manipulated votes are no longer random so they have a systematic influence on election outcomes. For example, a politician whose political campaign shows him to be a warm but tough patriotic leader is likely to evoke positive emotions in voters. He might get even more votes if he makes his opponent appear to be a selfish and weak leader because this will evoke negative emotions in voters. When feelings about candidates contrast so significantly they can override voters' interest in candidates' views on important issues or in whether candidates have the competencies necessary to effectively lead. In fact, history shows that politicians who prey on voters' emotions can and do win democratic elections despite whether their views or track records reflect the best direction for the majority of the people in a country.

How Can We Think for Ourselves and Best Support Our Democratic Nation?

There are no simple answers. Perhaps the most important step is to be aware of how easily our free will and free choices are influenced by the emotions evoked by particular issues or in particular situations. The second step might be to teach ourselves to recognize when our emotions are being influenced and to manage our emotions in those situations (for example, while watching political advertisements) so that we improve our ability to think for ourselves and make thoughtful decisions.

Research suggests that we are more likely to thoroughly analyze facts and information, rather than simply become slaves to our emotions, when we have: 1) the desire, and 2) the ability to carefully analyze the information. One study revealed that when college students felt no personal stake in an issue, they were

more likely to be swayed by their emotional reaction to a speaker's credentials. However, when an issue mattered to them personally, they were more likely to analyze the quality of that speaker's arguments.⁷

What else can we do to keep votes from being manipulated? What can we do to keep others from being so easily manipulated? What manipulative techniques have you seen used by politicians? In what situations or around what issues are you most susceptible to influence? How do your emotions affect who you prefer as a candidate? What political issues do you feel most emotional about (that might be used to manipulate your vote)? What keeps voters focusing on how politicians present their messages (i.e., the emotions they evoke in us) rather than the content of their messages? Since both of our dominant political parties (Democrats and Republicans) use these manipulative tactics what can we do to keep them and us focused on the issues that matter most to us and to the majority of the people in the country? Lastly, it would be impossible and likely destructive to attempt to take all emotion out of our decisions about politicians. After all, emotions provide relevant instinctual information that should carry some weight in our decisions—don't they? When should we and when should we not trust our emotions to steer us toward decisions that are best for us and for our nation?

Endnotes

¹ Harris, J. R. (1998). *The Nurture Assumption*. New York: The Free Press.

² Fiske, S. T. (2004). *Social Beings: Core Motives in Social Psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

³ Buchanan, M. (2007). *The Social Atom*. New York: Bloomsbury.

⁴ Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. New York: Avon Books.

⁵ Libet, B. (1985). Unconscious cerebral initiative and the role of conscious will in voluntary action. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8(4), 529–566.

⁶ Caplan, B. (2007). *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁷ Petty, R. E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Goldman, R. (1981). Personal involvement as a determinant of argument-based persuasion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 41, 847–855.