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WHAT MAKES US VOTE THE WAY WE VOTE?

Political psychology, at the most general level, is an application of what is known about human psychology to the study of politics. It draws upon theory and research on biopsychology, neuroscience, personality, psychopathology, evolutionary psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and intergroup relations. It addresses political elites – their personality, motives, beliefs, and leadership styles, and their judgments, decisions, and actions in domestic policy, foreign policy, international conflict, and conflict resolution. It also deals with the dynamics of mass political behavior, for example voting. There are many factors that affect our voting decisions. Interesting, that what the candidates actually say has little impact on voters' decisions. Party affiliation, values, education level, religion, economic status, and many other factors help to swing our vote in any election. To say that a single factor could lead to our vote would be almost always impossible. Researchers have spent years analyzing the psychology of voting habits to try to figure out just what that mystery element influencing our vote is. It's well known that our conscious decisions are routinely influenced by unconscious thought-processes, emotions and prejudices. Jon Krosnick, political science professor at Stanford University, has devoted his career to the phenomenon. "What we know now from 50 years of psychology is you can divide the brain into two parts," he explains. "In fact, all decision-making is unconscious."

1. *Negativity and Disgust*. Other subconscious biases are already exploited by political campaigns. One such effect is the so-called 'negativity bias', a well-documented tendency of people to preferentially remember negative information, and allow negative emotions to dominate decision-making. Krosnick's research suggests that when politicians emphasise the negative qualities of their opponent, it can increase turnout of their supporters. Back in the 1990s, he studied how people's feelings towards politicians affected their likelihood of turning up to vote. As you would expect, he found that liking both candidates equally affords little motivation to vote. But even if a voter likes them unequally, they still aren't very interested. Dislike, on the other hand, is

a much more compelling reason to cast one's ballot. "If you dislike at least one of the two candidates, then you really are motivated to participate – so in other words it's really disliking a candidate that motivates turnout," says Krosnick.

2. *Perception Matters*. We all know that we tend to feel unconsciously biased about people based on appearances, but apparently good looks are more important in elections than most people thought. The more attractive candidate has an advantage, especially during times of war. It's not all about objectively good looks, though. Even more than an attractive politician, we instinctively trust a candidate who appears to be more like us. What defines "like us" depends on the person. For people with underlying racial or gender biases, ethnicity and gender matter a lot more, even if the person does not consciously acknowledge those beliefs. People tend to vote for a candidate who shares their economic status, level of education, or personality traits much more often than a candidate who does not. It's important to note that these similarities are based on the perception, however, and not the reality.

3. *Strong fear*. A study into the impact of 'fear sensitivity' on political ideology suggests interesting conclusions: the researchers found that the more easily startled people in the group tended to have more right-wing views, a result which fits with an emerging pattern of conservatives as more sensitive to negative aspects of the environment. So perhaps political rhetoric that provokes fear – emphasising the risks of terrorism, economic instability and so on – can have a subtle but powerful effect on some groups of people when it is used to try and sway votes.

So, we may not be as in control of our own vote as we like to think, according to many psychologists. But still, there is things that we can notice and have under our control. Yet it's clearly worth being aware of the factors that may trigger us hidden biases the next time we place our vote in the ballot box.

Resources:

1. Bobo, L. D., & Tuan, M. (2006). *Prejudice in politics: Group position, public opinion, and the Wisconsin treaty rights dispute*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2. Cottam, M. L., Dietz-Uhler, B., Mastors, E., & Preston, T. (2010). *Introduction to political psychology*(2nd ed.). New York: Psychology Press.

3. Dalton, R., & Klingemann, H. D. (2007). *The Oxford handbook of political behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.