

[Interview 1 of 2: political psychology]

[why voters vote the way they do]

Political psychology involves more than just the discipline of psychology. It is a multidisciplinary school of thought that encompasses sociology, anthropology, economics, international relations and media, among other things.

Essentially, political psychology is the study of the bidirectional relationship between politics and psychology. First, you have the way in which we, as citizens, assess the psychology of our leaders, as well as make decisions about voting. Then, in the other direction, you have the impact of the political process and social policy on the psychology of our citizens.

Today I'll be discussing that first aspect or direction of political psychology, which involves the ways in which voters make decisions and the way in which they form perceptions about the political process.

This angle of political psychology goes back to the work of George Gallup, who in the 1930s founded the institute for policy analysis and voting patterns and is the founder of the famous

Gallup Poll. What he did that was so interesting was not just analyze what decisions people made but why they made them.

Why voters make the decisions they do has to do with the neurobiology of decision-making. As we all know, our country was founded on the premise that our laws and our system of government are based on rationality, facts, and debate that is focused on an analysis of issues. In actual practice, of course, probably nothing is further from the truth. The truth is that most voters on both sides of the political spectrum make decisions based on their emotional realities.

Especially in times like the present, emotional realities often supersede the functions of the brain that are associated with rationality or cognitive thinking. That means that if you have strong feelings one way or another about a political party, a political leader, or policies in particular, those can well override whatever it is you think in terms of your rational analysis of a position.

Furthermore, the more we get used to responding to our political process emotionally, the more entrenched our emotional responses become, leading to a phenomenon that we call confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias occurs when we evaluate the political process, elected officials, and data based on preconceived notions of how we feel rather than on what we rationally believe may or may not be true. According to studies, most voters make decisions based on their having sought out evidence that supports their feelings.

So, emotional realities are one factor influencing why voters vote the way they do. Other factors have to do with personality characteristics. For example, in personality theory, we consider there to be five main personality functions. Two of these are openness to new experience and conscientiousness. Research has shown that those people who are strong on openness to experience tend to lean more liberally in the political spectrum. Whereas, those who are more rule bound and focus more on the conscientiousness side of things tend more toward the conservative.

Yet another factor that influences how voters vote has to do with out-group stereotyping. This means that once we entrench ourselves in a particular spot on the political spectrum, we tend to view those with whom we disagree in the same generalized terms. If I'm a liberal, I might think that all conservatives

are greedy and self-interested. If I'm a conservative, I might think that all liberals are wasteful and overly enabling of the poor and the immigrants.

This is where things get tricky because the same confirmation bias that leads to this stereotyping also extends to the ways in which we view our leaders, hence the polarization at the present time. On one side of the political spectrum, we have people who support the current president no matter what. On the other end are people who will never accept anything he says or does based on the premise that they believe him to be mentally ill.

Another factor that I will discuss in terms of how voters vote has to do with the ways in which the news we are consuming is itself questioned. It's hard to have a rational debate with people on the other side of the spectrum if you believe, for example, that everything that is being said by the media is false. Conversely, if you believe everything that the current leadership says is false, that too makes it difficult to have any sort of basis for a rational conversation.

So, political psychology can give us a sense of how polarization can happen and how it can become entrenched. Knowing that, what

can we do to overcome and reduce polarization, even just within our own families and circles of friends?

First of all, before you look at other people, take a good look at yourself. What are your own biases? What are the lenses through which you look at the world around you? Could it be that your own emotional response is making it difficult to see the perspectives of others or to put yourself in their place?

Next, consider your values rationally. Do your best to stand apart from yourself and look at them dispassionately. Do they make sense? Why do they make sense? How did they develop and what is there among them that may be ready to be revised or even discarded altogether?

Then, consider your relationships with others in the context of those values that you hold. With so much social media and trolling dominating our lives these days it's easy to get inflamed, to unfriend your friends, to vow that you're never again going to speak to family members. Stop for a moment and think, is it really worth discarding this relationship in light of that?

Understanding what motivates people toward a particular political affiliation is at best a conscious and complex process. What's unfortunate is that very often people don't employ rational thought or deliberation in their process but rather have knee-jerk reactions based off of emotions.

To apply a conscious override to emotional responses takes a whole lot of effort. Most people are either unable or just don't think it's that important to do that, but political psychology helps us understand just how important it is. To reduce the kind of polarization we're currently experiencing, to see ourselves again as one nation and one world, we need to engage our thinking minds and be as objective as we can be. This is not to say that emotion should not be involved, but let's keep our heads on at the same time.