The Psychology Behind Voting Behavior

What are the underlying factors that influence us when we vote? There are many psychological concepts that explain why we vote and choose certain politicians.

Some say voting is an act of altruism. Others say it is more an act of egocentrism — a voter projects their own behavior to people similar to themselves likely to support the same candidate.

Ultimately, voting is viewed as an expression of who people think they are.

“Part of the self-expression associated with passion about our political ideologies is the desire to encourage others to think (and vote) like us,” says Tamara Avant, Ph.D., department chair for Psychology at South University, Savannah. “Some people proudly display their candidate’s logo via a bumper sticker or a yard sign. Our political ideologies are strongly linked to our values, and we use politics as a means of sharing those values with others.”

In some cases, voting is a habit. Studies have found that voting is habit-forming. Habitual voters are likely to continue to vote regardless of partisanship or candidates. They more than likely have lived at the same address for several years, with their voting habit activated by such election cues as neighbors talking about politics or candidate yard signs.

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Voting also marks our membership in a larger group. Social pressure has been found to be a major influence on many people’s decision to vote. People are often motivated to vote because they want to fit in.

“This social pressure can come from many sources, most notably parents, friends, and romantic partners,” Avant says. “Even employers and religious leaders can impact our political decisions.

“One of the greatest antecedents of social influence is status,” she adds. “People who are perceived as credible and intelligent are more likely to impact our decisions.”

Not only are we shaped by our social environment, but also the news we consume. According to Avant, high-profile events indirectly influence voting behavior by heightening emotions and drawing attention to specific issues. For example, recent events like the shooting of former Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in January 2011 and the shooting tragedy at the Aurora, Colorado, movie theater this past summer bring issues of gun control to the forefront.

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“It has been widely speculated that the capture of Saddam Hussein in 2003 likely impacted President [George W.] Bush’s re-election in 2004,” Avant says. “However, according to later Gallup poll results, Hurricane Katrina produced a negative change in President Bush’s approval ratings in 2005, likely because of media criticism regarding the government’s response to the natural disaster.”

Traumatic events and natural disasters certainly lead to strong emotional reactions. One of the most powerful reactions is fear. People tend to vote for the candidate who they feel best protects their country, their ideals, and their freedoms. Appeals to voter fears are therefore a common method of swaying voters’ opinions during elections.

High-profile events may impact elections, but personal tragedies and investments also impact voter decisions.

“For example, support of President [Barack] Obama’s Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act varies widely based on voters’ individual experiences with illness and insurance companies,” Avant says.
Avant says there are several social psychological concepts that explain why certain politicians are more likely to win elections. Physical attractiveness is said to play a role in a candidate’s electoral success.

“The beautiful-is-good phenomenon is an extension of the halo effect and explains why political candidates are typically physically attractive,” she says. “People often assume that people who are physically attractive also possess other desirable characteristics, such as being intelligent and friendly.”

Physical attractiveness is not the only factor that explains why specific candidates are more likely to win. People are strongly influenced by transformational leaders who are confident, have expertise, seem emotionally strong, trustworthy, optimistic, and action-focused, Avant adds.

Because people differ in the information they use to select a candidate, politicians must decide whether to use emotional or intellectual appeals to persuade voters.

The peripheral route for persuasion emphasizes emotional appeals and focuses on personal traits and generating positive feelings. The central route for persuasion presents information with strong arguments, facts, and logic.

“A person who uses the peripheral route to persuasion is more likely to vote for a candidate because s/he thinks the candidate is attractive, likes his/her family, or likes the tone of his/her voice,” Avant explains. “This route requires relying on superficial features for decision making.

A person who uses the central route to persuasion focuses on the content of the message being delivered and the candidate’s views regarding the issues, Avant continues. “The central route is the ideal route to be used when making political decisions, but people are often pressed for time or do not fully understand the issues and rely on the peripheral route instead.”