

**Newsweek**

# When It's Head Versus Heart, The Heart Wins

**Science shows that when we are deciding which candidate to support, anxiety, enthusiasm and whom we identify with count more than reason or logic.**

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It is a core tenet of political psychology that voters know nothing. Or next to nothing. Or next to nothing about what civics classes (forgive the anachronism) told us really matters. In 1992, the one fact that almost every voter knew about George H. W. Bush, besides that he was the incumbent president, was that he loathed broccoli. A close second was the name of the Bushes' springer spaniel, Millie, which 86 percent of likely voters said they knew. But when it came to the positions of Bush and his opponent, Bill Clinton, on important issues, voters were, shall we say, a tad underinformed. Just 15 percent, for instance, knew that both candidates supported the death penalty.

The fact that people have what is euphemistically called cognitive-processing limitations—most cannot or will not learn about and remember candidates' records or positions—means voters must substitute something else for that missing knowledge. What that something is has become a heated topic among scientists who study decision-making, and, of course, campaign strategists and pollsters. Some answers are clear, however. In general elections, a large fraction of voters use political party as that substitute, says psychologist Drew Westen of Emory University; some 60 percent typically choose a candidate solely or largely by party affiliation. The next criterion is candidates' positions on issues; single-issue voters in particular will never even consider a candidate they disagree with. In a primary, however, party affiliation is no help, since all of the choices belong to the same one. And parsing positions doesn't help much this year, especially in the Democratic race, where the policy differences between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are minute. "When voting your party doesn't apply, and when the candidates don't differ much on the issues, you have to choose on some other basis," says political scientist Richard Lau of Rutgers University, coauthor of the 2006 book "How Voters Decide." "That's when you get people voting by heuristics [cognitive shortcuts] and going with their gut, with who they most identify with, or with how the candidates make them feel." What has emerged from the volatile and unpredictable primary season so far is that the candidates who can make voters feel enthusiasm and empathy—and, perhaps paradoxically, anxiety—are going to make it to November and maybe beyond.

Because voters are not computers, willing and able to remember and analyze candidates' every position, they rely on what political scientist Samuel Popkin of the University of California, San Diego, calls "gut rationality," which provides one of the most powerful of the heuristics Lau cites. In his now classic 1991 book "The Reasoning Voter," Popkin uses an example from the 1976 Republican primaries, which pitted President Gerald Ford against Ronald Reagan. While campaigning in Texas, Ford ate, or tried to eat, a tamale without first removing its corn-husk wrapper. He nearly choked on it. Mexican-American voters inferred from this—reasonably, Popkin argues—that Ford didn't know much about them or their culture, and that it therefore made sense to pull the lever for Reagan. The Gipper carried Texas overwhelmingly, winning 96 delegates to Ford's zero, thanks in part to the Latino vote. In the 1992 campaign, when George H.W. Bush looked at his watch during a debate with Bill Clinton, the message that "gut rationality" received was that "Bush didn't want to be there," says GOP consultant Frank Luntz. "Voters felt 'He

doesn't understand the country anymore,' which leads to 'I don't trust him.'" In contrast, during the debate Clinton walked over to a questioner in the audience; as he looked into her eyes and spoke about the economy, she nodded and nodded. "No one remembered what Clinton said, but everyone remembered the visual expression of affirmation," says Luntz. "That one small move led hundreds of thousands of people to change their minds" and vote for Clinton.

With these and countless other instances of voters following their guts, the debate about whether the electorate is guided by its head or its heart, by reason or emotion, is over. "More important than what people think is how they feel," says Luntz, a view expressed by almost every expert NEWSWEEK interviewed. That doesn't mean voters don't care about Obama's war vote or McCain's support for the Iraqi surge. They do—but not because they have made a coldly rational calculation of how those positions would affect them. Instead, voters evaluate how a position makes them feel. To a struggling ranch hand in Wyoming, it may well feel right to vote for a candidate who opposes gun control even if the candidate also favors tax breaks for the wealthy—even though, from a purely utilitarian standpoint, a candidate who wants to raise taxes on the rich is the more rational choice.

Campaign ads therefore aim for the heart even when they seem to be addressed to the head. One Clinton ad shows a skydiver in free fall against a background of headlines about the housing bust and stock-market gyrations. A parachute opens—and Clinton's image appears. The emotional goal is clear: stir up fear and anxiety about the economy, then present Clinton as savior. In another ad, Clinton talks about her economic-stimulus plan, followed by a voice-over warning that "we know you can't solve economic problems with political promises." By reminding voters that these are risky times, the ads are meant to make voters feel anxious and thus more receptive to the argument that this is no time to gamble on a relative newcomer such as Obama.

When voters consider candidates' positions, they are drawn to the candidate who assuages fear, inspires hope, instills pride or brings some other emotional dividend. People are not dispassionate information-processing machines. "When a candidate says he is pro-life or antiwar, for example, he is giving voters a policy position but also appealing to strong emotional elements," says Democratic strategist Carter Eskew, who is not affiliated with any campaign this year. In Clinton's health-coverage ads, "she identifies with people she says have been forgotten or invisible. It's a policy position with an emotional appeal."

But recognizing the power of emotion leaves unanswered which emotions are paramount. The answer is, it depends—on circumstances as well as on individuals' emotional makeup. But as in every election, the emotions most in play are fear and the yearning for security; hope and a desire for inspiration, and a wish for a certain level of comfort with a candidate.

The strongest human emotions are fear and anxiety. Crucial to survival, they are programmed into the brain's most primitive regions, allowing them to trump rationality but not for rationality to override them. A terror attack on the United States would therefore drive out consideration of every other issue for most voters—and probably push many to Clinton and McCain, the candidates who have most successfully trumpeted their national- security credentials.

Events that fall well short of a terror attack can also "prime" voters' anxiety, by which psychologists mean that the event brings that emotion to the fore and shapes thinking. On the day of the New Hampshire primary, President Bush held a press conference that was heavy on national security issues; just two days before, an American warship and Iranian speedboats faced off in the Strait of Hormuz. It was, in a way, a January surprise. "These two things primed voters' brain networks for 'national security'," says Westen, who argues that McCain and Clinton benefited. (The counter is that antiwar Democrats may turn away from Clinton.) "If I wanted to stop Obama," adds Westen, "I'd keep raising the specter of war with Iran. People who are anxious are drawn to leaders who give them a sense of security." In fact, an adult's political leanings can be predicted with eerie accuracy by how anxious he was in preschool: the most anxious children grow into the most politically conservative adults. Their temperament leads them to value predictability, protection and preserving what they have rather than taking a chance on change.

Anxiety has a more subtle effect on voting decisions, too. It pushes people to seek out new information, research shows. Uneasy about either the state of the country or their personal finances, anxious voters are motivated to find out more about the candidates, paying greater attention to news coverage and debates. This year's electorate is nothing if not anxious, says

political scientist George Marcus of Williams College, with two thirds telling pollsters the country is "moving in the wrong direction." That helps explain why polls have been so unreliable, particularly on the GOP side: anxiety pushed voters to learn more about the candidates, which translated into taking a new look at some they might have originally supported (Giuliani, who had long been leading in national polls) or dismissed (McCain).

Even when anxiety is triggered by a specific issue, such as fear of an impending recession, it prompts voters to seek out more information on all aspects of a candidate, not only his or her economic platform. "That's why candidates and their personal qualities are getting a lot more attention," says Marcus. Everything, in other words, is in play. "When voters looked again at Giuliani, they were, like, 'Wait a minute, I don't like all this stuff about the [three] wives and the kids [who don't speak to their father],'" says Democratic strategist Peter Fenn. "He began to tank under the power of the microscope."

The many anxious voters taking another—and another—look at candidates may explain one of the more remarkable phenomena of this primary season: the many late-breaking voters. In New Hampshire, 18 percent of voters made up their minds on the day of the primary, says pollster John Zogby; in Michigan, 16 percent did. What sways those late deciders is more emotional than rational, says Obama strategist David Axelrod: "They're making critical decisions not just about the issues but about the character and personality of the candidates."

Obama has staked his hopes on the appeal of hope, which tends to be a winning strategy as long as voters' fears and anxieties are not primed by, say, a terrorist attack or a sharp economic downturn. "The outrage and cynicism that the Bush administration has made so many people feel has led a lot of them to want to feel inspired again," says Westen. That is clearly something the Obama campaign is counting on. In his endorsement speech last week, Sen. Edward Kennedy scarcely mentioned Obama's positions on issues, emphasizing instead the country's yearning for "a president who appeals to the hopes of those who still believe in the American Dream ... and who can lift our spirits and make us believe again," and calling Obama someone who can "summon our hopes and renew our belief that our country's best days are still to come." Although hope for the future is almost always trumped by anxiety about the present, it can sway voters whose fears are in check. That may explain Obama's success with better-educated, well-off Democrats, while Clinton appeals more to those who have only a high-school diploma and are struggling economically.

In contrast to anxiety, enthusiasm tends to close voters' minds to new information. It makes voters stand pat, as it were, rather than try to learn more about candidates. The lack of enthusiasm for the GOP pack may therefore explain why that race has been particularly fluid: unenthusiastic voters are still actively seeking more information about the candidates.

Clinton's misty-eyed moment right before the New Hampshire primary tapped into another factor that shapes voters' decisions, namely, whom they identify with. Her display of emotion brought her gender front and center. That led more women to identify with Clinton. "When Hillary, who has played against gender stereotypes, suddenly tears up, women flock to her because she seems like them," says political scientist Pippa Norris of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. That was especially true for older women, says Zogby: "When she showed emotion, they said, 'Her struggle is mine.' They related to her."

Which candidate a voter identifies with is one of the most important gut-level heuristics, since it is tantamount to deciding that someone is enough like you to "understand the concerns of people like you," as pollsters put it. "If you feel a candidate is like you racially or by gender, you're more likely to believe that that candidate will support what you support," says Norris. But with a white woman and a black man vying for the Democratic nomination, where does that leave black women? Whom they most identify with depends on which aspect of their own identity dominates their self-image. For instance, in a study of whether black women believed O. J. Simpson guilty or not of the 1994 murder of his ex-wife and her friend, those whose identity as a woman trumped their sense of themselves as black were significantly more likely to believe Simpson guilty. But black women whose self-image was dominated by their race tended to believe him innocent.

Which aspect of identity takes precedence can change week by week and even hour by hour, depending which aspect of yourself you're reminded of. That, too, explains some of the volatility in this year's primaries. Several studies find that when Asian girls take a math test that asks them to

indicate their gender, they are reminded of the stereotype that girls aren't good at math and therefore don't do as well as when they are not asked. But when they're asked for their ethnicity they assimilate the stereotype that Asians are math whizzes and do better. Clinton's emotional moment in New Hampshire brought gender to the fore, but the injection of race into the South Carolina primary made that aspect of identity more salient, and black women voted overwhelmingly for Obama.

Explaining why voters make the decisions they do is hampered by people's poor powers of introspection. Exit polls ask people whom they voted for and why. But the explanations tend to be post hoc, and wrong, because people have such little insight into their own motivations, reasoning and emotions, says Eskew. "People default to things like 'He shares my values,' or 'I think he's authentic,' or 'I like his position on abortion,'" he says. "But those are rational reasons. The real ones, the emotional ones, are harder to articulate." But they are the ones that count, and the campaign that best harnesses the power of the heart is just about certain to see its candidate at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue one year from now.

*With Daniel Stone and Pat Wingert in Washington, Richard Wolffe with Obama, and Jeneen Interlandi, Sarah Kliff and Raina Kelley in New York*

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