Love to Hate Politicians?

The Valence-Framing Effect Helps Explain Why Attack Ads Pervade Politics
Published on January 31, 2011

A new study published in the journal Political Psychology shows that it's easier to hate politicians than to love them. This helps to understand why mudslinging and belligerence—an extreme case being Sarah Palin's notorious map with crosshairs drawn over the congressional districts of Gabrielle Gifford and other House Democrats—are so commonplace in politics.

People just tend to feel more strongly about opposing than they do about supporting, quite apart from the negative versus positive information they hear about political candidates. Psychologists George Bizer, Jeff Larsen, and Richard Petty, the authors of the new study, call the phenomenon the "valence-framing effect."

One of their demonstrations of valence-framing used surveys conducted in New Jersey and Virginia, during the 2005 gubernatorial election races in those two states. In the New Jersey survey, the researchers asked half of their respondents whether they supported or opposed Jon Corzine, the Democratic candidate. The rest of the New Jerseyans (Jerseyites?) were asked whether they supported or opposed the Republican in the race, Doug Forrester. In the Virginia survey, respondents were likewise randomly asked about either the Democrat Tim Kaine or the Republican Jerry Kilgore. All were then asked how certain they were of their opinion, and how likely it was that they would vote for their preferred candidate.

Unsurprisingly, Democrats generally preferred the Democratic candidate and Republicans favored the Republican. But the experimental design of the survey resulted in some Democrats, by random chance, having to express their preference in terms of opposition ("I'm opposed to Doug Forrester," a negatively framed preference), whereas the rest had to express their preference in terms of support ("I support Jon Corzine," a positively framed preference). Conversely, the Republicans polled were essentially randomly assigned to saying either that they opposed Jon Corzine" or "supported Doug Forrester." Amazingly, those who had indicated their preference in terms of opposition, regardless of their party or their preference, later said they were more certain about their opinion than were those who had indicated it in terms of support.
Why does this certainty matter, you might reasonably ask, if it doesn't change which candidate you prefer? Here's the rub: those who expressed their opinion in terms of opposition were also significantly more likely to report that they intended to volunteer for and vote for the candidate they preferred!

It seems doubtful that a single poll question would affect votes days or weeks afterward. But habits of thinking and talking about politics in terms of opposition, not to mention negative political ads and news coverage, could interact with the valence-framing effect over a longer period of time. Building up a grudge against a politician could over time make you more likely to head to the polls on election day and vote for "the other one."

The valence-framing effect helps us to understand why political mudslinging, demonization, and calls to arms are so effective and widespread. Negative campaigns not only damage our assessment of a candidate, but they also encourage voters to frame their attitudes about an election in terms of opposition. In turn, this makes us more likely to vote for the favored candidate.

It is easy to see how this might both raise the temperature of political debate in the United States, and sway the outcome of close elections. But negative campaigns often distract attention from policy issues and candidate qualifications that are in the long run more important to voters. By pointing to the difficulty of positive, issue-focused campaigns, the valence-framing effect reminds us all to be alert to our unconscious political biases.

Subscribe to Psychology Today now and get a free issue!

Subscribe to Politics on the Couch

- Subscribe via RSS