**Psychology of Decisions Reading #1: Why We Are So Politically Divided**

It’s now possible to see why partisan identities are so persistent. A psychologist at Emory University imaged the brains of ordinary voters with strong party allegiances during the run-up to the 2004 election. He showed the voters multiple, clearly contradictory statements made by each candidate, John Kerry and George Bush. For example, the experimental subject would read a quote from Bush praising the service of soldiers in the Iraq war and pledging “to provide the best care for all veterans.” Then the subject would learn that on the same day Bush made this speech, his administration cut medical benefits for 164,000 veterans. Kerry, meanwhile, was quoted making contradictory statements about his vote to authorize war in Iraq.

After being exposed to the political inconsistencies of both candidates, the subject was asked to rate the level of contradiction on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 signaling a strong level of contradiction. Not surprisingly, the reactions of voters were largely determined by their partisan allegiances. Democrats were troubled by Bush’s inconsistent statements (they typically rated them a 4) but found Kerry’s contradictions much less worrisome. Republicans responded in a similar manner; they excused Bush’s gaffes but almost always found Kerry’s statements flagrantly incoherent.

By studying each of these voters in an fMRI machine, these researchers were able to look at the partisan reasoning process from the perspective of the brain. They could watch as Democrats and Republicans struggled to maintain their political opinions in the face of conflicting evidence. After being exposed to the inconsistencies of their preferred candidate, the party faithful automatically recruited brain regions that are responsible for controlling emotional reactions, such as the prefrontal cortex. While this data might suggest that voters are rational agents calmly assimilating the uncomfortable information, the researchers already knew that wasn’t happening, since the ratings of Kerry and Bush were entirely dependent on the subjects’ party affiliations. What, then, was the prefrontal cortex doing? The researchers realized that voters weren’t using their reasoning faculties to analyze the facts; they were using reason to preserve their partisan certainty. And then, once the subjects had arrived at favorable interpretations of the evidence, blithely excusing the contradictions of their chosen candidate, they activated the internal reward circuits in their brains and experienced a rush of pleasurable emotion. Self-delusion, in other words, felt really good. According to the researchers, “essentially, it appears as if partisans twirl the cognitive kaleidoscope until they get the conclusions they want, and then they get massively reinforced for it, with the elimination of negative emotional states and activations of positive ones.”

This flawed thought process plays a crucial role in shaping the opinions of the electorate. Partisan voters are convinced that they’re rational – it’s the other side that’s irrational – but actually, all of us are *rationalizers.*  The Princeton political scientist Larry Bartels analyzed survey data from the 1990s to prove this point. During the first term of Bill Clinton’s presidency, the budget deficit declined by more than 90 percent. However, when Republican voters were asked in 1996 what happened to the deficit under Clinton, more than 55 percent said that it had *increased*. What’s interesting about this data is that so-called high-information voters – these are the Republicans who read the newspaper, watch cable news, and can identify their representatives in Congress – weren’t better informed than low-information voters. The reason knowing more about politics doesn’t erase partisan bias is that *voters tend to assimilate only those facts that confirm what they already believe*. If a piece of information doesn’t follow Republican talking points – and Clinton’s deficit reduction didn’t fit the tax-and-spend liberal stereotype – then the information is conveniently ignored. Bartels says, “Voters think that they’re thinking, but what they’re really don’t is inventing acts or ignoring facts so that they can rationalize decisions they’ve already made.” Once you identify with a political party, the world is edited to fit with your ideology.

This excerpt is from the book *How We Decide.*

**Psychology of Decisions Reading #2: When To Think Carefully Through Decisions**

A research team surveyed shoppers in a variety of different stores, asking them what information they considered when making their decisions. Based on these responses, they assigned a “complexity score” to a list of consumer products. Some products, such as cheap kitchen tools (e.g. can openers) and home accessories (e.g. light bulbs) were relatively easy for shoppers to select. People didn’t weigh many variables when making up their minds, because there weren’t that many variables to consider. Since most stores carried only a few different brands of vegetable peelers and toilet paper, shoppers were able to quickly focus on the most important factors, like price. Making these simple consumer choices was the equivalent of choosing a car after learning only four attributes.

The researchers discovered that when people shop for modest cooking accessories, spending more time thinking about their decisions led to more satisfaction later on. In general, people did best when they carefully compared all of their options and reasoned their way to the best vegetable peelers. They tended to regret their impulse purchases, since they’d end up with kitchen tools they didn’t want or like. So, *when buying easier consumer products, it’s a good idea to take a few moments and reflect on the purchase*.

The researchers then studied a more complicated shopping experience. Their survey found that choosing furniture is one of the hardest consumer decisions, since it involves so many different variables. The prefrontal cortex can’t handle this much information by itself. As a result, it tends to fix on just one variable that may or may not be relevant, such as the color of the leather. The rational brain is forced to oversimplify the situation. The longer people spent analyzing their options, the *less* satisfied they were with their decisions. Their rational faculties had been overwhelmed by the furniture store, and they ended up choosing the wrong leather couch. In other words, *furniture shoppers did best when they didn’t think at all and just listened to their emotional brains – their initial instincts.*

The most satisfied subjects were those who let decisions for harder consumer products “marinate” in their unconscious brains for several minutes and then chose on the basis of which item was associated with the most positive emotions. In other words, look at your options, distract yourself for a while, and then decide.

We often make decisions on issues that are exceedingly complicated. In these situations, it’s probably a mistake to consciously reflect on all the options. Instead, use your conscious mind to acquire all the information you need for making a decision. But don’t try to analyze the information with your conscious mind. Instead, let your unconscious mind digest it. Whatever your intuition then tells you is almost certainly going to be the best choice. This psychological principle has far-reaching applications. Anyone who is constantly making difficult decisions, from corporate executives to poker players, can benefit from a more emotional thought process. As long as someone has sufficient experience in that domain – he’s taken the time to train his dopamine neurons – then he shouldn’t spend too much time consciously contemplating the alternatives.

The conventional wisdom about decision-making has got it exactly backward. That’s why the average American spends *thirty-five* hours comparing automotive models before he or she makes a decision about which car to purchase. It is the easy problems – the mundane math problems of daily life – that are best suited to the conscious brain. These simple decisions won’t overwhelm the prefrontal cortex. In fact, they are so simple that they tend to trip up the emotions, which don’t know how to compare prices or compute the odds of a poker hand. Complex problems, on the other hand, require the processing powers of the emotional brain, the supercomputer of the mind.

So how can anyone reliably identify the simple problems that are best suited for the prefrontal cortex? The best way is to ask yourself if the decision can be accurately summarized in numerical terms, such as price. On the other hand, for important decisions about complex items – leather couches, cars and apartments – categorizing by price along will eliminate a lot of essential information. This doesn’t mean you can just blink and know what to do – even the unconscious takes a little time to process information – but it does suggest that there’s a better way to make difficult decisions: listen to your feelings. They know more than you do.

This excerpt is from the book *How We Decide.*