



The Politics of Hope Ezine

“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become Extraordinary Public Leaders”



Does Our Brain Impair Our Politics Perspective?

By Donna Zajonc
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New brain research is giving us insight in to our political positions and may explain why we have become so politically polarized. Dr. Drew Westen, director of clinical psychology at Emory University, and his colleagues used a MRI brain scan to study a sample of Democrats and Republicans who were strongly committed to their individual candidate.

Democrats and Republicans were asked to evaluate negative information that had been published about their favorite candidate. During the evaluation, participants underwent MRI scans to see what parts of their brains were active. The purpose of the study was to research people who said they strongly identify with their political party (called “partisans”) and evaluate how they respond to contradictory information about their candidate.

Partisans were given questions about both their favorite candidate and the candidate they did not favor. For each question, partisans first read a statement from their candidate. The first statement was followed by a second statement that documented a clear contradiction between their candidate’s words and actions - suggesting their candidate was dishonest or veering from the truth.

Partisans were asked to consider the discrepancy, and then to rate the extent to which the person’s words and deeds were contradictory. Finally, they were presented with a statement that might explain the apparent contradiction, and asked to reconsider and again rate the extent to which their candidate’s words and actions were contradictory.

Partisans had no trouble detecting hypocrisy in the opposing candidate but had difficulty detecting it in their candidate. Notably absent were any increases in activation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain most associated with cognitive thought or reasoning.

Dr. Westen said, “We did not see any increased activation of the parts of the brain normally engaged during reasoning. None of the circuits involved in conscious reasoning were particularly engaged. Instead, it appears as if partisans twirl the cognitive kaleidoscope until they get the conclusions they want.”

The data shows a pattern of emotionally biased reasoning. Partisans from both political spectrums reached totally biased conclusions by ignoring information that could not rationally be discounted. Their minds were made up and they did not let facts get in their way. **What is validating about this research is that Democrats and Republicans did not differ in the way they responded to contradictions.**

“The result is that partisan beliefs are calcified, and the person can learn very little from new data,” Dr. Westen asserted.

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If your favorite candidate did not win the Democratic or Republican nomination during this 2008 Primary campaign, what part of your brain is now driving your behavior? Are you remaining open to the debate or have you allowed your brain to hear only what you want to hear?

If the emotional parts of our brains dominate our political decision-making rather than our cognitive and reasoning parts, then as citizens and political leaders we must work overtime to activate all of our brain power to arrive at fair and honest decisions.

This research also has implications for the “Group Think” phenomenon that is so common in organizations and politics. We can easily go along with the group if we allow parts of our brain to close down new information. It takes a conscious effort to ask for and listen to new information, adjust, and move beyond the commonly held view of the group.

Please take a moment to watch the Youtube video link ([click here](#)). The neuroanatomist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, demonstrates with a human brain how we can think and act from only one side of our brain and how this behavior limits our capacity to think, feel and lead. It is an extraordinary video that will demonstrate the need to use both sides of our brains in all that we do.

Next time you discover yourself in a heated debate or harshly judging the views of others, consider these strategies to engage both sides of your brain:

- Stop...count to five...take a deep breath and consciously move from pure emotion into a more rational perspective. (It only takes five seconds to move from the emotional-reactive brain to the cognitive part of your brain!)
- Second, ask yourself this question “Have I closed my mind on this question or am I open to new possibilities?”
- Be honest with yourself. If you have closed your mind then admit it. If so, are you comfortable with the idea that you may be closing out new information?
- Switch positions---try on an entirely new perspective and see how it feels. You may learn something and in the process you will activate your whole brain!

We all have biases. The challenge is to continue learning even in the midst of strongly held views. During this exciting Presidential campaign, being open to learning and hearing both sides will make the election season even more interesting.



If you are interested in learning more about Donna and the Politics of Hope, visit her website: www.politicsofhope.com or email her at: donna@politicsofhope.com