

Emotions as Key to Understanding Politics and Winning Campaigns

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2,000 years of separation

For more than 2,000 years, mankind has made two grave misjudgments about how to make good decisions in life. This holds true at least for the western hemisphere. In the occidental philosophical tradition from Plato to Immanuel Kant, two assumptions became common wisdom: First, that reason and emotion are separate, if not contrary, entities of the human mind. And second, that reason is superior to emotion.¹

Although deeply engraved in our culture and scientific worldview by now, both ideas were proved to be spectacularly wrong, first by psychology and behavioral economics and in recent years by evidence from neuroscience (Damasio 1994, LeDoux 1996, Spezio and Adolphs 2007).

We are just at the start of a long way into understanding how our brain works.² However, the misleading equation *emotional = irrational* has already been rejected by recent research; living with others, reasoning and making useful choices are all strongly connected to the emotional parts of our mind. Without them, we would not have survived hundreds of thousand years ago when our brain developed. Without the guidance of our emotions, we would also be unable to deal with the challenges posed by our modern societies.

On the next pages, I will show why emotions are of fundamental importance especially in politics and campaigning and outline the consequences of acknowledging the crucial role of

Voting for yourself vs. voting for others

Human beings are attracted to pleasure. Throughout million years of evolution, feeling pleasure has been a very useful mechanism for making us do things that will probably be good for us. Many species have sophisticated reward mechanisms that go beyond immediate physical pleasures (e.g. eating food or having sex). We feel internally rewarded, for instance, when we collect fruit that we will eat much later. This is, indeed, a smart move in the development of our brain. The pleasure of collecting something that acquires its highest value in the future is stronger than the temptation to eat the fruit right away. This allows humans and squirrels alike to stock up for winter times when there will be no food left on the trees.

A fascinating fact about humans and probably also most animals living in social groups is that we have another reward system, one that is very different from the thrill of adding to your personal basket. In many situations, we feel pleasure if we do something for others. We are happy if we can help a person directly, but we also tend to feel pleasure if we do something for groups that matter to us (this may also hold true for very big groups of which we only know a few members). This, in turn, is decisive for the way, in which we think about politics and campaigning: humans are not only born selfish, we are also “born to be good” (Keltner 2009).

This seems hard to believe when the evening news report about all the cruelties people inflict on their fellow beings. However, two branches of research offer proof for our disposition to altruism and generosity (which rarely make it into the news). Experiments in psychology and behavioral economics have shown that our actions are driven by “market norms” *and* “social norms” (see e.g. Ariely 2008: 69ff). Whether or not we are aware of norms, conforming to them often makes us feel good. Depending on various factors such as our personality, societal environment or the specific situation, we either go for our own benefit (feeling good because we obey market norms) or help others

without any immediate economic benefit (feeling good because we obey social norms).

Many experiments have clearly shown (see e.g. Brafman and Brafman 2008: 131-148) that once we follow market norms, they seem to hijack the social norms. When people are asked for a little favor, usually an impressive number is willing to do it, but as soon as the experimenters introduce a small monetary reward (e.g. 50 cents) the willingness to help decreases dramatically.

Neuroscience offers new evidence that two quite different reward systems co-exist in our brain. The *nucleus accumbens* has clearly been identified as the pleasure center patting us on our back for collecting goods we can put in our basket. It is part of the “dopamine culture” of our brain, the active, selfish and more aggressive reward circuit.⁵

However, all mammals, including humans, have developed another reward circuit with a completely different logic: the “oxytocin culture” of our brain. Oxytocin is a neuromodulator and when it flows it makes us—men and women alike—soft, caring, trusting, compassionate and generous (Keltner et al. 2010, Zak et al. 2007). This is why it is sometimes called the “love hormone”.

Similar to our ego pleasure center, i.e. the *nucleus accumbens*,⁶ other parts of our brain also light up when we do something “for society” without expecting something in return (see e.g. Tankersley et al. 2007).⁷ Caring for the greater good is obviously hardwired in our brain. Our upbringing can foster and strengthen or destroy it, but altruism and generosity do not seem to stem from education and culture alone.

The fact that our selfish reward centers, once activated, seem to block our social reward centers has substantial consequences for campaign communication. For instance, introducing an additional incentive in a charitable fundraising campaign—such as offering a flight mile for each Euro people give for the Red Cross—might backfire: As collecting miles will introduce market norms into the decision process, the number of people donating might *decrease*.

Just as the *nucleus accumbens* (rewarding us for obeying market norms) can block the social reward centers in our brain (making us feel good for obeying social norms), it seems that, in the past decades, the research and policy paradigms of economic selfishness have blocked paradigms of social selflessness.⁸ After the dominance of rational choice models, it is now time to find out more about why and when people are driven by compassion and ready to exert solidarity with others without immediate economic benefit.

In my view, the mobilization potential of political campaigns targeting the social reward circuits and the “oxytocin culture” in our brains is still underestimated: Politics are, by definition, a social endeavor, and political participation is mostly about getting involved for the greater good, even if there are different opinions about what the greater good would actually be.

I do not say that campaigns should ignore the fact that voters also have a pocket book. However, when the issue is shaping our politics, the reward systems giving us pleasure for working towards a better society have already been activated. The task of campaigns is to deliver cognitive content to fuel the compassionate drive of many voters and volunteers. If there is no message that nurtures the pursuit of the greater good, other emotional frames will dominate the debate.

Voting for fear

Having built-in reward centers is definitely a wonderful thing: they not only guide us in making good choices in many situations, but also make us feel good. However, if seeking reward were our only guidance in life, we would probably not get old. We would give in to many temptations: We might jump from a mountain cliff or give away all our possessions if we were not afraid to die, get poor or starve. Fear is a strong voice in the concert of our emotions.⁹

Fear is also an effective element in campaigns. First, it stimulates our attention for political messages—the bigger the threat, the higher the attention (Graber 2007). Second, it can

Campaigns often argue that they need to "stay on message," to keep the race focused on their issues, which might suggest spending heavily on advertising even if you know it won't change voters' minds directly because it keeps voters talking about your pet issues. In smaller races, campaigns might focus on advertising in order to promote the candidate's name - again, it might not change minds, but if you're running for the state legislature, the first thing you need to do is let people know who you are! I don't doubt for an instant that campaign advertising can be effective at changing voters' minds at the margin. But the magnitude of that effect is debatable, and I think it's pretty clear that no amount of advertising can overcome a constituency's natural political tendency. How campaigns became politics. Reading the weather and the tea leaves. Afterword. Campaigns are always full of stories but few campaigners have made enough use of them, myself included. The biggest political impact achieved by a pesticides campaign on which I worked with Friends of the Earth resulted from the public response to crop-spraying incidents, but not because we planned it that way. Visuals can reach our emotions, bypassing argument. They can reinforce or change views. Research any issue and you tend to find that people's views often track back to some event, recalled as a picture. "It was when I saw X that I realized things were serious." Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify and manage your own emotions and the emotions of others. can be learned at any age. Growing your competency in EI is not easy or quick, as it takes perseverance and critical self-evaluation to improve your behavior. Competence in EI does not necessarily increase with age, as you might expect. Some people may learn from life's experiences, but many do not. Perceiving Emotions. The first step in understanding emotions is to perceive them accurately. In many cases, this might involve understanding nonverbal signals such as body language and facial expressions. Using Emotions. The next step involves using emotions to promote thinking and cognitive activity. The study of emotions in politics and protest has emerged (or reemerged) in the past decade through a messy inductive process of recognizing the obvious: Emotions of many sorts permeate political action. In grappling with the inadequacies of existing theories of politics, researchers grabbed pieces of emotion theory opportunistically where they could find them. Even more than social movements, conflict is hard to understand without recognizing the emotions involved. Oberschall mentioned emotions at key moments in his analysis without dissecting their dynamics. In his influential model, Tilly (1978) depicted collective action as a function of interests, organization, the mobilization of resources, power, repression (or facilitation), and opportunities (or threats). Political campaigns matter -because presidents, prime ministers, and chancellors propose and implement vital policies - and Functional Theory can help understand the messages from viable candidates for office. AXIOMS. Those who are interested in understanding political campaigns can consider these assumptions to decide how well they fit the circumstances in the political systems of interest. 1. Voting Is a Comparative Act. A candidate is not likely to win many votes for that candidate. So, candidates must be distinctive from opponents in ways that make them appear preferable to other contenders. This need for a political candidate to appear preferable to voters means that campaign messages have three potential functions.