

A Psychodynamic Perspective on Elections

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In a democracy, elections are the way in which the collective thought processes of the voters arrive at a decision to direct their government. The author explores how the individual voter assesses and resolves many conflicting internal and external forces to arrive at a vote. The midterm elections of 2010 illustrate the parallel between individual resolution of conflicting forces and the process of a campaign leading to the outcome of an election. The psychodynamic concepts of conflict and compromise, affects, aggression, unconscious forces, mechanisms of defense, superego, and the ego's integrative functions are evident in both the individual voter and the collective electoral process. The author expresses concern about the historical vulnerability of democracies and the unbalancing effect of allowing limitless infusion of anonymous corporate money to pour into campaigns. (*Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 2010;16:416–419)

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When this issue of the *Journal* comes out, the midterm elections of 2010 will still be very fresh in our readers' minds, probably laden with strong emotion. Whether that affective load will be predominately elation, relief, despair, rage, or anxiety will depend on the reader's political inclinations, but it will seem like the ugliest campaign season ever. The negative ads, muck-raking, mud-slinging, lies, gross distortions, and oversimplifications leave a very bad taste, while the failure to constructively address the huge, complex, and foreboding issues that confront America breeds deep concern for the nation and the world.

For someone steeped in psychoanalytic thinking or other psychological frameworks that search beyond

the obvious, it is hard not to see various psychological phenomena writ large on the electoral process. Democracy is based on the concept that nations are best governed by the people who live in them, collectively, with each adult person having one vote. This contrasts with rule by one idealized person, by a privileged few, by a "superior" class, or by an ideologically driven one-party structure. If each voting citizen is the equivalent of one brain cell, the aggregate total of the democratic electoral output is comparable to the final decisive action of an individual person. In reaching that decisive action, there are inevitably conflicts—often fierce conflicts—with the end result the product of amalgamation and compromise.

Conflict and Compromise

Of course, there may also be conflict *within* each voter, as the various issues pull in different directions. How can there not be, if one is thoughtful about the issues rather than responding in knee-jerk simplicity to a single emotionally charged fixation? Think taxes, fiscal responsibility, avoiding financial collapse, pro-life vs. reproductive choice, government as the problem, government as the collective solution, free trade, human rights, peace, national security, guns, religion in government, sexual mores, privacy, global warming, environment vs. development, government regulation vs. unfettered capitalism...the list goes on. To be a thoughtful voter, one has to consider all of these things, sum them all up, assess the positions, capabilities, and personalities of the candidates, deal with one's own internal conflicts, and cast one vote for each office. Our representatives in the state and national governments go through the same process of broad assessment (we hope) in making their collective decisions in the process of governing on our behalf, and

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periodically they have to answer to their electorate about their decisions.

Unconscious Forces Within the Voter

Not all of this goes on at the level of conscious awareness. As we grapple with our individual decisions, we are influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by all sorts of pressures from our whole life experience. Our experience with others who are different from us colors our reaction to a candidate's gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation. If we have been hurt by another group of people, the feelings are especially strong—as with radical Islamists in the current collective American psyche. Racism and hatred of “foreigners” are blatant in some quarters, as is homophobia. Partisan strife is bitter and intransigent. In all, this seems to have been an especially hateful election. Beyond what is right on the surface, however, is the subtle influence of our early childhood experiences and family life, our struggles for self-mastery as we grew older and more autonomous, our characteristic defenses and dysfunctional, automatic thought patterns. We identify with our parents or go to the other extreme in reacting against them. We are influenced consciously or unconsciously by our personal ideologies.

Cognitive Distortions

Looking at this cognitively, it is so easy for us to catastrophize or to generalize in a way that blurs our vision without our knowing it. When this happens collectively in groups, we passionately engage in single-issue warfare—think about the Tea Party stand on taxes, the deficit, and big government—without considering the whole complexity of our national welfare. This results in mistaking the part for the whole (e.g., “energy tax” for the balancing act of the cap-and-trade carbon dioxide reduction bill) or in absurd distortions (“death panels” for the support of private conversations between doctor and patient about end-of-life preferences, now discarded from the health care reform bill). Some of these misconceptions and distortions seem to have been promoted deliberately, even maliciously, to manipulate public opinion, but the motivations both individually and collectively have deep unconscious roots in our fears of being controlled, losing autonomy, or losing our personal security. It is hard to deal maturely with a devilishly complicated reality.

Narcissism and Self-Interest

Blatant self-interest enters in. One bumper sticker boiled it down thus: “I’ll keep my guns, my money, and my freedom. You keep the change!” Where is the concern for the common good, for people in dire need of food or health care, or for our children and grandchildren who will have to cope with global warming, dependence on oil, and the national debt and its real causes? Where is either party’s willingness to engage in serious problem solving instead of the battle for partisan supremacy? Where was a pro-active effort to stand behind the accomplishments of a health care reform bill that addresses extremely complex issues? Why couldn’t its strengths be explained in the context of a complex system rooted in private health insurance but containing the excesses of that system? Instead, many arguments crumbled in the face of a media blitz to discredit this achievement.

Affects and Their Pervasive Influence

Drew Westen wrote, “...the vision of mind that has captured the imagination of philosophers, cognitive scientists, economists, and political scientists since the eighteenth century—a *dispassionate mind* that makes decisions by weighing the evidence and reasoning to the most valid conclusions—bears no relation to how the mind and brain actually work. When campaign strategists start from this vision of mind, their candidates typically lose.”¹

Anger is the most obvious emotion in the 2010 election, starting with Tea Party outrage but spreading to the rest of us as the more outrageous ads hit the airways. Racist hatred is subtly intermixed with anti-Muslim, anti-illegal-immigrant, and homophobic fulminations and even slander of the biracial President of the United States. The attack ads on both sides vociferously attempt to assassinate the character of opponents, rather than to seriously address the challenging issues that confront the nation. Even the in-person debates in my state (Ohio) have been long on personal attacks and short on thoughtful, innovative proposals for solutions. How can we assess character and intelligence and grasp of complexity in such an environment?

But beneath all this aggression lies anxiety or even outright fear. The vulnerability of the economic system that became evident in its collapse in 2008 is very disturbing. Stubborn unemployment persists, so that peo-

ple can't pay their bills. Serious mismanagement and greed became evident throughout the deregulated finance and mortgage loan industries with continuing disastrous results across the land. People are impatient with the slow pace of recovery. The interventions that have worked in the auto and banking industries are insufficient to reassure the public. Conservatives hammer on the cost of the bailouts, the deficits, and the rising national debt while minimizing the policies from earlier administrations that contributed to the collapse and the deficits. The active way of dealing with fear and helplessness is to fight for power, and so we have had a donnybrook of an election. But the attacks on the President have undermined the public's sense of stability and competent leadership that his demeanor conveys.

Unconscious Defense Mechanisms

So far my perspective has been to view the election campaign from the side of narcissistic self-interest, basic aggressive drive derivatives, and deeply rooted affects of anger and fear. What about the ego function of psychological defense mechanisms? There was plenty of **denial** of urgent problems such as climate change, economic disparities that lead to outsourcing of jobs, crumbling infrastructure, gross inequalities in access to health care, the need for a sound immigration policy, and more. On the liberal side, there was the potentially disastrous failure to recognize the intensity and extremism of the reaction that was occurring in a large segment of the public, based on fear and misunderstanding. **Displacement** of blame to the other party or to various minorities was present in abundance—verging on **projection** in some instances. Perhaps the Democrats were **introjecting** Massachusetts Republican governor Mitt Romney's solution of requiring everyone to obtain health insurance when they made that a basic tenet of national health insurance, whereupon the Republicans **dissociated** themselves from that idea and fomented law suits against it. By responding to scurrilous negative attacks by slinging mud themselves, the politicians and voters **turned passive into active**. By **disavowing** their own programs that are under attack, such as health care reform, liberals **identified with the aggressor** and failed the challenge to demystify it and convince the public of its potential benefits and cost savings through prevention, earlier detection, and more effective treatment of disease rather than withholding of benefits.

While defense mechanisms are largely unconscious in individuals, politicians appear to have been quite purposeful and Machiavellian in implementing them. But to the extent that they become firm believers in their strategy and are blind to its roots in defensive distortions, their psychological processes lie well outside their conscious awareness.

Superego Influences

In ego psychology, the superego is a very broad concept that includes conscience and morality (ideas of right and wrong) as well as ideals, personal standards, and expectations of oneself. It induces the affects of guilt, when one commits a sin, breaks a law, or hurts or disappoints someone else, or shame, when one fails to live up to one's own standards and goals. Clinically, these affects may be part of very painful, disabling, and even life-threatening disorders in which self-esteem crumbles and dangerous aggression is turned on oneself.

In the electoral process, the voter tries to assess the personal integrity of the candidates—are they honest, truthful, decent people who are willing to put the needs of the nation, state, or city ahead of their personal gain or political aggrandizement? When we as voters see them shamelessly engaging in vicious personal attacks on their opponents and wildly distorting the positions and achievements of the opposing party, we question their integrity and morality—unless we happen to strongly identify ourselves with their point of view. Morality and simple human decency sometimes seem to go out the window during a bitterly contested election when political survival is at stake.

Politicians are public figures, and we idealize them and put them on pedestals (sometimes literally). Perhaps we unconsciously expect them to be more moral or dedicated than we are! If a religious leader vociferously denounces others' sexual behavior or a political leader makes a career of exposing corruption and corporate crime, there is great public excitement when it comes out that the person is guilty of the very kind of behavior against which he or she has crusaded. We suspect these individuals of indulging in the psychological defense mechanism of **reaction formation**, a particularly useful defense mechanism when it comes to matters of morality. Eventually the defense fails: murder will out, guilt will have its way, and they betray themselves. The personal tragedy may get lost in the media excitement that follows. But we, in our idealizing selves,

are disappointed and disillusioned. Such crashes are a bipartisan phenomenon.

The Ego Function of Integration

What we hope to find in a candidate is a very smart and charismatic person with integrity and healthy self-esteem, coupled with humility, dedication to the ideals of the nation, the ability to be strong and aggressive when necessary, depth of knowledge about the complex issues, and enough understanding of people with differing points of view that he or she can negotiate when possible. That of course is an idealizing fantasy, but we hope to come as close to the ideal as possible. That kind of person would have a strong integrative ego function—the ability to sense the reality accurately and comprehensively, to process all of the emotional, instinctual, superego, realistic, historical, and theoretical factors, to evaluate them, to pull them together in an understanding way, and to use good judgment to decide on a course of action. In practice, political leaders consult with numerous experts and specialized advisors in the process of doing so, but eventually “the buck stops here” and the chief executive has to make a decision.

In a comparable way, each voter has a responsibility to do the same thing—to honestly confront all of the different forces within one’s self and within the society at large that come together in conflict, weigh them, and balance them out to some central point that results in a decision. Much of this process takes place unconsciously or intuitively. Thoughtful, wise integrative functions would result in a decision that makes sense in the real world, even though there will inevitably be a wide spectrum of individual conclusions. That is the foundation point of a democratic process.

Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Democracy

What I have described is an idealized view of what happens in a democracy. As we all know, people come down on all sides of an optimal balance of id, ego, superego, reality, and wisdom. As Westen noted, engaging with the electorate’s emotions is the determining force in a campaign. Sometimes a majority can reach a terrible conclusion. Our own American history presents numerous examples. We also know that, over the millennia, democracies have foundered, failed, and slid into empires and dictatorships—Rome, pre-Napoleonic

France, and pre-Nazi Germany, for example. Magnificent as the Constitution of the United States of America may be, it is not immune to human nature or the lessons of history.

Democracy rests on an educated and informed electorate, with free expression of individual or collective opinion. To me it is an ominous sign that the United States Supreme Court, professing to go back to the original intentions of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, recently accorded equal value to the free expression of huge corporations in election campaigns, especially when they are not even required to identify themselves or the groups or individuals that support them and when their financial resources overwhelm the contributions of individuals. How can big corporations aim for anything but to manipulate the elections for financial advantage? That is not a level playing field of free expression between individual voters and their membership groups. As I write, I ask myself, will this election be seen as the beginning of a perversion of the collective psychological event that I have described in this article? I certainly hope that the electorate will prove that it is not fooled, and that its wisdom will prevail.

Meanwhile, back at the office...

It is a relief to close the door of one’s office and leave the mayhem of a political campaign outside. But even in that inner sanctum our patients sometimes shock us with strongly held political beliefs and emotions that are diametrically opposed to our own, as I wrote in my last column.² The saving grace in such a situation is our commitment to understanding that individual human being and helping him or her resolve personal conflict and distress. We can sense the anger, fear, righteous indignation, enthusiasm, or elation and relate it to what we know of the patient’s history, relationships, and inner life. We hope that when we know what the patient is struggling with and sense where it comes from—conscious or unconscious—our differences of opinion and their related affects will fade into the distance. Usually our professionalism can prevail and the work goes on.

References

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