

A Smörgåsbord on the Social and Political Psychology of Voting

Eugene Borgida
University of Minnesota

FABBS Science Café
Washington, D.C., October 24, 2007



- smör ▪ gås ▪ bord/ n. (Swedish) a buffet offering a variety of hot and cold meats, salads, hors d'oeuvres, etc.



Overview

- Partisanship still matters, motivates reasoning, has neural basis.
- Electoral politics in time of war and terrorism: Leadership style matters.
- Values trump self-interest in most instances.
- Swift, automatic associations about race and gender are influential.



Party Identification: Still Matters After All These Years

- Foundations of the “Michigan school”: *The American Voter* and *Elections and the Political Order*.
- *Party ID* as a simply loyalty, a social identity learned early, difficult to displace, and stable across time.

Campbell et al., (1960; 1966)



Party Identification: Still Matters After All These Years

- PID as a “mover” → political cognitions → opinions and values → perceptions of candidates, candidate performance, candidate issue-positions → the vote.
- “...the psychological influence of party seems as great now as at any time since the Second World War.”

Johnston (2006: p.347)



Once our minds are made up, it's hard to change them

- *Partisanship and Motivated reasoning*: reasoning biased to yield emotionally preferred conclusions.
- Involves implicit emotion regulation – minimize negative affect, maximize positive affect in the face of threat.
- Is there a neural basis?



The Political Brain



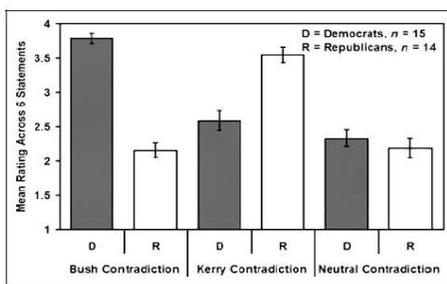
THE ROLE OF EMOTION IN DECIDING
THE FATE OF THE NATION

DREW WESTEN

- First neuroimaging (fMRI) study to examine partisanship and which neural circuits are engaged.
- 30 partisan Republican and Democrat participants just prior to 2004 Presidential election. All men, 22-55 years old.
- Judgment task: information threat to same or opposite party candidate vs. control.

Westen, et al. (2006)

 UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



- Strong behavioral evidence for motivated reasoning.
- Brain regions activated were associated with emotional influences on reasoning
- Qualitatively different reasoning in the presence of a strong emotional stake in the conclusions reached.
- Neural basis for why motivated judgments may be so difficult to change.

Westen et al. (2006)

 UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Political Preferences in Times of Crisis

Research Question:

How do we understand the psychological dynamics that bear on public confidence and trust in political leaders in times of crisis?



- Terror Management Theory: how people cope with knowledge of the certainty of their own death.
- Inspired by the writings of Ernest Becker (e.g., *The denial of death*, 1973).
- Key idea: support for political leaders is in part the result of the need to allay our fear of death.

Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, (1986)



- How **Mortality Salience** (MS) influences political preferences and voting behavior as a function of candidates' leadership styles.
 - Hypothesis: awareness of mortality makes people especially prone to the lure of charismatic political leaders; such leaders tend to bolster self-esteem.

Cohen, et al. (2004)



- Randomly assigned to MS or control conditions. Participants were 17-56 years old.
- MS induction via two questions.
- Read brief campaign statements by 3 gubernatorial candidates in hypothetical election.
- Expressed political preferences for each candidate and voted for one.



- Mortality Salience induction:
 - (1) “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.”
 - (2) “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.”

- *Leadership styles:*
 - *Relationship-oriented:* shared governance
 - *Charismatic:* visionary; make people feel that they are valued parts of something great
 - *Task-oriented:* instrumentally effective

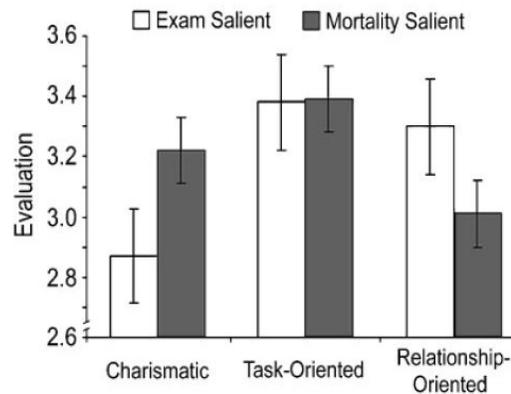


Fig. 1. Mean evaluations of the three candidates by condition. Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

Cohen et al 2004 Psychological Science

 UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

- If TMT is right, then would reminders of 9/11 function like MS primes in supporting President Bush?
- MS induction:
 - (1) “Please describe the emotions that the thought of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, arouses in you.”
 - (2) “Write down as specifically as you can what happened during the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.”

Landau, et al. (2004)

 UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

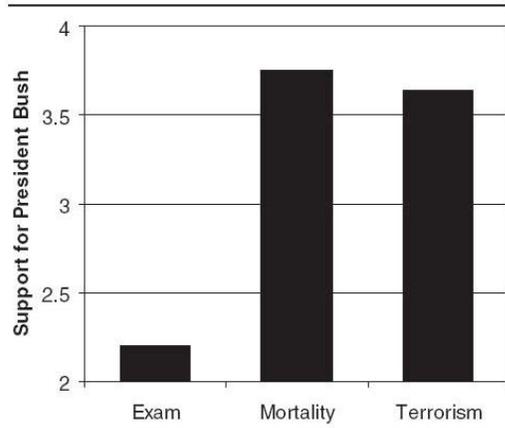


Figure 1 Study 3: Support for George W. Bush as a function of priming condition.

Landau et al. 2004 PSPB

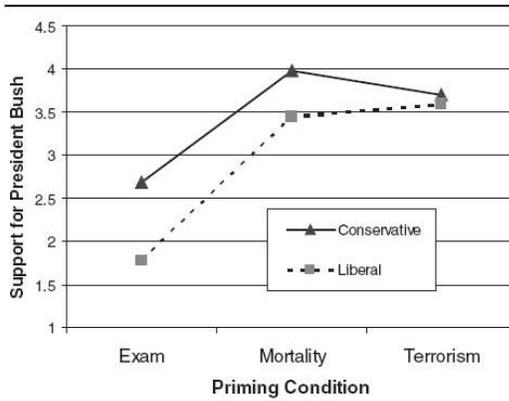


Figure 2 Study 3: Support for George W. Bush as a function of priming condition and political orientation.

Landau et al. 2004 PSPB



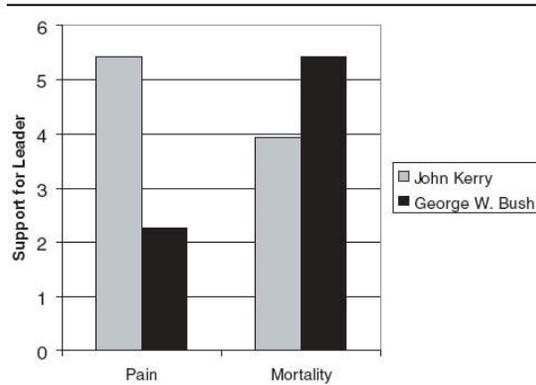


Figure 3 Study 4: Support for President George W. Bush and presidential candidate John Kerry as a function of priming condition.

Landau et al. 2004 PSPB

“No matter how bad Bush does on the war and 9/11, just having voters think about it kills us.”

Democratic strategist, quoted in *Time*
(5/3/04, p.32)

Landau, et al. (2004)

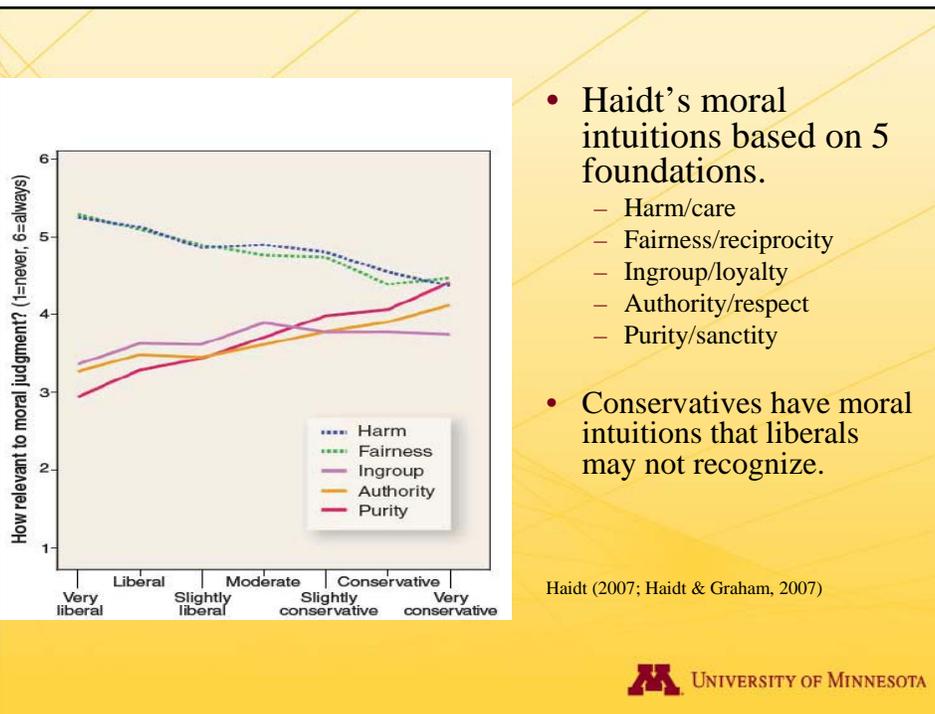
Values, morality, and political reasoning

“Symbolic politics”

Strong empirical support for value-based preferences on range of issues; expect tax policies.

“Myth of self-interest”

People infer self-interest in others’ judgments and behavior, yet are unaware of its influence on their own judgments.



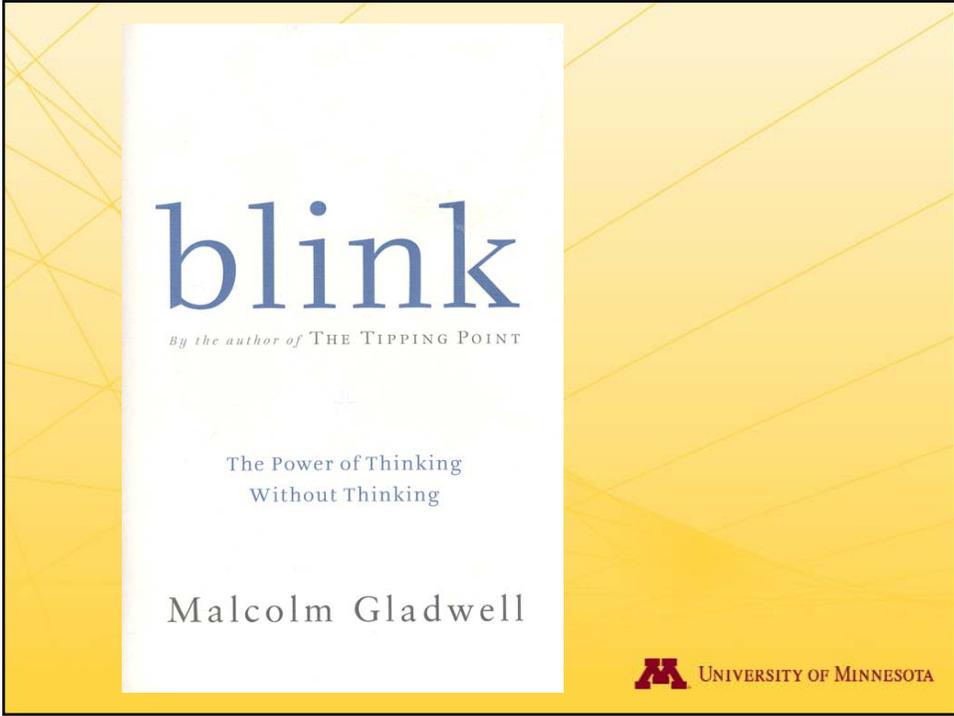
- Haidt’s moral intuitions based on 5 foundations.
 - Harm/care
 - Fairness/reciprocity
 - Ingroup/loyalty
 - Authority/respect
 - Purity/sanctity
- Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize.

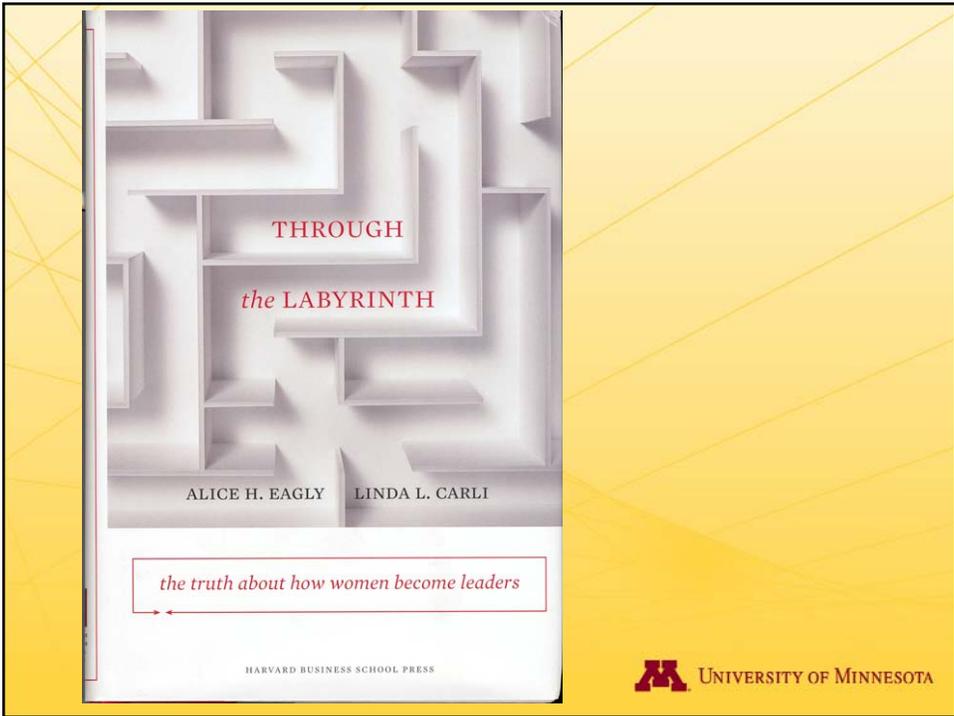
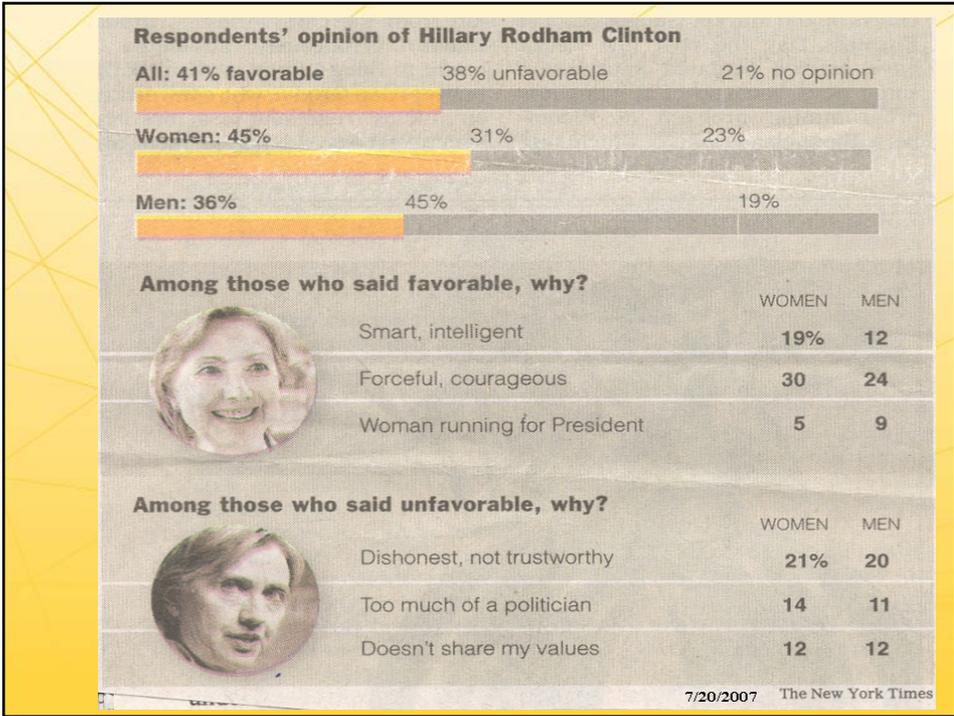


Current electoral context

- Role of implicit social cognitions: Social cues matter.
- Race-based associations in evaluation and decision making
- Leadership and gender – labyrinth vs. glass ceiling (Eagly & Carli, 2008)







In Summary

- Partisanship still matters, motivates reasoning, has neural basis.
- Electoral politics in time of war and terrorism: Leadership style matters.
- Values trump self-interest in most instances.
- Swift, automatic associations about race and gender are influential.



Thanks very much!

borgi001@umn.edu



Table 1. Two Examples of Statement Sets

<i>Sample Statement Set—George W. Bush</i>	
Initial	"First of all, Ken Lay is a supporter of mine. I love the man. I got to know Ken Lay years ago, and he has given generously to my campaign. When I'm President, I plan to run the government like a CEO runs a country. Ken Lay and Enron are a model of how I'll do that."—Candidate George Bush, 2000
Contradictory	Mr. Bush now avoids any mention of Ken Lay and is critical of Enron when asked.
Exculpatory	People who know the President report that he feels betrayed by Ken Lay, and was genuinely shocked to find that Enron's leadership had been corrupt.
<i>Sample Statement Set—John Kerry</i>	
Initial	During the 1996 campaign, Kerry told a Boston Globe reporter that the Social Security system should be overhauled. He said Congress should consider raising the retirement age and means-testing benefits. "I know it's going to be unpopular," he said. "But we have a generational responsibility to fix this problem."
Contradictory	This year, on Meet the Press, Kerry pledged that he will never tax or cut benefits to seniors or raise the age for eligibility for Social Security.
Exculpatory	Economic experts now suggest that, in fact, the Social Security system will not run out of money until 2049, not 2020, as they had thought in 1996.

Westen et al. 2006, *J of Cognitive Neuroscience*

- *Structure of each experimental trial:*
 - Statement
 - Contradiction (partisan threat)
 - Consider 1
 - Rate 1
 - Exculpatory statement
 - Consider 2
 - Rate 2