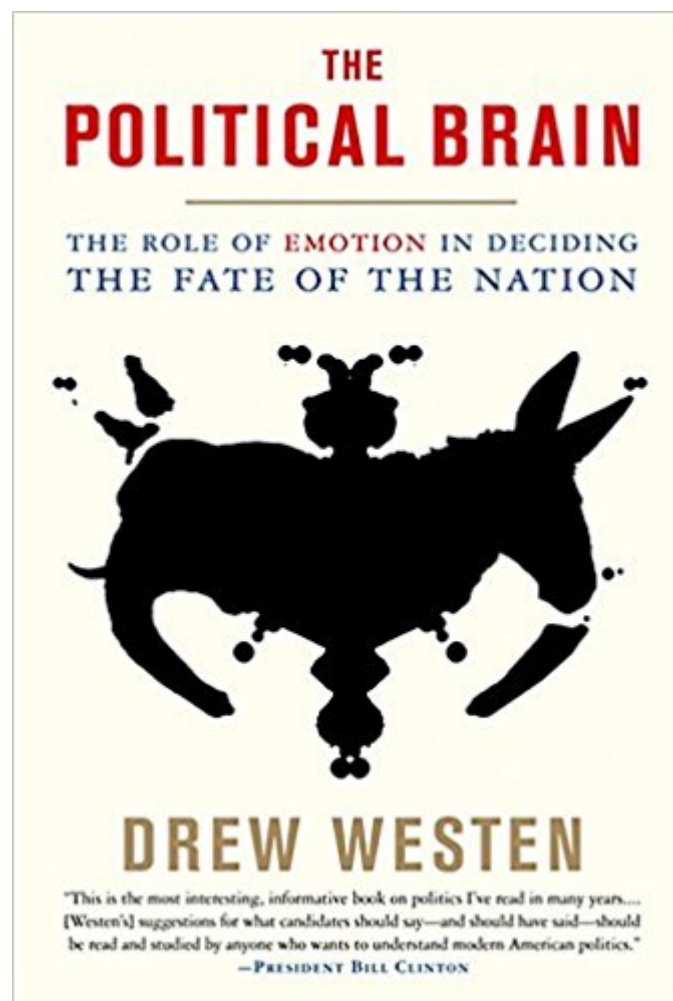


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The Political Brain: The Role Of Emotion In Deciding The Fate Of The Nation



Synopsis

The Political Brain is a groundbreaking investigation into the role of emotion in determining the political life of the nation. For two decades Drew Westen, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Emory University, has explored a theory of the mind that differs substantially from the more "dispassionate" notions held by most cognitive psychologists, political scientists, and economists—and Democratic campaign strategists. The idea of the mind as a cool calculator that makes decisions by weighing the evidence bears no relation to how the brain actually works. When political candidates assume voters dispassionately make decisions based on "the issues," they lose. That's why only one Democrat has been re-elected to the presidency since Franklin Roosevelt—and only one Republican has failed in that quest. In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins. Elections are decided in the marketplace of emotions, a marketplace filled with values, images, analogies, moral sentiments, and moving oratory, in which logic plays only a supporting role. Westen shows, through a whistle-stop journey through the evolution of the passionate brain and a bravura tour through fifty years of American presidential and national elections, why campaigns succeed and fail. The evidence is overwhelming that three things determine how people vote, in this order: their feelings toward the parties and their principles, their feelings toward the candidates, and, if they haven't decided by then, their feelings toward the candidates' policy positions. Westen turns conventional political analyses on their head, suggesting that the question for Democratic politics isn't so much about moving to the right or the left but about moving the electorate. He shows how it can be done through examples of what candidates have said—or could have said—in debates, speeches, and ads. Westen's discoveries could utterly transform electoral arithmetic, showing how a different view of the mind and brain leads to a different way of talking with voters about issues that have tied the tongues of Democrats for much of forty years—such as abortion, guns, taxes, and race. You can't change the structure of the brain. But you can change the way you appeal to it. And here's how—

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Customer Reviews

"The most interesting, informative book on politics I've read in many years" Bill Clinton "May prove to be one of the most important studies of political campaigning of recent times." Jonathan Freedland in *The Guardian*

Drew Westen received his B.A. at Harvard, an M.A. in Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex (England), and his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at the University of Michigan, where he subsequently taught for six years. For several years he was Chief Psychologist at Cambridge Hospital and Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School. He is a commentator on NPR's "All Things Considered" and lives in Atlanta.

Its thesis is that we, as humans, are predisposed to emotional, gut-level decision-making. Although most liberals will not want to accept this, author, Drew Westen, makes his case so well even the most inveterate ostriches must pull their heads out of the sand. We believe first, then we seek to support our beliefs. How we come to believe is a complex interaction of genetics and environment, which Westen makes no effort to reveal. What he focuses on is the counter-productive illusion that facts and issues matter more than the emotions underlying the principles we value most in life. And Westen disabuses the reader of this illusion quite completely, giving examples of what should have been said and what should have been done in Democrat campaigns in response to Republican attack. As a psychologist, Westin teaches us how the human brain works and why it is important for liberal politics to know how it works before selecting a candidate and mounting a campaign.

Must be read by anyone who is interested in understanding how political campaigns are run in the current environment. The book explains just how smart the campaign managers are. By measuring emotional responses and subtly changing the message, campaigns are manipulating popular

opinion in ways that are much less obvious. When people talk about how politically divided our country is, and how close to 50-50 it is between the two major parties, it's easy to see that the manipulators have been targeting narrow groups, changing the message, and bringing these groups over to their side, one subtle move at a time. It's a version of Spy vs. Spy, in a way. Is it any wonder that the parties are so similar and that the messages are so murky when both sides are playing the same game for votes? Drew Westen gives a great deal of insight as to how that happens.

Fascinating and important book about how voters reach decisions on how to cast their votes. It's not logic and reason and measured views on policy, people, it's emotion. And that's why the results of elections can often seem so odd, given the expressed views of the electorate. This book goes a long way to explaining why U.S. voters, in particular, seem so unresponsive to arguments directed to their assumed self-interest (from Democrats) and so responsive to emotional appeals (from Republicans). Recently, more Democratic political operatives seem to be appreciating the importance of emotion, symbolism, etc, but the party still keeps falling back into rationalism. Fight that trend!

It is a not so tightly held secret that the Republicans know how to manipulate emotions for political advantage; with this book Drew Westen levels the playing field by not only providing insight into how emotions are evoked and taken advantage of politically, but also provides evidence-driven suggestions for the Democratic party to follow. The question, of course, is will the Democrats change their electoral strategies taking Dr. Westen's suggestions to heart, or will they follow the failed tactics of the Gore and Kerry campaigns, which relied on consultants following a rational-choice model of politics that prefers watered down political positions and milquetoast candidates in hopes of taking the "center". While some may argue that this book is unethical by advocating the targeting of voters' emotions, instead of their "rational thought process", and thus is supportive of public manipulation, a very strong counter-argument might be made that putting this information in the public domain will help voters inoculate themselves against current Republican strategies which rely on scaring the public and arousing their anger against others using a range of techniques that border on the illegal. Specifically, the "RATS" subliminal advertisement used by the Bush 2000 campaign to attack Gore is, on close scrutiny, a very astute and professional advertisement that takes advantage of knowledge in the academic sphere that humans process information outside of conscious awareness. Specifically, a 1986 article in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology by Fazio et al. provided evidence that not only did the term "RATS" have a

negative effect on peoples' evaluation of items presented afterwards, but that further, the term "Reagan" had a weak positive effect. Likewise, both Westen and colleagues and Stewart and Schubert (in Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 2006), in separate studies, suggest that the term "RATS" is an effective subliminal. Furthermore, the use of fear/anxiety by the current administration is well established, with studies showing a correlation between changes in the Homeland Security color-coded threat indicator and political tactics. While one might argue over the timing of the Iraq invasion, and whether it was carried out for short-term political expediency, or to address a perceived threat in the region, one cannot argue with the rally effect that bolstered President Bush's ratings to over 90% immediately after 9-11 and over 70% after the Iraq invasion. Knowing that humans respond in predictable ways when different emotions are evoked allows not just politicians, consultants, academics and wonks to understand human behavior, but also will give the average citizen greater awareness of how the emotions evoked affect their decisions and responses. In other words, a more intelligent population may come from a more emotionally astute population.

The book scientifically demonstrates repeatedly that voters vote with the emotional side of their brains and not with the logical side. It also demonstrates that Republicans understand this, in depth, and that Democrats do not. Democrats appeal to voter's intellect and logic, while Republicans appeal to voter's emotions. Chillingly, Republicans have deeply researched voter reactions to emotionally charged words and deliberately use those words to positively characterize their proposals for the nation as well as to negatively characterize the Democrats proposals. If you feel that you are being manipulated it's because you are. Particularly in this critical (2012) election it is a book well worth the read.

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