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OP-ED COLUMNIST

How Voters Think

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People in my line of work try to answer certain questions. Why did Hillary surge after misting up in New Hampshire? Why have primary victories produced no momentum for the victors? Why did John McCain win among Republicans who oppose the Iraq war in both New Hampshire and Michigan, but lose among voters who support it?

The truth is that many of the theories we come up with are bogus. They are based on the assumption that voters make cold, rational decisions about who to vote for and can tell us why they decided as they did. This is false.

In reality, we voters — all of us — make emotional, intuitive decisions about who we prefer, and then come up with post-hoc rationalizations to explain the choices that were already made beneath conscious awareness.

“People often act without knowing why they do what they do,” Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize winner, noted in an e-mail message to me this week. “The fashion of political writing this year is to suggest that people choose their candidate by their stand on the issues, but this strikes me as highly implausible.”

Nobody really knows how voters think, especially during primary seasons when the policy differences are minute, but it wouldn't be surprising if the cognitive chain went something like this:

After seeing a candidate for 100 milliseconds, voters make certain sorts of judgments based on expressiveness, facial structure, carriage and attitude. Alexander Todorov of Princeton has found that he can predict 70 percent of political races just by measuring peoples' snap judgments of candidates' faces.

Then, having formed an impression from these thin-slice appraisals, voters rack their memory banks. Decades ago, Kahneman and Amos Tversky argued that human judgment is less a matter of calculating probabilities and more a matter of trying to fit new things into familiar patterns. Maybe John Edwards reminds one voter of the sort of person he disliked in high school. Maybe Barack Obama evokes the elevated feeling another voter felt watching John F. Kennedy.

It is no accident that the major candidates in the Republican field are a pastor, a businessman and a war hero. These are the three most evocative Republican leadership models. Nor is it an accident that the Democratic race is a clash between a daughter of the feminist movement, a beneficiary of the civil rights movement and a self-styled proletarian. These are powerful Democratic categories.

In making these associations, voters are trying to perform trait inference. They are trying to divine inner abilities from outward signs.

At the same time, voters embark on an emotional journey with candidates. Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux

have shown that emotion isn't the opposite of reason. We use emotion to assign value to things, thus making decision-making possible.

As the campaign drags on, voters see candidates at different events. Maybe at one event Mitt Romney smiled without dipping the outer edge of his eyebrows. This is a cue that the smile is fake, and produces distrust. On the other hand, maybe he vowed to bring all the manufacturing jobs back to Michigan. A voter might have known this was impossible, but appreciated the concern nonetheless.

As the months go on, emotions oscillate and voter preferences do, too. Voters listen to policy proposals and infer character traits. A social contagion like Obamamania might sweep the country. A global shock might set off a wave of fear, producing a powerful intellectual cascade.

Social tribes rally for and against certain candidates. Rush Limbaugh is currently going bananas because Mike Huckabee threatens to disrupt the community of conservative dittoheads he has spent decades cohering. Work by researchers at Stanford's Business School suggests that the voting environment itself — in say a church or a school — can influence choices.

Each of us has an unconscious but consistent way of construing the world. Some of us light up when we see a candidate being intelligent, others when we see a candidate being friendly or sentimental. This is the mode we use every day to make sense of the world.

My own intuition is that this unconscious cognition is pretty effective. People are skilled at judging character. And through reading, thinking and close observation, they can educate their unconscious to make smarter and finer distinctions.

But if there is one lesson from this wacky primary season, it is that we analysts should be careful about imposing a false order on voter decision-making. We can do our best to discern how certain politicians are making connections with certain voters, but in that process we have as much to learn from William James as from political scientists and pollsters.

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Correction: I got my own synapses crossed on Tuesday. I wrote that Ward Churchill was a critic of affirmative action, when I meant Ward Connerly.

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