Why the US Presidential Election Result Will Upset You - Whoever Wins

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Which candidate attracted your support during the 2012 US presidential ballot?

The hype surrounding election campaigning hinges on the argument that if the opponent triumphs, it will be cataclysmic for the nation. So when a rival candidate succeeds, this could be traumatic for supporters of the losers.

Timothy Classen from Loyola University, Chicago, and Richard Dunn from Texas A&M University recently investigated the impact of US presidential elections on suicide rates. They argued that for voters particularly keen for change, who urgently need hope, seeing their candidate lose, can be an especially harrowing experience.

Using presidential election results from 1980 to 2004, Classen and Dunn found that in the year of a presidential election, states which supported the winning candidate experienced a relative increase in suicide rates. This might reflect the despair of those living there who voted for the losing candidate. For example, the suicide rate for states that backed the national winner in the 1984 election was 4.77 percentage points higher than the rate for states that supported the loser.

But averaged over all the years studied, the suicide rate in states that supported the losing candidate declined sharply, relative to states that supported the winning candidate.

The study entitled The Politics of Hope and Despair: The Effect of Presidential Election Outcomes on Suicide Rates and published in the academic journal Social Science Quarterly, is consistent with individuals finding some hope that they live in a state that leans with them, even though the nation as a whole, voted for the opposing candidate.

If you find yourself on a losing side, but you are surrounded by others in the same predicament, as opposed to being relatively isolated (a state that voted for the other candidate), this helps ameliorate the stress of an unpleasant election result.

Several studies find suicide rates go down during wars, which is a surprise given warfare is surely more stressful than peace. But we may unite most strongly in the face of a common enemy, so community support and cohesion is greater during hostilities. If an election campaign is a kind of battle, with a more readily identifiable enemy than during peacetime, then this also explains why suicide rates have been found to generally go down during elections, but bounce back as the ballot retreats in time.
Voting is a recent phenomenon in human history, but building alliances and coalitions with friends in order to see off enemies, political dominance seeking, are all ancient behaviours. Historically, being on the winning or losing side determined your survival.

Evolutionary psychology argues men in particular are biologically wired up to pursue dominance. Elevated status in the tribe historically produced access to more resources and mating opportunities.

Testosterone, a hormone linked with aggressiveness and competitiveness, rises in men as a response to challenge, and winners of adversarial interactions experience a relative increase in testosterone compared to losers. This testosterone response has been found in physical competitions such as wrestling and tennis. Fans of sports teams also experience a similar pattern of testosterone response. We may be gripped by watching competitions because we are in fact genetically designed to by evolution. The consequence was vital to our futures as it determined who ruled us, and to whom we had to be subservient.

Political elections are also a form of competition, so Coren Apicella, assistant professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and David Cesari, assistant professor, Department of Economics & Center for Experimental Social Science, New York University, conducted a study examining how political support for a presidential candidate impacted on testosterone levels during election night itself in the 2008 US presidential election.

Twenty-four men were recruited based on their support for the Republicans or Democrats, and they were investigated throughout the evening of 2008 election night as they watched the results come in on CNN at a cinema on the Harvard campus.

Three saliva samples for measuring testosterone levels were collected. The first at the start of evening, before any result could be announced, then at 20.40 when CNN first projected an Obama win in Pennsylvania, then at 23.15, approximately 15 minutes after CNN and all other major networks called the election for Obama.

The experiment entitled Testosterone and the biology of politics: Experimental evidence from the 2008 presidential election, published in the book Man is by Nature a Political Animal (Chicago University Press) found the stronger a subject was attached to the party of the losing candidate, the greater his relative testosterone decline that evening.

This fall in a hormone which regulates aggression and competitiveness, and is linked to confidence and positive mood, may fundamentally impact your sense of well-being. But such a drop may also bring survival value. In our ancestral past it promoted withdrawal from contests where preliminary losses could signal further harm likely, if as a loser, you continued to fight.

Increases in testosterone levels in winners may prepare them for subsequent future competition through effects on confidence. Prehistorically fights resulted in leaders who had to be immediately prepared for yet more confrontation to their leadership, as they became the natural target from challengers wanting the top spot.
Indeed high testosterone might lead to over-confidence, which could usefully frighten off potential adversaries spoiling for a fight, but might be counter-productive when it comes to running a country.

Was it hubris from a series of electoral victories which lead Tony Blair to over-reach and initiate wars? Obama mocked such self-assurance in a White House Correspondents' Dinner speech where he declared: "I believe that my next hundred days will be so successful I will be able to complete them in 72 days. And on the 73rd day, I will rest."

The high testosterone and buoyancy of victors soon, history teaches us, gives way to crushing disappointment. Obama himself has been battling this psychological effect in this campaign, after the too high expectations generated by his previous victory.

Also - beware - as you celebrate or commiserate the result, psychological research finds that the modern electorate chooses candidates on the flimsiest of pretexts. Voters appear to make decisions on the competence of a candidate after exposure to their photographs for around one tenth of a second.

In a paper entitled Elected in 100 milliseconds: Appearance-Based Trait Inferences and Voting Christopher Olivola from the University of Warwick and Alexander Todorov from Princeton University marshal a host of evidence that candidate appearance is heavily important in voter choice. For example, they find competence judgments of candidates, formed after just 100 milliseconds exposure to the faces of candidates in US gubernatorial races, were accurate in predicting the election outcomes.

In one famous study, entitled Predicting Elections: Child's play! and published in the journal Science, the reactions of Swiss children accurately predicted the results of the French national elections. Children aged 5-13 years played a game where they were asked to choose who should captain a boat through a difficult mission, from photographs of the candidates in the French ballot. Remarkably, the children's judgments predicted the election result.

Olivola and Todorov argue we vote on who we think is most competent, but that judgement is arrived at faster, from appearance, and below conscious awareness, and from the same gut instinct present from an early age, much more than we realise.

So the latest psychological research suggests the protracted campaign, adversarial debates, plotted strategy, choice of running mates, elaborately groomed wives, and carefully schemed policies, have a lot less to do with the final result, than the politicians or the media pundits, would have you believe.