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Letting Animals Vote



By Marty Kaplan

You look terrific. Have you lost weight? Are you working out? You've got this glow about you. I bet you're in love. Wait — you were promoted. That's it, isn't it? They finally recognized how talented you are. By the way, did you know that the average global surface temperature has gone up one degree Fahrenheit over the last three decades? It's true. Here, have a look at this chart.

That, or something like it, is how you might get climate change deniers to change their minds, according to a new study by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, the social scientists whose previous study dropped this downer bomb: When people are misinformed, just giving them facts to correct those errors only makes them cling to them more tenaciously. Apparently there's something in our brains that resists contradiction. It hurts our heads to change our minds.

The earlier, depressing study by Nyhan and Reifler was called "When Corrections Fail." But their new manuscript, "Opening the Political Mind?," despite the question mark in its title, is more hopeful. Here's one of the experiments they report on.

Let's say you think that the economy is the country's most important issue, and that you disapprove of Obama's record on the economy.

You're randomly assigned to one of two groups we'll call A and B.

If you're in A, you're told this:

Please pick the characteristic or value from this list that is MOST important to you: Being smart or getting good grades. Creativity. Relationships with friends or family. Social skills. Business skills. Sense of humor. Living in the moment. Physical attractiveness. Athletic ability. (There are more, but you get the idea.)

Now in a few sentences, please describe a personal experience when the value you picked was especially important to you and made you feel good about yourself. Don't worry about spelling, grammar or how well written it is; just focus on your thoughts and feelings.

Next you're shown a graph of the total number of nonfarm jobs in the U.S. from January 2010 to January 2011 (around when the study was done). The line rises. At the start of 2010, there were about 129.3 million payroll jobs; a year later, it had gone up by about a million. (Today, it's 131.1 million).

Then you're asked this: Would you say that, compared to the beginning of last year, the number of people in the country with jobs has gone up, gone down or stayed about the same?

I'll tell you how A answered, but first here's what happened if you were in B, the control group. Before you were shown the same graph, you were not invited to think about an experience that made you feel good about yourself. Instead, you were asked to list everything you had to eat or drink in the last 24 hours.

Here's what Nyhan and Reifler found: A significant number of people in B, despite seeing the graph, said that employment had gone down. But a significant number of people in A changed their minds.

"Amazingly," they say, "the act of writing an essay about a time in which they upheld an important value substantially reduces these respondents' reported misperceptions about job growth.... Affirmation appears to make it easier to hold a factual belief that would otherwise impose a significant psychic cost." In other words, if you bolster people's self-worth, they're more likely to be open-minded.

I'm definitely encouraged by something else they found: people are more likely to accept facts when they're conveyed by graphics. That's good news for journalists whose stories are illustrated with charts. A picture — a graph — actually does turn out to be worth a thousand words.

But I'm ambivalent about the news about affirmation.

Sure, if boosting someone's self-esteem is the route to convincing them that tax rates are at a historic low, and that the Bush tax cuts are the cause of most of the looming deficit, then I'd be delighted to laugh at their jokes, praise their buns, admire their swing — whatever it takes.

But if pumping up someone's sense of self-worth can get them to accept an uncomfortable fact, maybe the opposite is also true: Running someone down makes them more resistant to reality. Isn't that what demagogues do when they tell people they're victims? Elites think you're inferior; secular humanists think you're deluded; tree huggers think you're gullible; illegals think you're chumps; China thinks you're toast. There's nothing like inducing a siege mentality to make people impervious to evidence that contradicts them.

The link between feeling good and facing facts is a reminder that reason doesn't rule us. It's uncomfortable to admit it, but we're animals. We eat too much fat and salt not just because of advertising, but because of chemistry; it's an addiction in our genes. In the workplace, pretty people and tall people have an edge. That's not the prejudice of our minds; it's the wiring of our brains. Fear, sex and gossip get high ratings not because we're morally weak, but because paying attention to them turned out to be evolutionarily adaptive.

For every Jefferson who praises the power of education to enlighten us, there is a Madison to remind us how far from angels we are, and how dangerous it is to put too much power in too few hands, no matter how cultivated the owners of those hands are. We love to talk about campaigns being great national conversations, and about elections being wonderful opportunities to discuss the issues, but when we pick leaders, it's our gut that does the choosing. We *Homo sapiens* respond more to stories than to statistics,

more to feelings than to facts, more to images than to issues, more to drums than to debates, more to intuition than to information. This is not a failing of our character. It is a characteristic of our species. And in America, we bipeds get to vote.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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