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# Fear: A powerful motivator in elections

The use of fear is an effective way to influence voting behavior, but there are ways we can resist how it affects us.

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With less than a month to go before the general election, candidates are looking to every available play to influence voting behavior. If there were an actual political playbook, fear tactics would occupy prime real estate. Simply put: Fear works.

“Discussing risks or instilling anxiety is effective at changing intentions and behavior, particularly when the behavior provides a solution to the threat,” says Dolores Albarracín, PhD, professor of psychology, business, and medicine at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “Humans are equipped with approach and avoidance emotions and we need both to lead successful lives.” For example, “having a fear of injury from an auto accident can lead more people to wear seatbelts,” she adds.

## Understanding fear tactics

Fear can sway opinions, but knowing the deliberate and strategic ways in which our fears are exploited can help lessen its effects.

For example, fear can be used to drive votes toward a particular candidate or party—a method that relies on our natural instinct to find safety in numbers. And, a meta-analysis conducted by Albarracin and her colleagues found that messages with fear are nearly twice as effective as messages without fear (*Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 141, No. 6, 2015).

“A large part of politics is getting people to think about things as part of a group,” says Christopher Federico, PhD, professor of political science and psychology at the University of Minnesota. Politicians using this strategy must first show that they (or their party) are best suited to address a specific issue. Once that is established, making people scared about that issue can cause them to seek comfort by joining the ranks of the group perceived as most capable.

Campaigns also use fear to drive votes away from political opponents. This strategy may involve factual or misleading statements about the opposing candidate’s limitations or claims that an election victory for the opposition will lead to outright disaster. And on a more personal level, when a politician casts doubt on the physical or mental well-being of a challenger, the goal is often to use fear to make supporters doubt his or her competency.

In addition to driving votes, fear is also used to diminish voter turnout.

“If someone is highly anxious about an election or candidate, they may avoid consuming any information about the candidate or the election,” says Leonie Huddy, PhD, professor of political science at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. “This may extend to voting abstention because thinking about the election is overly aversive.” Raising anxiety around an election or candidate is a tactic often used to decrease voter turnout among an opponent’s supporters (*The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 73, No. 1, 2011; *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2, 2013).

## Keeping fear in check

Perhaps the best way to prevent being manipulated is to understand the emotion of fear itself. “Fear induces withdrawal, stepping back, being cautious,” says Federico. “Fear and anxiety get us to stop and re-assess. But often when we re-assess because of fear, we tend to seek out information that reinforces the idea that a threat exists—which is not necessarily the most accurate or objective information.”

If you’re experiencing fear while listening to a politician, “It is important to understand that many statements made by politicians and candidates are made for strategic reasons that extend beyond changing your vote to demobilizing the electorate,” says Huddy (*Political Psychology*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2011).

“Fear, like hope, can be very motivating and is not inherently bad. The challenge is to identify when fear is being used deceptively. For example, intentional distortion of evidence is within the realm of disinformation and often foments fear for political

purposes,” says Albarracin. “Research on people’s awareness of bias, such as Nobert Schwarz’s and Duane Wegener’s work, suggests that when people identify a source of bias, they can correct and may even overcorrect for it. For example, audiences may realize that a political candidate is inducing fear in illegitimate ways like lying. This awareness can lead to eliminating the intended effects and may even lead the fear appeal to backfire if people feel deceived and defend against those emotions.”

“The use of disinformation to promote fear is quite striking when we look at how in recent years some political leaders have been increasingly spreading conspiracy theories,” says Karen Douglas, PhD, professor of social psychology at the University of Kent. But is there a way to know when we come across a conspiracy theory?

“Conspiracy theories are not easy to falsify and will often be pitched as questions or an opposition to an official account rather than proposing any concrete details that can be put to the test,” Douglas says. “And are therefore fairly easy to spot most of the time.”

But what about when the fear tactic is more nuanced than a conspiracy theory? First, you should check the facts. “It’s always a good idea to seek out multiple, reputable, nonpartisan sources of information,” says Federico.

And if, after fact-checking, you find that a particular media type or source tends to produce more inaccurate or fabricated information, reduce your exposure. Likewise, consider taking a media break if you’re experiencing fear while viewing. In fact, a meta-analysis conducted by Albarracin and colleagues showed that the impact of misinformation is extreme (*Psychological Science*, Vol. 28, No. 11, 2017). “Based on the effect sizes we estimated, misinformation heard for the first time will be persuasive 99.6% of the time,” says Albarracin.

“Some media outlets are more likely than others to carry highly emotional content which can exacerbate anxiety,” says Huddy. “There is evidence that highly emotional content is more likely to be shared on social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, and it may be better to avoid reading news on those platforms and consume less highly-charged coverage that is more common on mainstream news platforms” (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 114, No. 28, 2017; *Human Communication Research*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 2016).

When a politician says something that scares you, ask yourself if it sounds too scary to be true. If you’re unsure, talk to someone you trust and examine together whether your feelings of fear are justified and whether they are the anticipated result of a strategy.

And if you’re feeling nervous about political conversations, put your fear in context. “It’s important to assess the threat level. Ask yourself ‘How threatened are you?’” says Tania Israel, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and author of “Beyond Your Bubble,” a book about connecting across the political divide.

## Can we help others?

“If you’re planning to reach across the divide, ask yourself what your motivation is. Whether you’re trying to change someone’s mind or the way they vote, or just stay connected, you should try to understand people on the other side and do what you can to make them feel safe and understood,” says Israel.

Beyond that, trying to argue facts or sharing stats may be counterproductive (*Communication Research*, Vol. 39, No. 6, 2012). “The greatest mistake people make in trying to have dialogue across lines is assuming that providing info or a statistic or research will help their goal of persuading someone on the other side. The reality is that staying curious about the others’ viewpoints and maintaining a relationship goes a lot further,” says Israel (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 43, No. 6, 2017).

Keep in mind that we tend to imagine conversations with people from the other side as if we were talking directly to the leaders of that side. Israel reminds us that “there’s a lot more gray area—most people on the other side are not the same as the spokespeople of the party they support.”

We already know that the uncertainty of the upcoming election is causing stress. Given the effectiveness of using fear as a political strategy, it’s safe to say many Americans are scared as well. Understanding the psychological underpinnings of fear will not only help mitigate the effects of these strategies, it will make us more informed, level-headed citizens.



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