

TRUMP MANIPULATES VOTERS' EMOTIONS TO DISTORT TRUTH

Soon after former President Trump was indicted for leading a criminal enterprise to commit election fraud in Georgia, CNN aired “man on the street” interviews with several voters in [Alpharetta, GA](#). After listening to a key part of Trump’s phone call with Georgia Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, interviewees were asked to comment. Democrats who spoke on camera thought Mr. Trump was obviously guilty of committing a crime while two of three Republicans disagreed saying they would still vote for the former president. The third Republican said he could not cast a ballot for *either* Trump or Biden. The lone unaffiliated voter interviewed heard nothing illegal in the phone call and none of Trump’s indictments will change his opinion on the disgraced former president. He did not, however, share his opinion of the former President.

Judging by their remarks, these voters seem to use *emotion* rather than *cognition* to evaluate Mr. Trump. From a political psychology perspective, these Georgians revealed that their self-concept is either attached to – or detached from – Trump and the Republican Party. Further, each interviewee demonstrated that, regardless of party affiliation, to maintain a positive *self-concept* they must stay positive about the identity groups with whom they feel a connection.

Emotions help humans do that by adjusting our actions to meet the moment. With our feelings (e.g., affect) comes a *psychophysiological* reward – the release of brain hormones such as oxytocin, adrenaline, cortisol – whatever suits the moment. Our “fight or flight” response (production of adrenaline and cortisol) is but one example.

Scholars began studying the role of emotions in politics during the Reagan years by assessing their influence on political ideology, behavior, and voter decision-making.

They've found that we humans are predisposed by genetic inheritance, gene expression, brain structure and lived experiences. Their work – largely ignored by the mass media but well-known in academic circles – helps explain Mr. Trump and his supporters' past, present, and future state of mind and behavior. To be sure, there will be more bat-guano crazy statements and behavior by the only president in U.S. history to be indicted on 91 felony charges (44 federal and 47 state) across four indictments. There are two reasons for this expectation.

First, most Americans are too disinterested, apathetic, cynical, or busy living *their* lives to engage with politics. In the 2020 presidential election to “save democracy,” 33% of eligible voters did not cast a ballot. The US Census Bureau collects data and often the figure in presidential elections approaches 40%. Midterm elections are higher.

Secondly, according to social and political scientists, psychologists and neuroscientists, the major political parties and their politicians and candidates must employ fear, anger, and enthusiasm (e.g., *action tendencies*) to *motivate* voters. Researchers have noted some emotions and processes are *automatic*, or *unconscious*. And they remind us that the oldest parts of the human brain existed to process *emotions* rather than cognition.

To gain his party's nomination in 2024, Mr. Trump and his allies must continuously exploit voters' MAGA supporters' action tendencies favoring the former president and related *in-groups* (e.g., NRA, Federalist Society, Christian Nationalists, Evangelicals, right-wing media, anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, etc.) while directing animus toward Democrats and their in-groups (e.g., women, non-whites, LGBTQ+ folks, unions, teachers, mainstream media, the DOJ/FBI, etc.).

Group associations play a powerful role in one's **social identity** and **self-concept**. Such bonds are real, stable, and significant given that we humans gravitate toward homogenous and cohesive groups. Thus Mr. Trump's indictments and felony counts have recast the Republican Party and its supporters in **his** image by making lawlessness, bitter partisanship, and chaotic leadership the foundation of their social identity and self-concept.

For its part, the Democratic Party also uses emotion to rally supporters. Today, they use concepts relating to individual freedom, personal responsibility, legal accountability, and protecting democracy (domestically and abroad) to bind voters.

As CNN's interviewees in Alpharetta, GA demonstrated, Mr. Trump's continuous lies, threatening rhetoric, and demonizing of out-groups has effectively "brainwashed" a significant **minority** of eligible voters. Many if not most MAGA Republicans will be primed to use their action tendencies – fear, anger, and enthusiasm – when casting their 2024 ballot for Mr. Trump.

On the other hand, Democrats, never-Trump Republicans, and a portion of unaffiliated voters, will combat Mr. Trump's emotional assaults with their own psychophysiological rewards. Their brains will integrate emotion with cognition, and they will ask themselves, "Why would anyone believe Trump?"

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