



The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation

Drew Westen

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The Political Brain is a groundbreaking investigation into the role of emotion in determining the political life of the nation. For two decades Drew Westen, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Emory University, has explored a theory of the mind that differs substantially from the more "dispassionate" notions held by most cognitive psychologists, political scientists, and economists—and Democratic campaign strategists. The idea of the mind as a cool calculator that makes decisions by weighing the evidence bears no relation to how the brain actually works. When political candidates assume voters dispassionately make decisions based on "the issues," they lose. That's why only one Democrat has been re-elected to the presidency since Franklin Roosevelt—and only one Republican has failed in that quest. In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins. Elections are decided in the marketplace of emotions, a marketplace filled with values, images, analogies, moral sentiments, and moving oratory, in which logic plays only a supporting role. Westen shows, through a whistle-stop journey through the evolution of the passionate brain and a bravura tour through fifty years of American presidential and national elections, why campaigns succeed and fail. The evidence is overwhelming that three things determine how people vote, in this order: their feelings toward the parties and their principles, their feelings toward the candidates, and, if they haven't decided by then, their feelings toward the candidates' policy positions.

Westen turns conventional political analyses on their head, suggesting that the question for Democratic politics isn't so much about moving to the right or the left but about moving the electorate. He shows how it can be done through examples of what candidates have said—or could have said—in debates, speeches, and ads. Westen's discoveries could utterly transform electoral arithmetic, showing how a different view of the mind and brain leads to a different way of talking with voters about issues that have tied the tongues of Democrats for much of forty years—such as abortion, guns, taxes, and race. You can't change the structure of the brain. But you can change the way you appeal to it. And here's how...

The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation Details

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Isis says

The thesis of this book is that voters make choices based on emotion ("gut") rather than on logical reasoning, and that Republicans understand this and use it to advantage in their ads and speeches, while Democrats, who believe that their policies and stands are the logical ones, emphasize the issues rather than emotions and thus fail.

It's hard to disagree when the facts are presented so, er, logically :-) especially as it explains why lower-income whites repeatedly vote against their own financial self-interest. The dissection of political ads to show what worked and what didn't was really interesting, especially when Westen turned to negative ads with implied messages as well as overt ones. I also appreciated the presentation of the results of psychological studies, such as the one on aggression and Southern men, and the studies of unconscious racism, and of the way being reminded of mortality tends to shift attitudes toward the conservative.

What I did not think was particularly effective were the repeated examples of "what [X] *should have said* in situation [Y]." For example, Westen showed how Kerry's lack of aggressive counterattack to Bush's accusations painting him as a coward resulted in the weird situation that the candidate who had avoided the draft and had no military experience was viewed as a better Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces than a decorated war veteran. But his "This is an example of the kind of ad Kerry should have run" was 20/20 hindsight, as were the other examples for Dukakis, Gore, and other democratic candidates.

Instead, I would like to have seen a future approach for the candidates that were on the horizon, so that their success or failure could be evaluated. (Which there was a tiny bit of - Westen mentioned that if the up-and-coming Barack Obama were to run for president, he would expect the Republicans to make a big deal out of his middle name!) But in the two areas where he did address issues that have evolved since 2006 (when this book was published), he was...not exactly right. For example, he talked about selling climate change to midwesterners via emphasis on the values of preserving the land and livelihoods such as farming. But this approach has failed due to the Republican lock-step of disbelief. The last chapter in the book talked about an incremental approach to gay marriage via civil unions, and that ended up being almost irrelevant due to the combination of judicial action and the tide of opinion. Still, I think there are a lot of very important ideas in this book which Democratic candidates at all level should take to heart.

This worked well as an audiobook (although perhaps was more persuasive than it would have been in print). The narrator subtly but unmistakably suggested the accents of the various politicians whose ads and speeches were dissected, along with the appropriate passionate or indifferent delivery as implied by the surrounding text.

Gordon says

In the 2004 Presidential election, George Bush beat John Kerry by "Swift Boating" him. Karl Rove, Bush's campaign strategist, recruited a group of military veterans of the Republican far-right persuasion, who formed a group called "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" and attacked Kerry for allegedly lying about his

military record commanding a patrol boat in Vietnam and for collecting a Purple Heart Medal for a trivial wound. The star witness in the Swift Boat TV ads was a man who claimed he had actually treated Kerry for his “wound”.

There were a few problems here. The name of this witness didn’t match the names of any of the medical personnel on Kerry’s records. For such a supposedly superficial wound, it was hard to explain why Kerry still carried shrapnel in his body decades later. Kerry had returned to the US and become a prominent member of the anti-war movement, subjecting him to intense attack from the Republican administration and the right-wing in general. Yet none of these charges had come up then, at a time when the facts would surely have been fresh in everyone’s mind and there was plenty of motivation to use any unflattering information to discredit that “traitor”, John Kerry.

Faced with this attack, the near-universal expectation was that Kerry would come back swinging immediately. He did not. He waited in dignified silence. He waited a full two weeks, then responded by having his campaign manager (!) send a letter to her Republican counterpart (!) requesting that Bush repudiate the attacks. Bush did nothing of the kind. Kerry and his campaign then tried to systematically refute the charges by presenting the facts, but it was far too little, too late. The effect of the attacks and their impact on voter opinion was devastating. In a close election, the Swift Boat ad campaign represented the margin of victory that brought the country four more years of George Bush and Dick Cheney.

The irony of this whole sorry episode is this: Notoriously, Bush had used his father’s political connections to get him into the safety of the National Guard (and then failed to show up for duty much of the time) while Cheney had obtained draft deferments FIVE times, explaining later that he had “other priorities” than going to war.

The Bush campaign had given Kerry’s team a golden opportunity to score a knockout blow: to shine a light on the sorry record of his armchair-warrior opponents, their thread-bare ethics, and their willingness to send other people’s children off to die on the battlefield despite their unwillingness to serve when their own turn had come 30-some years before. Kerry’s team blew it.

And that story, in a nutshell, represents the core of the thesis of *The Political Brain*. It goes like this:

- Democrats think that the guy with the best facts, the best policies and the best logic will win. Republicans think that the guy with the best story line that goes straight to the emotions of the voters wins.
- Democrats think that negative campaigning is a bad thing. Republicans recognize that it doesn’t matter whether you go positive or negative – the idea is to tell an effective story that makes your guy look good and the other guy look bad.
- Democrats think elections are fought in the marketplace of ideas. Republicans think elections are fought in the marketplace of emotions.

If you like the application of psychology to politics, and if you like great political story-telling, you’ll love this book. You’ll also never listen to any political speech in quite the same way again.

Heather Denkmire says

Ever wonder why otherwise intelligent people even consider supporting Sarah Palin? Why the "left" doesn't really exist anymore? Why Obama is considered "liberal?" Why the Right is RIGHT when they accuse

progressives of flip-flopping and having no values?

Progressives haven't been paying attention to what it means to be human. That is, we have been stuck in the Enlightenment's view of the mind. The mind, the brain is not a dispassionate vehicle seeking facts and reason. Even reasonable and rational decisions require emotional connections.

If even half of progressives read this book, we could change the nation's fate. No kidding. Highly recommended. Beyond highly recommended. I wish it could be required reading.

Pat Simen says

This book is absolutely fantastic. It combines the stuff that I work on in my research (how emotion affects decision making) with an analysis of failed Democratic political campaigns of the past. Aside from Clinton's successful campaigns, this guy Drew Westen really seems to nail what went wrong with all the presidential campaigns against Republicans since LBJ. Namely, that Republican campaigners know what voters respond to, and Democratic strategists frequently don't, and that is: how to mold people's emotional responses. Hindsight's 20:20, and this book can get a little repetitive at points, but it makes everything make sense to me. How else to explain how a guy like Bush could come off seeming to voters like the honest one (!) while Gore looked untrustworthy? I swear that Obama's people have read this book, and they are using just about every suggestion that it makes. Bottom line: when people say Obama is great on giving an abstract feeling of optimism, but that he's short on specifics . . . well, yes, exactly! That's exactly what works! Read it.

John says

The book started off in superb fashion-tossing out psychological gems like candy to the reader, but the grotesque bias that clouds an otherwise intelligent person makes this a difficult read and an awful philosophy.

Westen starts off by mentioning a study in which participants showed how people rationalize blatant contradictions by their favorite political candidates. When the participants found a way to keep their candidates in good standing, the "happy circuits" in their brains lit up like a Christmas tree. This study showed that people--once they've picked a political party or candidate--very little evidence will change their mind about them.

Instead of dwelling on this dramatic finding and elaborating on why today's us-against-them mentality in politics is killing our democracy and bigger goals (like truth), Westen spends the majority of the book showing how Republicans use emotion to manipulate the populace and how Democrats should use emotion also--not to manipulate constituents' minds--but to reveal the valid points Democrats are trying to get across.

This book fails because it's contradictory itself: The religious right is evil when they use religion to make a political move, but Westen uses religion throughout his book (not just his native Judaism) to make his points; Westen shows that popularity of issues are an indication of their validity, but then contradicts that by saying the Civil Rights movement was correct despite its unpopularity; and of course, Republicans who use emotion are diabolical, but Democrats are the white knights using emotion to spread truth. Westen also uses polls throughout the book, but at one point explicitly says that polls can basically say anything you want them to--

each poll can be used for either side.

Despite the author's initial plea to people on both sides of the aisle, his bias is deliberate and obvious and it's another major drawback to the book--Nixon wasn't the President who got us out of Viet Nam, he was the President who dismantled the War on Poverty. Johnson wasn't the President who presided over the largest troop deployment in US history (to Viet Nam) he was a champion of civil rights. Clinton wasn't lucky to get elected (minority votes) and lucky to preside over a boom--he was an emotional and economic genius. Well, I hate to break it to you Drew, you aren't the objective voter who shares the views of every American, you are a snide, biased, commentator.

Die hard Democrats will love this book, but people with an honestly open mind will struggle to get past the first few pages--unfortunately, there's little new in this book--it just perpetuates the us-against-them mentality that makes politics today so unbearable. For a better book about politics, try *Justice and Equality: A Dialogue on the Philosophies of Conservatism and Liberalism* and for a better book about psychology, try *Stumbling on Happiness*.

Austin Kleon says

Very good. My map:

Steven Peterson says

The dust jacket has one line that is at the center of this book: "The idea of the mind as a cool calculator that makes decisions by weighing the evidence bears no relation to how the brain actually works." Drew Westen uses this thought as a takeoff point in his book, "The Political Brain." He asserts that (page xv) "The political brain is an emotional brain."

One point that he hammers throughout the book is that Republicans do a better job of connecting with voters at an emotional, gut level than do Democrats. Ds tend to make rational points; Rs wed their points to emotional appeals, ending up doing much better. He provides examples from the Gore-Bush and Bush-Kerry campaigns. One interesting feature of the book is the author's development of how Gore and Kerry could have crafted statements to wed emotion to policy talking points in a way to, in Westen's view, would trump the Republican efforts. As an example of where Democrats have succeeded, he notes Bill Clinton's wedding of talking points to emotional appeals.

The discussion of neurosciences and how they tie into the argument is a bit underdeveloped. Westen does discuss some studies and notes some of his own research. Nonetheless, he could have elaborated more completely and made a more compelling case. He also addresses the evolution of what he terms "the passionate brain," in which (page 51) ". . . Feeling and thinking evolved together, and nature `designed' them to work together."

He discusses specific policy arenas and how Democrats have ceded the potent ground wedding emotion and thinking, from abortion to gun control to race to taxes. He takes Democratic consultants and campaign

advisors to task. There is a bit of "conflict of interest," in some senses, since he also consults for Democrats. He is most explicit about one goal of this volume during his policy arena by policy arena analysis on page 380: "The central point of this chapter is that Democrats need to talk about values, morality, and faith again, but not by talking like Republicans. They need to offer a counternarrative that has as its core beneficence, tolerance, and humility, not hate, contempt, and dogma." That quotation surely provides a taste of Westen's passion and his political perspective.

One real annoyance with the book that I purchased. Each chapter is studded with numbered footnotes--but nowhere in the volume are the corresponding citations. One must go to a web site to get them. This keeps the volume shorter, but it makes it more difficult to check out citations. One might not necessarily be near the Internet while reading the book and wanting to check something out.

His call to realize that there is a passionate component to politics and political discourse, his linkage of evolution and brain structure and function to political thinking and behavior is well taken. There are some less than optimal elements to the book, as noted, but, overall, this is a provocative volume that will get readers to thinking.

Charlene says

This book could have been titled, "How Liberals Can Be More Effective When They Stop Relying on Facts and Begin to Understand Emotions of the Masses and What Drives Decision Making."

I am a diehard liberal and really needed to read this book. Throughout his entire argument, Drew Westen drove home one point: If any candidate or voter is going to be effective in swaying anyone, at all, to vote for a particular candidate, they will not successfully do that by providing potential voters with only facts. Instead, most people vote with their guts. This seems to be particularly true for conservatives. However, even well educated liberals often form an emotional attachment to particular ideals. If the candidate can speak passionately to the emotions about that particular idea, then they can capture your vote. Why? Because it triggers the right hormones in the right part of your brain.

How can a candidate go about eliciting the right brain responses from potential voters? Westen has many answers. It's important to note that right off the bat, most of what Westen puts forth is gleaned through the eyes of a Monday morning quarterback, who is only able to see what the best play is by reviewing the tape in slow motion many hours after the game has already finished. Despite this severe limitation, that necessarily finds its way into every chapter of the book, Westen has exceptional observations and what seems to be solid advice. Anyone watching Hillary's speeches could tell there was something off about her sections that talked about "Being good." They just didn't ring true. Even though she won the popular vote, imo, she needed better advisors. After reading this book, I had wished Westen had advised her in every debate prep. He had pointers on exactly how to speak to the emotions in the undecided voter. Each candidate has their hard core voters. It would have taken a miracle for me, a liberal, to vote for a racist, sexist, science-denier like Trump. So Hillary had a lot of leeway with someone like me. It was the undecided voter she needed to capture in order to not just win by a little, but win the vast majority of swing states. Westen has **exact** advice on how she or any candidate can do this. The worst part was that republicans are **really** good at this already and Westen describes exactly how they got that way and what liberals can do to be almost as good. It's hard to beat the republicans at this game because it takes a certain amount of denial of fact, playing to the fears of your citizens, and other manipulative factors that liberals often don't engage in to the extent conservatives do. That

doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

The best quote in the book was: "Contemporary liberals believe that the way to voter's hearts is through their brains. But, they are appealing to the wrong part of the brain." Westen makes a clear distinction between the emotional parts of the brain and the logical parts of the brain. He suggests that if a democratic candidate doesn't know how to trigger activation in the emotional parts, while offering some sort of narrative to logical parts, they are going to be hard-pressed to win the votes of undecided voters. It is a much smaller subset of people than one might suspect who make decisions, for political candidates or otherwise, using mostly their logical brain regions. (For anyone who loves Josh Greene's work on the emotional and logical brain regions, this was similar research and just as fascinating). For the vast majority of voters, if you can get them to feel it, true or not, you have their vote. If you can stimulate the emotions and also give them a good argument to boot, all the better.

One of the most eye-opening aspects of this book was all of the information Westen provided about guns and gun laws. This book was written in 2007. Obviously we still haven't put his very good advice into practice. Despite studying gun control in grad school, reading about it post school, and being someone who is always on the lookout for a good gun control argument (one that is practical, appeals to the majority of citizens, and is *effective*), I had not heard any arguments I felt were that great. Westen's argument for the way liberals should approach gun control completely reshaped the way I see the issue.

This book was filled with various parts of speeches given by presidential candidates over the many past decades. It was far more exciting and rewarding to read than any summary I could write would give it credit for. Westen's critique of various speeches, and how it helped or destroyed each candidate, was the best part of this book. Westen showed how time and again, conservatives were able to construct a powerful narrative that democrats, for various reasons, simply could not. It's easier to define yourself when you are set free from ambiguity. If you choose to ignore facts, you don't get wrapped up in the uncertainty that new evidence always brings. It's hard to fight against that, but until liberals at least try to define the actual problem, they will have an even more difficult time winning those swing states.

One aspect of this book that bothered me, other than the obvious pitfalls of Monday morning quarterbacking, was that for a book that focused very heavily on emotional intelligence (signal that you understand them, signal that you are one of them), Westen could himself not help fall into that trap so many authors do in that he bragged far too often about his child. Why do any author's do that? Westen should have known better. The number one reason people get dropped from Facebook is too much bragging. It's not that hard for a scientist who studies emotions to know this. Even with this serious faux pas, it's still at least a 5 star book.

Note to the consumer who chooses to listen to this in audio version (free oh hoopla, btw): The narrator does not know how to say "amygdala" and makes that brain region sound like Queen Amidala resides in our brains. I found this incredibly distracting. However, I listened to this book with my 17 year old, and eventually, we were just able to simply laugh at it toward the end.

Gary says

The book lays out the universal way we see and develop our beliefs concerning the world in the realm of politics. The first third of the book was masterful when the author stuck to the science (mostly neurosciences) that sway us in the realm of politics. He makes his points and does a good job at bringing home the importance of neurosciences in the realm of marketing and politics. We often are not aware of the

networks that are activated or are unaware of our emotional states that we use unconsciously in our decision making processes. The author frames his story ('framing' is a concept he relies on in his story telling) around Darwin, Skinner and Freud. We are born as humans in a certain way (Darwin), our environment shapes our behavior (Skinner), and there is an unconscious component to being human (Freud). Feelings are how we process most of our information (unfortunately for me, I am a mathematician and I process most of my world differently).

The author should have stopped the book after the first third. He would have had a brilliant book. He teaches the reader of the value of narratives and of the networks (or using William Van Orman Quine's word 'web' when he's identifying one of his 'values' of science) we use in understanding what we believe is reality.

I have the advantage of hindsight. He's writing around 2007 and a lot of things have happened that really color my attitude against the author's approach. For example, his compromised approach on Gay Marriage being re-branded as 'civil unions' is not what happened (thankfully). That would have been the wrong approach. As Hegel said regarding philosophy, "any shoe clerk thinks he understands philosophy", and just as readily I can say 'everybody thinks they are an expert at politics'.

The election of a president who makes absurd statements such as "Climate change is a Chinese Hoax", or "we should not only kill the terrorist but the terrorist's family", or "waterboarding is not torture and we should do even more" shows that even someone who makes psychotic sounding statements (each one of those three statements strike me as coming from a psychotic with either no empathy or a pathological understanding of reality) can sway Americans who want to be swayed.

It sucks being a Democrat and I'm holding out for Elizabeth Warren or Sherrod Brown in 2020 who don't need to read a book like this one because they already know how to speak from the heart and should be able to beat a person who speaks like a psychotic.

Bruce says

I echo Robert Kuttner's and Bill Clinton's comments : This is the most illuminating book about American politics I've ever read. The author is a clinical and theoretical psychologist who also has an incredible intuitive understanding of politics and the political mind. He argues that Democratic political strategists, like most economists, political scientists, and others, have been captive to a view of the mind that drastically underestimates the role of emotion, as opposed to rational calculation, in making decisions. He offers striking experimental evidence but also detailed, penetrating, and savvy analysis of speeches and statements from recent campaigns to make an extremely persuasive case. Also humorous and marvelously well written. Seems like Obama got the point in the last election.

Ericka says

I'm still in the middle of this, and though I like it, I'm a bit concerned about some of the language of the book. However, these issues aside (and lets see if they are answered by the end of the book), I would recommend this to everyone running a democratic campaign, as I think there are some excellent lessons to learn from this book.

Current questions:

1. what's with the uber masculinist language? is this the brain scientist speaking or the southern man?
 2. has he just taken thagard without any critique?
 3. although he cites damasio, he seems to know nothing about spinoza (obviously not a big problem, but an issue for me, and something Id like to talk to him about)
 4. psychological quasi-evolutionary theories pop up at crucial points in the argument without evidence or compelling argument.
 5. Academic readers (and all others who wish to keep writers honest) will no doubt have the general dissatisfaction of having to go to the internet to chase down references and footnotes.
 6. general worry about books like this, popular science and science for politics.
 7. this seems so freaking commonsensical its almost amazing that one needs to say it.
 8. it strikes me that there are some serious problems in the democratic party that go beyond campaigning, and have *everything* to do with whether the party moves to the right or to the left. that is the core of the lack of identity problem.
-

Daniel Clausen says

I read parts of this book as part of a discussion group. The discussion group presented parts of the book as mini-posts. I didn't get to finish the book, but I loved the main point--that politicians should fashion stories that draw on primevil needs and emotions.

Paul Jellinek says

Drew Westen, an Emory University pshycologists, uses brain mapping and other neurological measures to demonstrate conclusively that politics is all about emotion. He then shows just as conclusively how Democratic candidates and strategists have missed this point for decades--at great cost to their own fortunes and the nation's. Eminently readable, this book was required reading among Democratic candidates and strategists in 2008. The result speaks for itself.

Chris says

Written by an Emory psychologist who does consulting work for the Democratic Party. The central premise is that to run a good campaign, you need to understand that voting decisions are made based on emotions, not (only) facts. Politicians that understand how to activate emotions win elections. This doesn't have to be unethical (in fact, he makes an argument that to ignore emotion is to be pretty unethical).

One of the best books about politics I've ever read. Reminded me that (1) psychologists are smart and know stuff, (2) the Democratic party runs crappy campaigns, (3) the Democratic party doesn't have to run crappy campaigns.

Justin says

Although the author is long-winded and less clever than he thinks he is, he advances a timely and compelling argument that intelligent politicians, and democrats in particular, need to change up their political game. In short, they need to avoid coming across in interviews and debates as a cerebral policy wonk (Dukakis, Gore, and Kerry) and emotionally connect with the average American (Reagan, W. Bush, and hopefully Obama). This isn't an earth-shattering revelation, but the author takes the apparently unique approach of applying evolution and psychology principles to communication styles and public response.

Like many books I pick up, I only read enough to understand the overall thesis. Reading the rest is only necessary you need convincing or found the structure and style engaging -- neither were true for me.
