

Emotion, Group Psychology and Inflammatory Political Rhetoric: The Erosion of Civility in the Digital Age

It is the position of The American Psychoanalytic Association that

Whereas:

- Emotion plays a significant role in the public decision-making process,
- Unconscious mental processes are key to the automatic decisions people make,
- In political groups, as in all groups, there is an ever-changing, unconscious communication among group members and with the leader,
- When leaders recruit group members' loyalties, powerful group feelings—including altruism as well as self-righteous opposition—toward out groups can be mobilized,
- Group members' moods have a profound effect on how they respond to leaders and how the leader functions,
- Group contagion as a result of anxiety can lead to destructive processes,
- Present-day "24/7" instantaneous media culture intensifies negative, polarizing political battles,

Therefore:

- It is incumbent upon Political Candidates to recognize that certain various baseline emotions—conscious and unconscious—exist in the electorate, and that in the context of a radically-changed media culture, great care should be taken to interact with the electorate responsibly.
- The Media must act responsibly in reporting news to the electorate given the spontaneous, automatic nature of human cognition and emotional systems.
- Voters should be mindful of partisan attempts of political candidates and the media to fuel their emotions and degrade reason.

Background

In a democracy such as in the United States there is often tumult as multiple political ideas and leaders compete with one another. Electoral and legislative battles can be bruising. In fact, extremely contentious presidential election battles were present from the beginning of the Republic. For example, in 1800 "Federalists claimed Republican candidate Thomas Jefferson was dead." In the 1828 presidential race, "John Quincy Adams supporters called Andrew Jackson a slave-trading, gambling, brawling murderer." In response, "Jackson supporters accused Adams of having premarital sex with his wife and being a pimp, claiming he arranged

an American hooker for Czar Alexander I.” In a later race, “Whigs ‘proved’ that James K. Polk was a slave trader in 1844 – by quoting extensively a completely fake excerpt from a book.”¹

On the other hand, a traditional courtesy has allowed the government to function. In the United States Congress there is a longstanding tradition on the Floor of the House or Senate chamber to refer to one’s colleague as “The Honorable Senator/Congressman or -woman from...” This formality of deferring to one’s colleagues, whether there is agreement or intense disagreement, modulates the intense emotions that are often at play. The curbing of these passions are necessary for a functional process to take place. Decisions can then be achieved that will be accepted by the community at-large, whether or not any group of individuals agrees or disagrees with the outcome. If emotions are not sufficiently controlled, inaction can occur.

Although political language has always been insistent, intentionally persuasive, and with the aim to tarnish one’s opponent, in the 21st century, the omnipresence of instantaneous access to social media has magnified political language to further degrade discourse. Postures and positions become rigid, polarized, and unyielding, especially as large segments of the body politic communicate in rapid, digital formats that interact in “real time” with others who hold similar opinions.²

Public figures now have instantaneous impact on not just those physically present, but in large-platform media and “virtual” groups. As a result, the responsibility borne by our public figures, and those entrusted with our many media platforms is great. The “crowd” – a physical congregation of masses of people – was the outgrowth of the development of the city. Many fears and anxieties were attached to it, both realistic and not. The virtual group is both a 21st century phenomenon, and a manifestation of the digital revolution which is still evolving, and fluid. Yet, like the crowd of past centuries, there are associated dangers, and those who rely on digital media are challenged to be thoughtful, even wary. While we must be alert to what is new and different, much that we know about group psychology helps us understand contemporary political group phenomena.

Psychoanalytic Understanding of Group Psychology and Inflammatory Rhetoric

Similar to political group phenomena, the psychoanalytic consulting room is also a place of intense, yet nuanced, emotion. Unconscious mental processes come to the fore which are often unexpected, uncomfortable, and can be experienced as threatening to the patient’s, or analyst’s conscious desires and wellbeing. Within the analytic situation, a formal framework allows for both the expression of intense emotions, as well as their containment; behavior is curbed in favor of reflection and articulation, and the patient can achieve a new psychological reality and a new way of being.

Groups—its members and its leaders—have ways of managing intense emotions. And, like the legislative chambers of Congress or the psychoanalytic consulting room, have a

framework and process, whether explicitly stated or implicitly understood rules, to manage strong and conflicting feelings. Over time groups can demonstrate great fluidity. They create and are the creation of leaders. They can be affirming, consolidating and creative; they can be regressive, conflict-ridden and destructive. Individual group members can become part of a productive group process larger than themselves, identifying with their peers or with their leader. Or they can feel disenfranchised, with poorly defined membership boundaries—individually and in their groups and subgroups—at times leading to turbulence, confusion, chaos, even violence. The language and rules used by a group, its members, and its leaders, has a profound impact on the outcome of a group discourse and process. This is true whether the group is a legislative body, a therapeutic assemblage, or a group created in an electoral contest.

During political campaigns competitors aim to rally groups of citizens to side with them in upcoming elections. On the surface, it seems that logical arguments are the key methods of communication by political leaders, and that citizens make decisions as a result of logical deliberations. However, “three decades of research in the cognitive and neurosciences challenge this conventional view by developing and testing *affect-driven, dual-process models* of thinking and reasoning, in which unconscious and uncontrolled affective processes drive behavior, either directly or indirectly through the generation of conscious considerations. Unconscious (implicit) processes operate outside of awareness, are spontaneous, fast, unreflective, and relatively effortless, whereas conscious (explicit) processes are intentional, slow, deliberative, and effortful. Moreover, conscious thinking always follows earlier unconscious processing.”³ In addition, it has been demonstrated that one cannot simply consider the role of a charismatic leader from a static perspective; that is, that he or she influences the actions of a group from “top-down.” Rather, it seems that the group perceptions of the leader’s charisma influences, and is influenced by, the group mood.⁴

Psychoanalysis is a profession dedicated to understanding emotions, language, and relationships; particularly, unconscious communications among people. Its knowledge of complex intrapsychic processes of individuals can contribute to its depth understanding of large group processes by understanding the conscious and unconscious interactions among group members and between group members and the leader. Psychoanalysts understand that emotions in groups can be inflamed as a result of people’s fears and anxieties which can lead to potentially destructive actions.⁵ Those fears and anxieties must be understood and managed. Effective groups, though often borne out of passion, evolve when their structure includes an intentional language of reason, adherence to basic rules of conduct, and cooperative relationships within and between groups.

Political language has always had a component which is emotionally intense, challenging, and which reorganizes our perceptions of the social world. In the political arena, “gladiators” compete, facts are disputed, motivations assumed and alleged, outcomes predicted, and a variety of judgments of value and truth made. Democracy is a robust market place where competing forces argue their point of view.

Paradoxically, although democracy has great tensile strength, it is fragile; dependent on the good will of its group members toward each other, as well as toward others who occupy an opposing group. Society functions on fundamental rules of personal conduct. Indeed, democracy allows freedom, and with that freedom goes great responsibility.

References

¹ Ungar, R. (2012). The dirtiest presidential campaign ever? Not even close! Forbes.com Online Magazine, August 20, 2012.

²Carr, N. (2015). How social media is ruining politics: It is turning out to be more encompassing and controlling, more totalizing, than earlier media ever was. Politico.com Online Magazine, September 2, 2015.

³Erisen, C., Lodge, M., Taber, C. (2014). Affective contagion in effortful political thinking. Political Psychology 35 (2): 187-206. 20 p. DOI: 10:1111;j. 1467-9221.2012.00937.x

⁴Tee, E, Ashkanasy, N., Paulsen, N. (2013). The influence of follower mood on leader mood and task performance: An affective, follower-centric perspective of leadership. The Leadership Quarterly. 24(4): 496-515.

⁵Bion, W.R. (1961). Experiences in Groups and Other Papers. , 1-191. London: Tavistock.