

Reminders of Death Can Sway Political Attitudes

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From one day to the next, approval ratings of political figures can plummet or soar. Psychological scientists have long been trying to identify the cognitive factors that might account for the vagaries of public opinion.

Why, for example, did the approval ratings of President George W. Bush— who was perceived as indecisive before September 11, 2001—soar over 90 percent after the terrorist attacks? Research suggests that it was because Americans were acutely aware of their own deaths.

The fear people felt after 9/11 was real, but it also made them ripe for psychological manipulation, experts say. “We all know that fear tactics have been used by politicians for years to sway votes,” says psychological scientist Florette Cohen of the City University of New York’s College of Staten Island. Now psychological research offers insight into the chillingly named ‘terror management.’

In an article published in the October 2011 issue of [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), Cohen and Sheldon Solomon of Skidmore College review many studies from psychological science that examine the ways in which reminders of death can affect our political attitudes and behavior.

The researchers cite studies showing that awareness of mortality tends to make people feel more positive toward heroic, charismatic figures and more punitive toward wrongdoers. And even subliminal suggestions of mortality can have similar effects. Participants who saw the numbers 911 or the letters WTC had higher opinions of a Bush statement about the necessity of invading Iraq, regardless of whether they identified as politically liberal or conservative.

As time goes by and the memory of danger and death grows fainter, however, reminders of death tend to polarize people politically, leading them to cling to their own beliefs and demonize others who hold opposing beliefs—seeing in them the cause of their own endangerment.

This wealth of research should make voters wary of emotional political appeals and even of their own emotions in response, Cohen says. “We encourage all citizens to vote with their heads rather than their hearts. Become an educated voter. Look at the candidate’s positions and platforms. Look at who you are voting for and what they stand for.”