

An angry voter is an ignorant voter

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Imagine this scenario: You lost your job at the lumber yard early in 2009. Nobody is building new homes these days, and this slowdown has trickled down to suppliers all over the country. What's worse, you're dipping into savings just to make your own mortgage payments—on a house that has lost a big chunk of its value. In short, your American dream is in shambles.

It's a dreary but all too familiar scenario. Now imagine further how you feel about this. Is worry your primary emotion? Are you anxious about your wife's health, and the possibility of an expensive hospitalization? Are you fearful about depleting your kids' college funds? Where will you all live if you lose the house?

Or are you mostly angry? After all, this situation is totally unfair, given how hard you have worked all these years. Who's to blame? Those fat cat bankers are still drawing their obscene bonuses, while working guys like you are barely eking out a living. Someone's got to pay for this mess.

Both fear and anger are understandable under these dire circumstances. But what are you going to do? Well, there's an election coming up later this year. Here's your chance to at least take some action, to raise your citizen's voice and be heard. How will you exercise this civic responsibility when you go to the polls in November?

We like to think that our democracy is rational, that as voters we educate ourselves on the issues and choose the candidate who best represents our views. Emotions, while natural, would seem to undermine this civic ideal, leading to cynicism and confused thinking and wrongheaded choices. But is it so simple? New research suggests that emotions can indeed skew voting behavior—but in surprising and nuanced ways.

University of Massachusetts scientists Michael Parker and Linda Isbell rigged an election to explore the interplay of specific emotions and voting. Not a real election, of course, but a hypothetical Democratic primary election for the Massachusetts state senate. They created two candidates, John Clarkson and Tom Richards, each with detailed positions on a dozen important public issues. The candidates' positions are spelled out on the candidates' Web sites, along with general information on each aspiring senator.

The researchers recruited a large number of volunteers, all Massachusetts residents, to act as voters in this election. They were directed to the Web sites, and told to peruse as much information as they liked, in any manner they wanted—and to consider whatever they needed to make an informed voting decision. Clarkson and Richards actually agreed on most of the issues, though they stated their views differently. The general information was vague, but made clear that each candidate was well qualified.

But here's the rub: Before the voters started researching the issues and candidates, some were primed

for fear and others for anger—much like the scenarios above. The idea was to see if these two basic human emotions shaped civic behavior in different ways. That is, did angry citizens size up candidates one way, and anxious voters a different way? And did these thinking styles translate into different behavior at the polls?

The answer is a resounding yea. As reported on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*, the worried voters were much more deliberate and organized in their thinking than were the angry voters, spending significantly more time exploring the candidates' Web sites. What's more, the anxious citizens actually voted for the candidates whose positions they agreed with; in other words, democracy worked the way it's supposed to work. This may seem obvious, but it wasn't to the angry citizens, for whom there was no apparent connection among issues and positions and ballot-box choices.

So what was influencing the angry voters, if not the issues of the day and the candidates promises? Apparently it was the vague general information that guided their choices. In the real world, that means things like basic name recognition, party loyalty, and simplistic political labels. The angry voters didn't take the time to really concentrate on the issues and positions, and instead let these skimpy generalities guide them. It appears their anger was switching their brain from deliberate mode to automatic mode—to gut feelings more than rational analysis. The worried citizens had too much at stake to trust their gut.

For more insights into the quirks of human nature, visit the [“Full Frontal Psychology”](#) blog at True/Slant. Excerpts from “We're Only Human” appear regularly in the magazine *Scientific American Mind*. Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*, will be published by Crown in September.