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Counseling Democrats to Go for the Gut

By PATRICIA COHEN



Nearly every campaign season there is someone with “the big idea” -- the brilliant brainstorm that everyone seems to believe will get some lucky candidate elected president. And nearly every campaign season there is a long line of consultants, party leaders and scholars, each of whom is convinced that he’s the one.

This year, among Democrats, one such contender is Drew Westen, a professor of psychology at [Emory University](#) in Atlanta and the author of a new book called “The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation” (Public Affairs). Dr. Westen takes the unlikely position that the Democratic Party should, for the most part, forget about issues, policies, even facts, and instead focus on feelings.

What he calls “the dispassionate view of the mind which has guided Democratic thinking for 40 years” is deeply flawed, Dr. Westen argues. What decides elections, he maintains, are people’s emotional reactions, even if they don’t know it.

By now Dr. Westen has met with just about every major Democratic group, big donor and activist, not to mention several presidential candidates over the last several months.

Former President [Bill Clinton](#), who was reading the book over the weekend, called Dr. Westen from Colorado to tell him how much he liked it. (Mr. Clinton comes off very well in its pages.)

“To say I think it’s a very important book is an understatement,” Mr. Clinton said in a telephone interview yesterday, adding that he particularly liked the discussion of how one could “evoke emotion without being intellectually dishonest.”

“One of the things I do for Hillary is research,” he said, referring to his wife’s presidential campaign. “I read things and underline them. I want her to look at it; I think she’ll largely agree with its findings.”

Erica Payne, a political strategist, said of Dr. Westen, “This is the ‘it’ guy for the season.” She met Dr. Westen while she was working with Maureen White, a former finance chairwoman of the [Democratic National Committee](#), and Gail Furman, a longtime Democratic fund-raiser, to organize a series of monthly breakfasts for party leaders and contributors. Dr. Westen appeared at one at the Regency Hotel in New York in February. Fearing that, like some academics, he might ramble on too long, Ms. Payne worked out a signal -- a pull on her ear -- to tell Dr. Westen to wrap up quickly. So Ms. Payne pulled, and Dr. Westen announced that he would skip ahead because he was running out of time.

“The whole audience said, ‘NO-O-O-O,’ “ Ms. Payne recalled. The crowd was enthralled: there was, she said, “this ‘a-ha’ moment.”

Dr. Westen is short and stocky with small rimless glasses and a boyishness that makes him look much younger than his 48 years. He was sitting at the Fifth Avenue apartment of the billionaire philanthropist [George Soros](#), who had offered to give a party for the book last week after hearing him speak. If he seems a bit surprised by all the attention, it hasn’t stopped him from taking advantage of it. He created a consulting firm a couple of months ago, after campaigns started asking for advice. “You never know when you’re a fad,” he said, until “people stop calling.”

“The Political Brain” takes a different tack than, say, “What’s the Matter With Kansas?” by Thomas Frank or [Al Gore](#)’s “Assault on Reason,” which try to explain voter behavior in terms of self-interest and factual analysis.

“My message is the exact opposite,” Dr. Westen said. They’re explaining “why we should be more rational” instead of “why we should bring more passion into politics.”

In recent years, studying the psychological roots of political affiliation has become something of a growth industry among academics, particularly since brain imaging became widely available.

In his book, Dr. Westen describes an experiment he conducted in the fall of 2004 on committed Democrats and [Republicans](#). Subjects had their brains scanned while they viewed slides containing pairs of contradictory statements from their favored candidate ([George W. Bush](#) or [John Kerry](#)). Confronted with the unwelcome contradictions, each subject’s network of neurons associated with distress and regulating emotions (the right frontal lobe, the insula and amygdala) lit up. But soon the subjects found ways to deny that there was any significant contradiction, and calm returned.

“The neural circuits charged with regulation of emotional states seemed to recruit beliefs” -- even false ones -- that would eliminate the distress each subject was experiencing, he writes. Meanwhile, the reasoning centers of the brain -- the part to which writers like Mr. Gore appeal -- were quiet.

What’s more, the neural circuits responsible for positive emotions turned on as soon as the subject found a way to resolve the contradictions -- reinforcing the faulty reasoning. Dr. Westen summed it up: people think with the gut.

This is not to say that political choices are completely irrational. As the renowned neurologist Antonio Damasio has shown, the brain’s emotional systems are an essential part of logical thinking.

But when it comes to swaying voters, Dr. Westen insists that triggering the right emotional network -- that unconscious bundle of ideas, images, words, memories, feelings -- is much more important and effective than appealing to reason.

Consider the associations that are likely to appear when a city dweller hears the word “gun”: handguns, murder, mugging, robbery, killing and crime. But for rural residents, Dr. Westen says, “gun” is likely to activate an entirely different network that includes: my daddy, my son, gun collection, rifle, deer, buddies, protecting my family, my rights.

So stop talking about “gun control,” Dr. Westen advises, since the word “control” suggests curtailing freedom, and instead look for ways to tap into a network that helps your cause. Democrats, he says, should link to the network of fear that guns in the hands of terrorists and criminals trigger.

As Dr. Westen sees it, the decision to keep quiet when confronted with negative attacks or difficult and controversial subjects like race, [abortion](#) and gay rights is always a mistake. “Democrats run from every issue where there’s passion involved,” he complains. “If you don’t say anything, you are giving them” -- your opponents -- “the right to define the public’s feeling.”

Dr. Damasio, who quickly skimmed “The Political Mind,” said he couldn’t comment on the specific research, but he called the fundamental argument “very sound.”

“Knowing more about how you process emotions will become more and more important in governing society,” he added.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the [University of Virginia](#), said, “Reasoning, when we do it, is mostly to find justification for what we already believe.”

Many of Dr. Westen's indictments of previous Democratic advertisements, speeches and strategies -- from the failure to strike back to the mind-numbing lists of statistics to the lack of emotional power -- are not new. Yet even those who agree with his analysis may criticize Dr. Westen for using the same kind of manipulative techniques that he takes Republicans to task for. Although he called the 1988 ads with the furloughed murderer Willie Horton and a revolving door of black men in and out of prison subtly racist, he suggests the Democrats take a similar approach and use images of Middle Eastern men buying guns as a way of linking gun control to terrorism fears.

In an e-mail message, he wrote that if people saw such a message as racist, he would be against it: "Unethical appeals are a subversion of democracy" and should be avoided no matter how effective.

Yet there is a more fundamental question: Without relying on reasoned analysis, what is the basis of one party's claim to have a superior agenda to their opponents?

"I would pose the issue as one between two competing value systems, not between competing plans or policies," he said, and that is what does and should determine their choices.

Aside from the scientific patina, part of Dr. Westen's appeal to the party faithful, no doubt, is his smack-down comebacks that Democrats wish they had heard.

Writing of the 2000 presidential debate, Dr. Westen says that instead of saying he was "not going to respond in kind" to Mr. Bush's attacks on his credibility and character, Vice President Gore should have said that he was going to teach his opponent "a few old-fashioned lessons about character," mentioning Mr. Bush's drunk-driving incidents, business practices and Vietnam-era Air National Guard service, using the words "coward," "drunk," "crooked" and "disgrace."

Writing that imaginary speech and others like it must have had Dr. Westen's amygdala flashing like a pinball jackpot. Ultimately what led Dr. Westen to write about others' political passion was his own. "I couldn't stand where the country was going," he said. "It's written from the passionate point of view of a father thinking about his kids."

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