

DISPATCH FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

## In Politics, Aim for the Heart, Not the Head

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In 1935, researchers from Columbia University fanned out around the city of Allentown, Pa., and handed out leaflets ahead of local and state elections. What residents did not know was that they were part of an experiment in political persuasion -- an experiment whose results came to mind last week as Adrian M. Fenty stormed to victory in the District's Democratic primary.

Researchers first divided Allentown into sections. Five thousand campaign leaflets in some wards asked residents to answer a series of questions about policy matters. For example, it asked them whether they thought all children should have access to higher education irrespective of income, whether banks should be run on a nonprofit basis like schools and whether workers ought to have more say in running their workplaces.

Another set of 5,000 campaign leaflets went to a different set of wards. These leaflets contained a heartfelt letter -- supposedly from the young people of Allentown -- which said that with "Dad working only part-time on little pay, and Mother trying to make last year's coat and dress look in season," the future for young people in the city looked bleak.

The researchers looked at how many voters in the two sections they could persuade to vote for the Socialist Party, rather than the Republicans or Democrats. (The Socialist Party was chosen because it had no chance of winning the elections.)

What the researchers wanted to study was the contrast between rational and emotional appeals in political persuasion. The questionnaire's appeal was rational. It asked people who wanted a more egalitarian society to vote their views on policy matters. The letter's appeal was emotional: "We beg you in the name of those early memories and spring-time hopes to support the Socialist ticket in the coming elections!" it said. When the election was over, the Socialist vote increased by 35 percent over the previous election in the sections of the city that received the rational appeal. In the sections that received the emotional appeal, the Socialist vote increased by 50 percent.

Given the enormous proliferation of policy questions today, surfing the emotional wave nowadays may be even more important than it was in 1935. George E. Marcus, president of the International Society of Political Psychology, said modern research confirms that unless political ads evoke emotional responses, they don't have much effect. Voters, he explained, need to be emotionally primed in some way before they will pay attention.

The research is of importance to politicians for obvious reasons -- and partly explains the enduring attraction of negative advertising -- but it is also important to voters, because it suggests that the reason candidates seem appealing often has little to do with their ideas. Political campaigns are won and lost at a more emotional and subtle level.

The District's Democratic mayoral primary, for instance, turned on which candidate seemed freshest and most energetic. By that measure, Fenty, 35, bested a field of same-old, same-old insiders, including his nearest rival, Linda W. Cropp, 58.



Adrian Fenty found an issue that resonated with voters' emotions, helping him win D.C.'s Democratic mayoral primary. (By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post)

But why should that issue have been the one that voters cared about? Why not maturity and experience, in which case Cropp may have looked like the natural winner?

The success of the Fenty campaign, several political psychologists said, was in making energy the central emotive issue in the campaign. Once it was the top item on the agenda, Fenty had to win. (Besides being amid a whirlwind of activity, the candidate made sure he said the words "energy" and "energized" every chance he got. Reporters followed Fenty's lead, attaching the adjective "energetic" to news reports about his campaign.)

The Fenty machine essentially took advantage of what the Allentown study found: It is comparatively difficult to persuade anyone to change their mind on an issue. What works much better, because it influences people at an emotional and subtle level, is to get people to focus on a different issue -- the one where the candidate is the strongest.

"The agenda-setting effect is what we are talking about," said Nicholas A. Valentino, a political psychologist at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "The ability of a candidate not to tell people how to feel about an issue, but which issue they should focus on -- that is the struggle of most modern campaign managers."

"Campaigns have been much more successful at shifting people's attentions to different issues rather than shifting people's positions," he added.

A political scientist who lives in the District, Lee Sigelman, pointed out that as Fenty put the question of energy at the top of the agenda, Cropp tried to strike back with ads painting Fenty as inexperienced.

But it was too late. As many politicians before her have realized, no one notices when the first nimble candidate changes the agenda. It's always the candidates who come late to the agenda wars who look like they are trying to manipulate voters.