POLITICAL ANIMALS: How Our Stone-Age Brain Gets in the Way of Smart Politics

Rick Shenkman

In this timely and readable book filled with lots of scientific data illustrated by real-life anecdotes and examples from news events we all remember, historian Rick Shenkman sets out to answer four questions:

1. Why do tens of millions of Americans fail to vote?
2. Why are we so bad at sizing up candidates?
3. Why do voters punish candidates who tell them hard truths?
4. What accounts for the lack of empathy in public policy debates?

Here's what he concluded:

1. Many people fail to vote because they don't feel like they need to. There's no penalty for not voting or for "voting badly" so why make the effort? Politics seems remote and irrelevant to their daily lives. And though information about candidates and issues is readily available (our Vote411 website was a source listed) it takes effort to obtain information and to evaluate the sources of information. Though much money has been spent to expand civics instruction in the public schools, this has had no effect on increasing voter turnout. Surprisingly, scientists working at Facebook discovered that when users posted an "I voted" sign on their page, three of their close friends followed suit and voted. So it appears that peer-group pressure works in close-knit networks.

2. We can find ourselves surprised and disappointed in candidates we have elected when they don't turn out like we expected because though we're rather good at sizing people up in face-to-face encounters, it's not so easy to do with politicians we only see at a distance or on TV or filtered through intermediaries. We think we can predict how politicians will act based on our perception of their personality, a notably poor predictor of behavior. And while believing they choose candidates based on some rational criteria such as their stand on particular issues, most voters' political decisions are made by using their often unreliable instincts.

3. Voters punish candidates who tell them hard truths because we don't want the truth. We want certainty, reassurance, feeling good about ourselves, making sense of things. Moreover, our cognitive biases can be a roadblock to accepting the truth or to what version of the truth we accept.

4. Public policy debates that focus on problems facing large numbers of people don't elicit wide-spread empathy, though individuals manifest it routinely toward those in need. When problems affect thousands, or even millions of individuals who are reduced to numbers, empathy is short-circuited.

But more interesting than the answers to these questions were the causes Shenkman uncovered and what we can do about them. Premodern humans were prewired with instincts that enhanced their survival in the world they inhabited then, a world of hunter-gatherers. Instinctive responses are automatic and protect us in certain circumstances, such as when a rock is falling toward our head. But most instincts are often not well suited to the political tasks we face in the modern world.

Premodern people lived in small groups that interacted with other small groups and evolution selected for people who could keep track of a social network of about 150. It was an evolutionary advantage to be able to draw conclusions about people in your group who you would rely on for survival, picking up cues from watching their faces and their behavior close up. In the modern world, our groups can contain millions of people, far too many individuals to "know."   Most of us see our political leaders only at a distance or electronically, where facial recognition cues are much harder to spot and their actions and words are so often scripted. It's no wonder we can't get a read on our politicians.

This also explains why while we often can feel empathy as individuals, when we identify with individuals in distress because we've gone through something similar; or because they are a member of our group; or when we are face-to-face with someone in pain or jeopardy; and why public policy solutions so often seem to lack this. With Premodern humans depending on their group for their very survival, an impulse of concern for the well-being of those in your group was an evolutionary advantage. Large groups of people in terrible circumstances don't elicit the same automatic impulse in many of us. Not only may we not identify with their circumstances, another problem is they exceed the 150 number our brains can keep track of.

In so much of the way we navigate our political world, we rely on our instincts—the same instincts that evolved from our Premodern past. Within these instincts are our biases. Biases are not character flaws. "Biases represent adaptive solutions to the decision-making problems of our evolutionary past," and they operate outside our conscious awareness. Some examples of biases useful in a time when life-and-death situations called for quick action: availability bias (the first answer we think of is correct); perseverance bias (inclination to stick with our opinions); confirmation/ disconfirmation bias (tendency to believe what confirms our opinions and discount what doesn't). This leads us to rush to judgment even when we don't need to as is usually the case when evaluating a politician.

Instincts and biases are evolved psychological mechanisms that were designed to solve problems we encountered in the world of 10,000 years ago.   They were not designed to solve the day-to-day problems of the modern world. So relying on them to make political decisions in our modern political environment can give us some really bad answers.

Fortunately, we are not slaves to our instincts. We can't change our instant reactions. But we can learn to notice them. And digest them differently as we learn to recognize biased thinking. This process actually changes our neural networks. Though there is scientific evidence that liberals and conservatives are genetically predisposed to be what they are, the most important thing we can do is to study ourselves, analyze our biases and ask ourselves if they make sense. We can watch for the red flags that signal we need to look more closely: instantaneous reactions, a tipoff that our emotions are at work, emotional reactions that can mislead us; anxiety, a key trigger for change, signaling a mismatch between our expectations and reality; politics that make us feel angry. Anger evolved as a short-time response to specific threats, not as the default reaction to ordinary day-to-day politics or for fund-raising or membership recruitment. Anger destroys our system because it destroys compromise and leads to gridlock.

Other things we can do: experience politics close up by meeting the candidates or attending candidate forums in person. Expand our social networks to spend time around people with a different point of view. Scrutinize the media, even sampling media with a different point of view.

Rick Shenkman closes his book with these hopeful words: "While we busy ourselves with projects to reform the system, we need to work at reforming ourselves, too. Science, fortunately, shows us we can."