

Political Animals

★ RICK SHENKMAN ★

*How Our STONE-AGE
BRAIN GETS in the WAY
of SMART POLITICS*



Your Voter Toolkit

"Politics. *n.* A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage." — Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*.

Worried that politicians are taking advantage of you? What follows below are ways to protect yourself — from both politicians and your own biases.

- How to Watch a TV Debate
- Why It's So Hard to Tell a Politician Is Lying
- Why Going with Your Gut Doesn't Work in Politics
- Why We Don't Second Guess Our Choices
- 8 Biases to Watch Out for (in yourself and others)
- How to Find Out Basic Facts About Politicians
- Where to Search for News

How to Watch a TV Debate

The temptation to judge candidates at a TV debate the way we judge actors on a television soap opera is impossible to resist. But there is a way to move beyond the superficial aspects of a television debate. Surprisingly, it doesn't require that you become a political junkie.

While knowledge is obviously important – heading into a debate it helps to be aware of the key issues and the candidates' positions –

no amount of preparation is likely to help you sort out the conflicting claims the candidates make as the debate unfolds in real time. There are simply too many arcane subjects to master to be able to know with confidence whose version of the truth actually is the truth. This invariably leads most of us to throw up our hands in frustration and do the only thing that seems reasonable under the circumstances and that is to watch the debate as if we're theater critics, casting praise on the candidates who manage to deliver pithy sound bites while scornfully dismissing those who fumble.

But there is a way out of this trap. It's a sure-fire method to finding substance even in the midst of the glitz that envelops and subsumes candidate debates in the modern age. Here's how it works. Say you are about to watch a presidential candidates' debate. After preparing as best as you can by reading as much as you can from as diverse an assortment of media sources as possible, sit down and watch the debate with a pad and pencil at the ready. As the debate begins your job, contrary to everything you were probably told by your civics teacher, is not to take notes on what the candidates say but on what *you* feel as they are speaking. That's right. Don't worry about the fine points of the argument, which there's no way to spot check in real time anyway, even with Google. Just focus on how you feel, noting what you experience when Candidate X says this and Candidate Y says that, whether the feeling is positive or negative. Feeling patriotic? Note who made you feel that way. Feeling fearful? Note that, too.

At the end of the debate review your notes. This is the magic moment. Those notes in which you recorded your emotions as you watched the debate amount to a roadmap to each candidate's strategy. How you felt as they barnstormed their way through the debate is a clue to how they are trying to manipulate you. The emotions we feel in the course of a debate as candidates make their pitches are the result of the calculated strategy of the candidates and their handlers. Your little list is your campaign cheat sheet. With it in hand you can tell how the candidates are trying to con you, whether by fear or patriotic blather or whatever.

The reason it's important to note your feelings on your note pad is to be able to distance yourself from them. While we are feeling what we're feeling as the debate unfolds it's too hard to be able to make a

proper assessment. Only in the calm afterwards can we do so, as social science research shows.

Why is this exercise important? Because it helps you answer one of the most important questions that you face as a voter: How the candidates are trying to manipulate you. Fortunately, it doesn't require knowing a lot about them. Rather, it requires knowing a lot about yourself and being honest with yourself. Like Dorothy we don't need a wizard to help us figure things out. All we need is to be able to pay close attention to our own feelings.

Politics in the end always comes down to feelings, whatever the civics teachers say. Understanding our own emotional responses is therefore critical. Once you know a politician is trying to reach you by appealing to your fears, say, it's a lot harder for him/her to do so. This leaves you free to make a more rational assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and your own real priorities.

Why It's So Hard to Tell a Politician Is Lying

Facts are important, but when most of us are trying to size up a politician what we do is rely on our gut. Social science studies show we make preliminary assessments in as little as 167 milliseconds. We do this whether we consciously want to or not. It's how our brain is engineered.

What makes us good at this is that we come equipped with cheater-detection software. It's part of every normal human being's operating system. Often it takes us just a glance to spot a robber on the street who has just robbed a jewelry store or a student in class who is reading the answers off a friend's quiz. Cheaters often give themselves away. They act funny or they twitch.

But one thing jams our radar, preventing us from reading people. And that's something politicians know how to do masterfully and that's to fake being sincere. When we read people what we are doing is figuring out if they are sincere. But with politicians (among other classes of people such as the legendary used car salesman) it's often impossible to know if they are.

Why is that? It's because often they actually believe what they're

selling. Most successful politicians don't believe they are lying to voters. They convince themselves they are telling the truth. This is dangerous because as long as they believe what they're saying our cheater detection software doesn't work. It can only ferret out a lie when the liar knows what he's saying is untrue.

Despite our belief in our mind reading abilities we can't protect ourselves against good liars who believe what they're saying. Since there's no way to protect ourselves from a politician's fake sincerity the only rational approach is to remain ever vigilant. This, unfortunately, goes against everything we feel in our bones. While by instinct we are suspicious of outsiders, we aren't suspicious of people who seem sincere. We aren't exactly sitting ducks for sincere liars. Over time a sincere liar's lies will usually trip them up. A person who lies a lot gets a reputation for lying. But in politics so much fairy dust is thrown around politicians that they can often escape unscathed. And thanks to cognitive dissonance once we commit ourselves to a politician for one reason or another we are loathe to abandon them. No one likes to admit they've been duped. Rather than admit it we insist on believing we weren't.

Why Going with Your Gut Doesn't Work in Politics

Going with our gut is what we all do in life. We are engineered to do this. It feels good when we do. But in politics it's dangerous. Social scientists say that we have two ways of making sense of the world. System 1 thinking is automatic and fast. You are using System 1 when you step back from the curb as a truck whizzes by. System 2 thinking is contemplative and involves higher order cognitive faculties. You are using System 2 when you work out a math problem.

In most of the challenges that face us in our day-to-day lives System 1 is immensely helpful. Relying on our instincts can be life saving. You wouldn't want to have to consciously think about the threat to your life that a truck flying down a road poses as you step into a crosswalk. In this kind of situation you want your brain to take over your response without taking the time to consciously sort out your choices. Speed is of the essence.

But in politics we rarely face decisions that need to be made in an

instant. This doesn't stop our brain, however, from making instantaneous decisions. In general our brain doesn't distinguish between political choices and other choices. It sizes up a politician you see on TV for the first time the same way it sizes up a stranger you pass on a sidewalk. Our conscious brain later makes adjustments in our assessments. But all too often we don't revisit our initial impressions even though those impressions are, by definition, superficial.

Why We Don't Second Guess Our Choices

Once we make a political choice we are unlikely to revisit our decision even when the facts change. This tendency reinforces the status quo, putting reformers at a disadvantage.

Why don't we like rethinking our choices? There are many reasons. First, as the psychologist Daniel Kahneman points out in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, our brain is lazy. Since our brain consumes 20 percent of the energy our body uses it is always looking for ways to take energy-conserving measures. One sure-fire method is not to relitigate issues it believes it's already decided. Second, once we make a decision, particularly decisions that involved high costs, we tend to stick by them to avoid the uncomfortable feeling that we might have made a bad choice. As the social scientists say, we humans don't like cognitive dissonance. We do everything in our power to avoid it. Third, our brain is partisan. Once we make up our mind we root for our team and boo the opposition. Campaigns are geared to motivate partisan voters by making blatantly biased appeals. To outsiders these appeals often seem brazen and crude. But to a partisan they're merely the truth. Seldom, sadly, do we want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We prefer instead the truth as our allies see it.

8 Biases to Watch Out for (in yourself and others)

Availability Bias This is the tendency to go with the first answer that pops into our head. What's wrong with that? It mistakes the ease of recall with accuracy. Just because an answer comes easily to mind doesn't mean it's the right answer. If someone asks you who your favorite president was and you answer Ronald Reagan, that's probably not because, upon reflection, you believe that Reagan was

the greatest president in our history, but because Reagan's name is a lot more familiar than others who probably should be remembered as the greatest (Washington? Lincoln?).

Perseverance Bias This refers to our inclination to stick with an opinion once we have enunciated it. Studies show that once we have formed an opinion we don't easily give it up—not even after contradictory evidence surfaces that un-demines our position.

Source Confusion After a short period of time we tend to treat information — of both the reliable and unreliable sort — similarly since we forget where we learned it. And if it comes to mind quickly (Availability Bias) we are apt to conclude it's reliable even though we picked it up from a tawdry grocery store tabloid.

Projection Bias This refers to the inclination to project your own values onto others, a bias that show up mostly in foreign policy debates. It was owing to this bias that Dick Cheney believed the Iraqi people would greet us with flowers after our invasion. He believed that Iraqis thought like Americans.

Self-Serving Bias This is the inclination to take the credit when something good happens and to shuck off the blame when something bad happens. It's summed up in the old farmer's cry that some people like to take credit for the rain but not for the drought.

Superiority Bias Think you're a better than average driver? It turns out most of us think we are above average drivers. Indeed, most of us think, even college professors, we are better than average in nearly everything we do. This, of course, is a mathematical impossibility. But the feeling gives us the confidence to believe that our political views are right and others are mistaken.

Planning Fallacy Anybody who's ever built a house or a website knows that projects rarely come in on time or within the budget. But when politicians announce plans for government programs or construction jobs they almost always make the mistake of believing their own timetables and spreadsheet projections.

Optimism Bias This bias afflicts more than 80 percent of the American people. It's one reason the Planning Fallacy is so

common. We walk around with rose-tinted glasses.

How to Find Out Basic Facts About Politicians

- Find out where your public officials stand on the issues by going to [Project Vote Smart](#). Go [here](#) to find out how interest groups rank your elected leaders.
- Track how your member of Congress voted by going to [Congress.org](#).
- Compare where you stand on an issue with your member of Congress or Senator by going to [Congressional Report Cards](#).
- Get an app that allows you to get the facts, contact your legislator, and influence Congress by visiting [BythePeople.us](#).
- Put the news into proper historical perspective by reading the non-partisan [History News Network](#). You can sign up for their [free newsletter here](#). (Disclosure: Rick Shenkman runs the website.)
- Find out where politicians get the money to run their campaigns and which interest groups dominate political races in your state by checking out [OpenSecrets.org](#).
- Find out how much your member of Congress is worth by going to [CQ Roll Call](#).
- Track bills in Congress by going to [GovTrack](#), though the site hasn't been updated since 2014.
- Find out how 31 key advocacy groups rate your member of Congress by consulting [The Hill's comprehensive list](#).
- Track the lies politicians are telling by consulting Congressional Quarterly's [PolitiFact](#), the Annenberg Public Policy Center's [FactCheck.org](#), the Washington Post's [Fact Checker](#), and the liberal [Media Matters](#).

Where to Search for News

- Read the news websites that the people who run this country read: [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), and [Washington Post](#).
- News magazines: [Newsweek](#), [Time](#).
- These websites provide a conservative take on the news: [Weekly Standard](#), [National Review Online](#), [Daily Caller](#), [Hot Air](#), [Drudge Report](#).
- These websites provide a liberal perspective: [The Nation](#), [Mother Jones](#), [Huffington Post](#), [New Republic](#), [Slate](#), [The Atlantic](#), [Salon](#), [Daily Kos](#), [AlterNet](#), [Counter-Punch](#), [TruthDig](#), [MoveOn.org](#), [Bill Moyers](#).
- Websites for political junkies: [Political Wire](#), [Real Clear Politics](#), Nate Silver's [FiveThirtyEight](#), [The Hill](#), [NPR](#), [DailyBeast](#), [Politico](#), [Mike Allen](#).
- Blogs
 - Liberal blogs: [TPM \(Talking Points Memo\)](#), [Conscience of a Liberal \(Paul Krugman\)](#), [Informed Comment \(Juan Cole\)](#), [Crooks and Liars](#).
 - Conservative blogs: [Instapundit](#), [PJ Media](#), [Volokh Conspiracy](#).
- Think Tanks
 - Liberal: [Center for American Progress](#), [ThinkProgress](#).
 - Conservative: [American Enterprise Institute](#), [Heritage Foundation](#).
 - Middle of the road: [PewResearchCenter](#), [Brookings Institution](#).
- Public opinion polls: [Rasmussen Reports](#), [Gallup](#), [Real Clear](#)

Politics, Public Policy Polling.