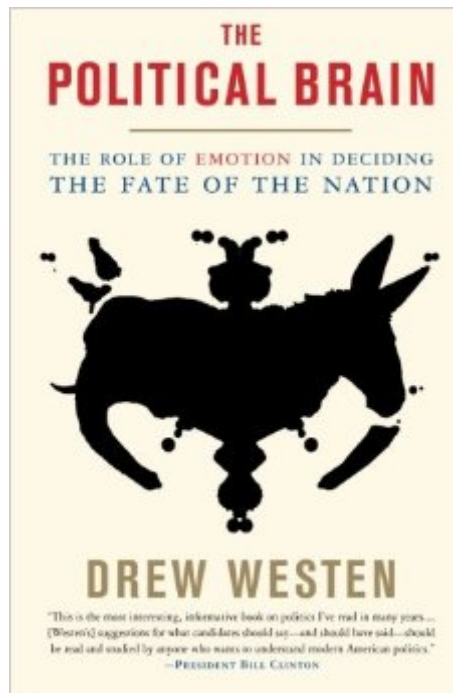


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The Political Brain: The Role Of Emotion In Deciding The Fate Of The Nation



Synopsis

The Political Brain is a groundbreaking investigation into the role of emotion in determining the political life of the nation. For two decades Drew Westen, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Emory University, has explored a theory of the mind that differs substantially from the more "dispassionate" notions held by most cognitive psychologists, political scientists, and economists—and Democratic campaign strategists. The idea of the mind as a cool calculator that makes decisions by weighing the evidence bears no relation to how the brain actually works. When political candidates assume voters dispassionately make decisions based on "the issues," they lose. That's why only one Democrat has been re-elected to the presidency since Franklin Roosevelt—and only one Republican has failed in that quest. In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins. Elections are decided in the marketplace of emotions, a marketplace filled with values, images, analogies, moral sentiments, and moving oratory, in which logic plays only a supporting role. Westen shows, through a whistle-stop journey through the evolution of the passionate brain and a bravura tour through fifty years of American presidential and national elections, why campaigns succeed and fail. The evidence is overwhelming that three things determine how people vote, in this order: their feelings toward the parties and their principles, their feelings toward the candidates, and, if they haven't decided by then, their feelings toward the candidates' policy positions. Westen turns conventional political analyses on their head, suggesting that the question for Democratic politics isn't so much about moving to the right or the left but about moving the electorate. He shows how it can be done through examples of what candidates have said—or could have said—in debates, speeches, and ads. Westen's discoveries could utterly transform electoral arithmetic, showing how a different view of the mind and brain leads to a different way of talking with voters about issues that have tied the tongues of Democrats for much of forty years—such as abortion, guns, taxes, and race. You can't change the structure of the brain. But you can change the way you appeal to it. And here's how—

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Customer Reviews

Though there is nothing entirely new here, in this large well researched book Westin manages to draw together several ideas that have been part of our intellectual discourse for some time in an engaging and informative way. Westin uses 4 themes throughout the book. First, he explains how our human brain evolved over millions of years to make decisions first with our emotions and only secondarily with our logical faculties. This is because we evolved out of other life forms that had a simpler brain structure. The first uses of the brain were for sensation and perception, uses that would tend to keep the primitive forms that were the first conscious creatures alive. Second, he uses this model of the brain to explain why emotional intelligence controls absolutely every decision that people make, and that this is no where more true than in electoral politics. The dominance of the emotional brain predates and supersedes the thin human veil of reason, and this has proved to be a successful adaptation over thousands of years. Third, he shows that with the exceptions of FDR and Bill Clinton the democrats have been consistently emotionally tone deaf in their national campaigns, and that they will not be able to win until this is addressed. Finally, he explores the importance of a consistent emotionally appealing story or narrative to present to the voting public about the values of the party and the candidate. Only after voters understand and resonate with these two things do they care about the issues. The right wing understood this when they supplanted the winning narrative of the new deal with their own narrative of small government and individual hard work.

The dust jacket has one line that is at the center of this book: "The idea of the mind as a cool calculator that makes decisions by weighing the evidence bears no relation to how the brain actually works." Drew Westen uses this thought as a takeoff point in his book, "The Political Brain." He asserts that (page xv) "The political brain is an emotional brain." One point that he hammers throughout the book is that Republicans do a better job of connecting with voters at an emotional, gut level than do Democrats. Ds tend to make rational points; Rs wed their points to emotional

appeals, ending up doing much better. He provides examples from the Gore-Bush and Bush-Kerry campaigns. One interesting feature of the book is the author's development of how Gore and Kerry could have crafted statements to wed emotion to policy talking points in a way to, in Westen's view, would trump the Republican efforts. As an example of where Democrats have succeeded, he notes Bill Clinton's wedding of talking points to emotional appeals. The discussion of neurosciences and how they tie into the argument is a bit underdeveloped. Westen does discuss some studies and notes some of his own research. Nonetheless, he could have elaborated more completely and made a more compelling case. He also addresses the evolution of what he terms "the passionate brain," in which (page 51) ". . . Feeling and thinking evolved together, and nature 'designed' them to work together." He discusses specific policy arenas and how Democrats have ceded the potent ground wedding emotion and thinking, from abortion to gun control to race to taxes. He takes Democratic consultants and campaign advisors to task. There is a bit of "conflict of interest," in some senses, since he also consults for Democrats.

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