

A LINE ON LIFE

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Why Vote? *

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Since we have a local election on December 5, it seems logical to discuss the voting process. Since we are citizens in a democracy, we can vote for those who compete for leadership positions in our cities, counties, states and the country as a whole. Many people have suffered, immigrated to other countries, and risked their lives to have the freedom to vote.

We assume that the elections are honest and the votes are counted accurately. Ideally, the voters are well informed and elect the most able candidates. Later, those who continue to be effective will be retained, and those who do not perform their office adequately will be voted out of office.

In contrast, a more cynical view of voting emphasizes ignorant and indifferent voters, who are manipulated by dishonest or inept politicians and their clever advisers. Getting elected seems to be based on deceiving the voters.

Regardless of what view you hold about the voting process, two factors seem to predominate among voters in choosing candidates. They vote for those who they **like best** and those who seem to be **good leaders**.

Candidates tend to be liked more, if they are more familiar. Mere **repeated exposure** to the candidates' names, faces or the candidates themselves makes them more familiar and likeable. As long as little is known about the candidates, more billboards, posters, handouts, buttons and media exposure make them more liked and more likely to receive votes. Since all of this costs money, winning candidates often provide *"the finest representation that money can buy."*

Arousing **positive feelings** in voters – patriotism, family values – is another tactic. As I was watching TV last night, I saw a presidential candidate combine both of these values in one particular statement – *"God bless America."* As obvious as this tactic seems, it still works. Also a candidate who reflects both **optimism** and **hope** is more likely to win than one who is pessimistic.

Even **attractiveness** pays off politically. Physically attractive candidates are three times more likely to win than unattractive candidates. **Height** is also an asset for men. The taller man is more likely to win.

Even **names** can affect the outcome. Some voters don't have much more information than the persons' names on the ballot. Socially desirable or common first names are more positive than uncommon names. If names indicate a specific ethnic identity – White Dove, Wong or Goldberg – they may get more votes from their ethnic groups but less from other groups.

In Illinois in 1988, a psychological experiment was carried out with two actual names from a primary election. Both were running for Lieutenant Governor. One had a smoother, *"soap opera"* name – Mark Fairchild – while the other had a less familiar ethnic name – George Sangmeister. Before the actual primary, voters were asked who they would pick. (The order of presentation of the names was varied systematically, so it would not influence the outcome.) With minimal information about the candidates, twice as many people picked Fairchild (47%) rather than Sangmeister (22.7%). However, 30.3% of the people did not make a choice. (This sounds logical, since no information was given about the candidates.)

When the candidates' platforms on such topics as drugs, AIDS screening and taxes were given, the name effect vanished. Fairchild received 43.9% of the votes and Sangmeister got 54.6%. This time, only 1.5% did not make a choice.

Besides being liked, candidates need to be perceived as **good leaders**. To be viewed as a good leader, candidates must appear to be **confident, achievement oriented** and **dominant**. Changing one's mind on issues – even though it may be warranted with new information available – may be perceived by voters as weak and "wishy-washy." Since most candidates try to project a "manly" self-image, this leads to a lot of "macho-mouth rhetoric." This would lead their candidates to stand their ground rather than "backing down" or compromising. (Does that seem familiar?)

However, some voters hold a pessimistic view of their voting power. After all each of us has only *one* vote. How can any of us change the outcome of an election? Beside, who has time to learn about the candidates and the issues? However, if you become familiar with them, you will be able to make a better decision. In addition, you will have information to influence those close to you to vote the same way.

If you want to gripe about poor performance in a political office, the most effective way to do it is through the ballot box. If you don't express yourself this way now, you won't get another chance for quite a while.

Failing to vote is like giving others more control over your life.

However, if you don't vote, you give others more control over your lives. People have struggled and died to have the right to vote – but if you don't want to vote – I'd like to encourage you in your decision. You see, the more people who fail to vote, the greater proportional weight my vote will carry. You will be giving me – and others who take the effort to vote – your power.

* Adapted from Robert Baron and Donn Byrne's *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction*, Allyn and Bacon, 1991, pages 596-605.