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 Radical Decency Reflection #2
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Why Republicans Win

Why do Republicans win so many elections? For years, this question has puzzled me. Their policies so clearly favor a wealthy minority and penalize the middle class as well as the poor; i.e., the vast majority of voters. And their rationales are so transparently make-weight. Nevertheless, theory (or pseudo-theory) has trumped economic self interest in 7 of the last 11 national elections.

Years ago the most common explanation was that Republicans had the money. However, that is no longer true. And yet, there has been no noticeable shift in our politics.

More recently, the common explanation is that Republicans play the political game better. They have clearer, simpler messages and get them out more effectively. But this argument is not persuasive. There are very smart strategists on the Democratic side as well. How could it be that, year after year, they have been tactically outsmarted and never learned from their mistakes? Not very plausible.

So here is the explanation that makes sense to me.

Over the course of 7 million years, humans have evolved exceedingly effective survival mechanisms. The best theorists describe our sensitivity to one another and, with it, our ability to cooperate and communicate as our key evolutionary edge. While we are weaker and slower, our ability to intuit what others feel meant that a nod of the head or change of expression could be instantly understood by a fellow hunter at 50 yards. Living as hunter/gatherers— the reality for almost all of our years as a distinct species – this ability, and the capabilities it fostered, were the key to our evolutionary success.

The implication, confirmed by contemporary neuroscientists such as Daniel Seigel, is that we are fundamentally affiliative beings. Our natural state is to be in intimate connection and to care for one another. As Seigel says, it makes no sense to think of a single brain in isolation. From birth – and throughout life – our brain is molded and evolves by interacting with other brains. That is how we are neurologically wired.

But this is not the full story. Like other mammals, we have a second emergency system: Fight or flight. And because it is designed to deal with mortal danger it has a number of unique characteristics.

First, it is fast, 10 times faster than our thinking brain. A car cuts across your lane without warning and what happens? You swerve superfast – your fight or flight brain in action. Only then do you realize that a car cut in front of you – your thinking brain. In addition, since it would be a lousy idea to evolve a species that doesn't remember the mortal risk of a crouching tiger 6 months or 20 years later, it never forgets.

Finally, once activated, your fight or flight brain takes control of your mind and body. To support immediate counter-measures, it rushes hyper alert chemicals (cortisol and adrenaline) into the system and blood to the large muscle groups. In addition, it shrinks the activity of the thinking brain, thereby minimizing the risk of having complex considerations interfere with the fast action required to insure survival.

So what does all this evolutionary and neurobiological theory have to do with the Republicans ability to win elections? That gets back to our species' history over the last 10,000 and 200 years.

As hunter/gatherers we spent long days quietly cooperating with one another in the mundane tasks of survival, with occasional episodes of terror: A confrontation with an animal or neighboring group; or a natural disaster. But then, about 10,000 years ago, as Jared Diamond describes in Gun, Germs, and Steel, we learned how to domesticate crops and animals.

The effect on humanity was seismic. Now, for the first time in our history, one group of people – through control of the food supply – could forcibly exercise control and dominion over others, and do so on a vast scale. The result: Our history as a species moved decisively and dramatically in that direction. We ceased to exist as small, isolated groups of hunter/gatherers. City/states, nations and empires became the norm.

But with this new, very different way of living, the people in control needed to develop new techniques for maintaining and expanding their power. And when we remember the powerful physiological effects of fight or flight, it is not surprising that strategies that activated that part of the brain became key tools. Demonization of the “other” became – and has remained – a mainstay of our governance. Why? Because when people are in a fight or flight state out of fear of annihilation by an enemy, their willingness to follow, and to be controlled by, a leader is greatly increased.

So cultivating our auxiliary fight and flight mechanisms for political purposes has a long history. But, technological developments in the last 200 years have vastly upped the ante. Why? Because so many of life's taken for granted down times – the times that allowed us to be in our base-line affiliative state for a great majority of the hours and days of our lives – no longer exist. And, as an unintended but enormously important consequence, there has been an exponential increase in our fight or flight states of mind.

The technologically induced shifts in the rhythms of our lives couldn't be more dramatic. For all of our time on earth – until 200 years ago – nighttime automatically resulted in a cessation of work, and the seasons dictated the intensity of our activities. In addition, work rhythms were modulated by the fact that it took weeks, and sometimes months, for communications to be delivered. But all that has changed. We eliminated winter 150 years ago (with central heating), night time 120 years ago (with the electric light), and summer 60 years ago (with air conditioning). And, in the last 20 years or so, we have completed the obliteration of physical distance with cell phones, emails, texts, and the internet.

Now, thanks to technology, we can work all the time. And the culture powerfully reinforces this tendency with its emphasis on competing, dominating, and winning in all that we do – at whatever the cost. The result? Our fight or flight physiology is, more and more, in a state of constant activation. We are literally at risk of having this emergency auxiliary system become our new, base line mental state.

So, why do Republicans win? Because they are the natural inheritors – and prime beneficiaries – of the trends of the last 10,000 and 200 years. In contrast to more progressive politicians, they whole-heartedly embrace and promote competition, dominance and control as positive values. And because fear, anger, and attacking behaviors – the activators of fight or flight states – so effectively promote these goals, they can, and do, embrace these tactics without reservation.

In both their message and tactics, the Republicans are fully congruent the mainstream, culture's competitive values and predisposition toward fight or flight mindsets. And, to make matters worse, the developments of the last 200 years have made us more and more primed, by our habits of daily living, to be receptive to these messages.

In saying all this, I want to emphasize that I am not a complete pessimist. The powerful and enduring political advantage, enjoyed by progressive politicians, is that their policies are more congruent with our true nature as affiliative beings. Moreover, there are inherent problems with policies and tactics that push us toward chronic states of arousal since they are manipulative, exploitative, and physically and emotionally draining – all qualities that limit their continuing appeal. In the end, politicians with a more humane approach to governance have, I believe, the better of the argument.

But we need to recognize that we live in a culture that is deeply out of synch with our biology and has been, to an increasing degree, over the last 200 years. Thus, while the Republicans can simply exploit current trends, progressive politicians have the much more difficult task: To mount a challenge to the status quo that persuasively presents a more decent alternative. For this reason, their work (and the work of Radical Decency) is complicated, confounding, and profoundly wisdom-stretching. But it is the right thing to do. And, we always need to remember that, without regard to outcomes, it is the surest path to a vibrant and ennobling life. See Reflection 13, *Decency Is Its Own Reward*.