

State of Mind - November 2008

A few days ago, an old friend questioned whether I was excited about the candidate whom she is passionately backing. First, she almost seemed offended when I did not share her exuberance and then seemed bewildered that I expressed general disdain for both presidential tickets. Her next comment caught me off guard as she said, "You must vote." Her implication was that only the McCain/Obama issue was important. Well that's not true for me, and not voting has never been an option. Although lukewarm about the national race, there has never been a moment when I might have withdrawn from the process in total. How could I? As matter of fact, how can anyone, especially in these most challenging times? My interest was piqued about factors involved in motivating people to vote...or not vote.

Interestingly, the first comment found in an article entitled, "Why Do We Vote?" found in the June 2008 *Monitor on Psychology* cited the personal costs of participation:

"It takes time to register and to learn about the candidates' views. On election day, you may need to leave work, stand in long lines or slog through harsh weather, knowing all the while that the chances your individual vote will make a difference among the thousands, or millions cast, are pretty much zero."

Given this somewhat depressing premise, why would anyone actually make the effort? There are many possible answers, including altruism, self-expression, belongingness, obligation, habit or duty. To be sure it is a complex process—one that goes far beyond the mere act of marking a ballot.

According to *Newsweek*, "Most voters cannot or will not learn about and remember candidates' records or positions [which] means voters must substitute something else for that missing knowledge." There is no question that one's choice of candidate results in a combination of emotional and intellectual processing. The experts believe it is one's gut and heart that drive such decisions, not intellect.

Indeed, emotion rules. Trust and fear both play roles in the decision-making process. The levels of idolization and antipathy are apparent everywhere. Even when confronted by accurate data that is in conflict with a person's beliefs, we are likely to ignore it or reject it out of hand. The passion generated in those actively involved in campaigning is laudable, as it is the clearest example of one of our greatest privileges, the right to free expression. When people feel a part of something bigger than themselves, it creates a desire to participate so they can declare membership in the group. *I voted for our guy ... I cast my ballot against the issue.*

Problems come up when differences become fodder for hateful or destructive acts, whether they are verbal or physical. Perhaps of greater concern is apathy, which sometimes evolves into cynicism or outright rejection of the election process. Apathy arises out of a number of roots, including the sense that nothing is going to make a

difference, especially not one measly vote. Maybe on the national scene this might be true, but recent referendums in West Virginia were decided by a handful of votes. So even if the presidential and congressional races don't cause excitement, battles for local office might. While there may not be any positively compelling choices, many voters might be pulled toward the polls to vote **against** someone or something. In the end, maybe it isn't the specific candidates, or even the office to which they aspire, that should drive us to the polls.

After reading all the research, I settled back and thought about my motivation. The stories my father told about World War II and the pride he expressed about fighting for our ideals echoes in my mind. His cousin died strafing a German convoy in an unarmed Piper Cub so his unaware comrades would know there was unseen trouble coming. Veterans from every armed conflict since Viet Nam have passed through my office. Even with their pain and often-occurring disillusionment, they have reflected on the promise of the United States. The idealized belief that our form of government is best and has been the reason why thousands of lives have been lost still lingered in their hearts and minds. Every one of them wanted their efforts to be worth something. This continues today. We are touting the superiority of democracy, but not showing the world that we value the freedom...and the responsibility...we bellyache and cry...when we should shout with pride. Whether you are for or against the war...Democrat or Republican or Independent...Conservative or Liberal...the act of voting is one of commitment and thanks.

Heck, what I said to my friend was wrong: **I AM excited about the election!** My chance to vote shows the world that our freedom does matter. Maybe I won't change the outcome of an election, but I can contribute to the percent of citizens who show up at the polls. (Why isn't it 100%!) Why don't we help those who may find it hard to get to their precinct? Why don't we make sure everyone who wants to "pull the lever" gets to do so? Why don't businesses let workers depart early, so they have the time to vote? Why doesn't every citizen encourage friends?

Where will you be Tuesday?