

Special issue introduction

The body in politics — emotional, perceptual, and visceral dimensions

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Special issue editors

The relationship between the human body and politics, though complicated, is increasingly apparent. For centuries, there was little intellectual pursuit of the relationship, as first Enlightenment philosophers valued rationality over embodied forms of cognition and then popular misconstruals of both philosophy and science argued by assertion for a misguided social Darwinism. By the mid-twentieth century, political attitudes and behavior were for the most part deemed unrelated to bodily features and functions.¹ Over the past 50 years, however, there has been much progress in showing distinct biological correlates of political behavior.

On the one hand, this progress is attributable to an increased understanding of visual information processing: humans are wired to process visuals automatically as sensory stimuli with social relevance, whereas we must learn to process verbal information about politics over a slow and arduous process.² Interesting work published across a range of disciplines in recent years is showing how visual expressions and bodily signals are processed instantaneously and serve as reliable indicators of emotional states, behavioral intents, and even personality.³ On the other hand, with the advent of brain-imaging technology, we can now map with increased accuracy the biological markers of judgment and decision-making. This means that we can now associate political evaluations and behavioral differences with observed differences in brain activity and other physiological changes.

The contributions to this special issue touch on how we read others' bodies — perceptually, emotionally, and politically — and how one's own body is, on a visceral level, related to political preferences. The balance is tilted toward the later aspect of inquiry: the first four contributions provide new insights into how the body affects individual orientations toward politics. Peterson and Palmer, in their piece on the effects of physical

attractiveness on political belief, provide evidence that physical appearance influences political efficacy and political orientations, such as ideology and partisanship. They hypothesize that a likely explanation for this linkage is socialization, offering insight into the relationship between self and others' perceptions of the body (i.e., attractiveness) and political leanings.

In their study of disease salience, xenophobia, and support for humanitarian aid, Peterson, Gonzalez, and Schneider argue that contamination fears during epidemics may have much stronger influence on foreign aid attitudes than previously realized. If, as they find, this explanation holds more sway than explanatory mechanisms based on xenophobia, then their research has obvious application for media coverage of outbreaks: reassuring citizens of the low possibility of contamination during an epidemic may directly impact viewers' willingness to volunteer to help victims.

The next two articles in the issue address the influence of cognitive traits on political views. Keene and colleagues, in their investigation into the biological roots of political extremism, find that individuals' pronounced negativity biases predict preferences for extreme ideological views. By working with a measure of motivational activation, they find that people with strong negativity bias are more likely to report extreme conservatism, while those with low negativity bias are more likely to find themselves at the extreme liberal end of the spectrum. These response tendencies also affect information seeking on traditional and interactive media for both conservatives and liberals.

In an experimental design that demonstrates how conservatism and liberalism predict performance in two nonideological cognitive tasks with both Brazilian and American samples, Bernabel and Oliveira reveal that people at different ends of the ideological spectrum also show significant cognitive differences. Conservatives outperform liberals in tasks in which a conservative cognitive approach is favored, while liberals perform better in tasks that require more cognitive flexibility. The authors conclude that there are environments,

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