Transforming Conflict Blog

What Really Motivates the Presidential Candidates?

New research sheds light on the role of identity in the presidential campaign.

By Daniel L Shapiro

With the elections heating up, I thought I would start off by sharing a simple psychological framework connected to presidential politics and identity. Given that the winner of the upcoming American presidential election will have substantial power to shape the broad identity of the entire nation, it can be useful to understand what is, at core, meaningful to each presidential candidate.

The more we understand the central characteristics defining the candidate as a person, the more we can understand the personal biases that are likely to drive their politics and policies.

An organizing framework can thus come in handy. In my new book Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts, I have developed a simple framework to clarify the key components defining one’s core identity. I call it the BRAVE Framework, for it draws attention to five pillars of identity that form the acronym BRAVE. Each of the five pillars can easily be used as a lens for understanding a candidate’s identity:

1. **Beliefs**: What convictions and morals does the candidate hold as most personally significant?

2. **Rituals**: What customs and ceremonial acts does the candidate hold as sacred, such as holidays, family activities, and the like?

3. **Allegiances**: To whom does the candidate hold deepest loyalties – such as toward specific family members, friends, or mentor?

4. **Values**: What core principles does the candidate hold as most important in life? Which of these principles does the candidate merely espouse – and which does he or she actually enact?

5. **Emotionally meaningful experiences**: What intense events, positive or negative, help to define the candidate’s identity? Such events can comprise everything from one’s wedding day to the trauma of losing a beloved family member.

By considering each presidential candidate’s core identity through the lens of these pillars, we can come to a better understanding of what drives each person’s worldview—and what factors may motivate their policies and actions.
In fact, when the televised presidential debates launch, I would encourage the moderators to ask questions targeting the five pillars of this framework. That way, the American public can better understand what each candidate holds as most meaningful – or at least what the candidates *espouse* to be important.

The BRAVE Framework also affords us with an opportunity. As the airwaves and internet lines become more and more saturated with candidate statements, we can listen carefully behind each candidate’s words for the potential motivational meaning: What beliefs and values may be underlying their communications? What comments or actions appear to genuinely threaten their beliefs, rituals, allegiances, and so on?

As you come to better understand the candidate’s core identity, you will gain greater clarity into the psychology motivating that individual’s political behavior.

In sum, core identity heavily influences a person’s emotions and behavior, so the more we can understand each candidate’s core identity, the more we can understand what motivates their political activity. In turn, we become better situated to craft a policy or proposal that meets the leader’s core interests--and our own.

Thanks for reading this first blog post. More soon!!!