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Psychologists: Propaganda works better than you think

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Science Snapshot
Dan Vergano

By Dan Vergano, USA TODAY

Science seldom interacts with the legal world, more's the pity. But the latest big Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*, has some scientists talking about the difference between the legal view of human psychology and what the evidence shows.

"The First Amendment confirms the freedom to think for ourselves," said Justice [Anthony Kennedy](#), reading the court's 5-4 majority opinion on Thursday, finding that corporations and unions can freely spend money on campaign ads to defeat or elect federal candidates. The decision ends decades-old limits on political spending.

"The spigot is ... wide open," campaign finance specialist Richard Hansen of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles told USA TODAY, after the decision.

So, we might ask, how well does research suggest people "think for themselves" under the potential flood of political ads from that spigot?

"I don't have any particular position on the ruling itself, but this justification for the decision is based on an incorrect assumption about how the mind works," says psychologist [Brian Nosek](#) of the [University of Virginia](#). "If the goal really was to increase the chances that citizens would think for themselves, then the decision should have been to ban partisan advertising completely."

Nosek and his colleagues, Harvard's Mahzarin Banaji and the University of Washington's Tony Greenwald, operate "Project Implicit" which features an "Implicit Association Test" to measure unconscious beliefs, including political ones. The data from 7 million participants show so-called "undecided" voters have often already [made up their minds unconsciously](#) on who they will vote

This is a 2008 frame grab from an ad paid for by the National Republican Senatorial Committee warning against voting for Sen. Jeff Merkley.



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for, for example. And the team has also mapped congressional race outcomes nationwide against [unconscious racial biases](#), finding that prejudices invisible to voters themselves swayed their decisions, rather than rational thinking.

"The (think for themselves) justification is ironic considering that the purpose of advertising — political or otherwise — is to persuade the viewer about a particular point-of-view," Nosek says. "That is, the goal of the political ad is deliberately 'not' to have citizens thinking for themselves."

In fact, psychologists have shown that people respond far more readily to propaganda, otherwise known as advertising, than they are willing to believe:

- Just giving medical students pens with a drug's name on them made the students significantly more favorably disposed toward the medication than otherwise, despite their immersion in classes aimed at letting them rationally evaluate drug benefits, found a 2009 [Archives of Internal Medicine](#) report.
- Remember shaking hands with Bugs Bunny at Disneyland? Roughly a third of people presented with a fake ad depicting a visit to Disneyland that featured a handshake with Bugs later remembered or knew the meet up with the 'wascally wabbit' had happened to them, according to a 2001 University of Washington [study](#). Even though Bugs is owned by [Warner Brothers](#) and verboten at a Disney facility, so it couldn't have happened.
- In a famous 1951 experiment led by Swarthmore's Solomon Asch, 76% of people conformed at least once to what they heard other people arguing was the correct length of a line on a scale right in front of their face, even though it was plainly wrong. The people arguing for the incorrect measurement were all plants, but overall, 33% of participants went along with the group, even though they were [spouting nonsense](#). A follow-up study in a 1955 [Journal of Abnormal Psychology](#) report found even under anonymous conditions, about 23% of people preferred to believe what people were saying about the line rather than the evidence in [front of their own eyes](#).

"If you are inclined to believe that people do all their thinking rationally, then you might accept that more information is better, and that eventually the good information will drive out the bad," says journalist Shankar Vedantam, author of the just-released *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives*. "Unfortunately, there is a small warehouse full of research showing it is an error to believe we live according to reason. Rather we make decisions with our unconscious."

Ironically enough, Vedantam points to 2008 [experiments](#) by Yale political scientist John Bullock on people's perception of Supreme Court Chief Justice [John Roberts Jr.](#), for example. Volunteers rated their opinion of Roberts, and then some were shown a NARAL Pro-Choice America ad, released during his 2005 court nomination,

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which accused Roberts of "supporting violent fringe groups and a convicted clinic bomber."

Among Democrat study volunteers, disapproval of Roberts went from 56% to 80% after seeing the ad. The study volunteers were then told that the ad had been repudiated and was in error. But the disapproval of Roberts only dropped to 72%, "even though the volunteers all acknowledged the ad was wrong," Vedantam says. "Unconsciously, not only does good information not drive out bad information. It often actually amplifies the bad information."

Both Democrats and Republicans demonstrate the same reliance on unconscious biases to make decisions, he adds. "The only thing I can take away from all this is to try and be a little more humble when I see a political ad and it is making me draw any conclusions."

Advertising folks have known all this of course, long before the *Mad Men*. In 1928, pioneering public relations expert **Edwards Bernays**, "the father of public relations," published the book, *Propaganda*, which argued: "conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country." Bernays suggested advertisers rely on a "herd instinct" in people, much like the desire to conform demonstrated by the 1951 experiments, to sell their products.

In the Supreme Court decision, Kennedy also found: "When Government seeks to use its full power, including the criminal law, to command where a person may get his or her information or what distrusted source he or she may not hear, it uses censorship to control thought."

But psychology suggests otherwise, Nosek says. "The reality is that organizations use advertising to control thought."

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A banner advertisement for Charter Spectrum Internet. It features five colored boxes: orange with 'FASTEST INTERNET', green with '60 Mbps', purple with 'MORE BANDWIDTH', blue with 'Charter Spectrum Internet™ \$29.99/mo for 12 mos when bundled*', and a dark blue box with the Charter Spectrum logo and 'GO FASTER' in a yellow box. Small text at the bottom of the last box says 'Restrictions apply'.

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