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All Politics Is Olfactory

By PETER LIBERMAN and DAVID PIZARRO

JUST days before New York's Republican gubernatorial primary, Carl Paladino [mailed out thousands of campaign ads impregnated with the smell of rotting garbage](#). Emblazoned with the message "Something Stinks in Albany" and photos of scandal-tainted New York Democrats like former Gov. Eliot Spitzer and Representative Charles Rangel, the brochure attacked Mr. Paladino's rival, former Representative Rick Lazio, for being "liberal" and a part of the state's corrupt political system.

At first glance, the revolting scent seemed like another attention-grabbing stunt from Mr. Paladino. But recent research on disgust suggests that the odor may have had additional, hidden effects on the 200,000 registered Republicans who received the brochures.

The emotion of disgust, many researchers believe, evolved to protect us from contamination. It is easily elicited by feces, pus, vomit, putrid meat and other substances linked to pathogens. A single picture, a few choice words and, yes, a slight odor can elicit a surprisingly intense reaction.

Disgust's origins as a protector against contamination can be seen in its characteristic and universal facial expression: the wrinkling of the nose, curling of the upper lips and protrusion of the tongue. Wrinkling the nose has been shown to prevent pathogens from entering through the nasal cavity, and sticking out the tongue aids the expulsion of tainted food and is a common precursor to vomiting.

But disgust does more than just keep us away from poisonous substances. It also exerts a powerful and idiosyncratic influence on judgment. People who are feeling disgust become harsher in their judgments of moral offenses and offenders.

Consider [recent experiments](#) by the psychologist Simone Schnall and her colleagues: people who were sitting in a foul-smelling room or at a desk cluttered with dirty food containers judged acts like lying on a résumé or keeping a wallet found on the street as more immoral than individuals who were asked to make the same judgments in a clean environment. This general finding has been replicated by other psychologists using a variety of disgust elicitors and moral behaviors.

Subtle cues about disgust and cleanliness can affect social and political judgments as well. In an experiment conducted recently by Erik Helzer, a Cornell Ph.D. student, and one of us (David Pizarro), merely standing near a hand-sanitizing dispenser led people to report more conservative political beliefs. Participants who were randomly positioned in front of a hand sanitizer gave more conservative responses to a survey about their moral, social and fiscal attitudes than those individuals assigned to complete the questionnaire at the other end of the hallway.

In another experiment one of us (Dr. Pizarro) was involved in, a foul ambient smell — emitted, unbeknownst to test subjects, by a novelty spray — caused people answering a questionnaire to report more negative attitudes toward gay men than did people who responded in the absence of the stench. Apparently, the slightest signal that germs might be present is enough to shift political attitudes toward the right.

Why does a mechanism that originally evolved to protect us from pathogens affect our reactions to people and behavior? One possibility is that early humans were endangered by contact with outside clans that carried diseases for which they had not developed immunity. Reacting with disgust toward members of groups seen as foreign, strange or norm-violating might have functioned as a behavioral immune system.

Consistent with this, researchers at the University of British Columbia have shown that individuals who see themselves as particularly vulnerable to disease (a trait that is correlated with disgust sensitivity) **tend to report more xenophobic attitudes**. These studies, we might add, did not set out to study extreme hypochondriacs, clean freaks or slobs, but rather drew on samples of ordinary college students.

Moreover, similar effects were demonstrated when researchers increased individuals' perceived vulnerability to disease (for example, by showing them pictures of a woman battling cartoon germs in a kitchen). Participants shown such pictures felt more negatively about, say, Nigerian immigrants than did participants who were shown slides of non-pathogenic dangers, like school bus accidents or electrical appliances teetering above bathtubs.

While this avoidance mechanism may have conferred a survival benefit on our ancestors, it can easily overfire, causing us to shun groups and people inappropriately and unfairly. And because it remains tightly linked to the disgust we experience in the presence of oral contaminants (like putrid meat), it makes sense that inducing disgust with a rotten smell could cause a shift in attitudes toward certain individuals or social groups.

Recent data collected by one of us (Dr. Pizarro) has also shown that political conservatives on

average report being more easily disgusted than liberals. These studies used a “disgust sensitivity” scale developed by the psychologists Paul Rozin, Clark McCauley and Jonathan Haidt, which asks hypothetical questions like, “How disgusted would you be if you took a sip from a soda can and then realized that it belonged to a stranger?” Even when controlling for income, depth of religious belief and a host of other factors, conservatives tended to score higher in disgust sensitivity than liberals.

Mr. Paladino, a Tea Party activist, seems no exception to this general pattern. He has called gay pride parades “disgusting” and proposed sending welfare recipients to state-run work camps, where they would receive “life lessons” in personal hygiene.

Taken together, researchers’ findings suggest that the foul smell of Mr. Paladino’s mailer may have done more than just lend it novelty. It also probably made voters more judgmental of New York’s “career politicians” and more receptive to the mailer’s message that the next governor needed to “cut taxes” and “ferret out corruption.” And these impressions may have endured long after the odor and feelings of disgust had dissipated.

Obviously, the malodorous mailer alone can’t explain how Carl Paladino steamrolled Rick Lazio in the primary, 62 percent to 38 percent. Nonetheless, election officials should keep the psychology of disgust in mind — and be wary of Purell dispensers or awful odors mysteriously appearing at polling places this Nov. 2.

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