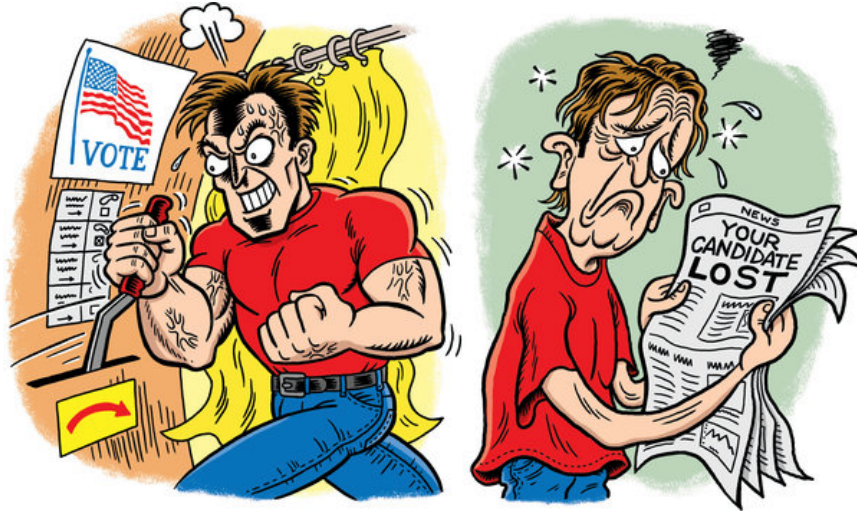


Is America Man Enough to Vote?

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Credit Ward Sutton

HUNDREDS of variables affect voting patterns: income, race, gender, unemployment, the weather, polling locations, altruism, to name a few. And on Election Day these all come together to produce a voter. Too often they produce a nonvoter.

American voter participation is consistently below that of other industrialized democracies. (The historically significant 2008 presidential election drew less than 62 percent of eligible voters to the polls.) It's a truism among election reformers that poor turnout produces poor representation, which produces laws people are disinclined to obey and so undermines the process. But here's a new idea: testosterone may provide a key to boosting voter turnout.

In 2008, scientists from Duke University and the University of Michigan analyzed the biological effects of voting on more than 150 voters. On Election Day, more than 150 test subjects chewed sugar-free gum after they'd voted and again at regular intervals after learning the election results.

When the scientists analyzed the testosterone in the saliva generated by all that gum chewing, they noted a dramatic pattern: men who had voted for the losing presidential candidate, John McCain, suffered a big drop in their testosterone after hearing of his defeat.

The scientists reported that the male McCain voters "felt significantly more controlled, submissive, unhappy and unpleasant." The testosterone effect was "as if they directly engaged head-to-head in a contest for dominance" and lost, one researcher told a reporter when the study was published in 2009. The men who voted for Obama fared better. The researchers speculated that there might be an Obama baby boom.

Politicians mining the gender gap should pay close attention to the study. Women had no change in testosterone levels, regardless of whom they voted for. Estrogen was not measured in the study. And women return to the polls more frequently than men. (Indeed, female turnout has exceeded men's in every presidential election since 1980.)

Is it possible voting makes male voters too vulnerable? Could the unpleasant feelings male voters experience when their candidates lose discourage them from revisiting the polls? No wonder they stop voting. It hurts too much.

Low turnout should be a concern, and not just because of the inadvertent commentary it supplies on American manhood. The democratic process is our way of resolving conflict. It produces the laws that underpin our society, often in the face of substantial disagreement. Researchers have demonstrated that participants in the democratic process are more likely to comply with its outcomes, even when they disagree. They pay their taxes and obey the speed limit. When fewer people vote, the connection between the people and the laws that govern them grows tenuous.

Low turnout also affects the quality of government. Voting behavior is not uniform across socioeconomic groups. Young people, Latinos and poorer people vote at lower rates than, say, rich, white, older people. When turnout falls, politicians can and do collect bands of polarized followers and cater to their wishes rather than to the general public good.

The pharmaceutical industry has tackled depression, sleeplessness and erectile dysfunction. Could we drug people into being better citizens? Studies by the geneticist and social scientist James Fowler suggest that serotonin, the neurotransmitter connected to mood disorders and depression, is strongly implicated in voting behavior.

Often called the utility hormone, serotonin plays a role in our ability, among other things, to absorb disappointment (or worse), while maintaining social and emotional balance. In one of Mr. Fowler's studies, people with the genetic code for efficient serotonin systems were more likely to vote — and more likely to return to the polls in subsequent elections, even if their candidate lost. Mr. Fowler hypothesizes that people with more durable serotonin systems can better

handle the intensity of voting.

As absurd — or useful — as it may be to think about hormones and voting, studies like Mr. Fowler's don't really help us grapple with the complex issues facing our democracy. This year, more than ever, our quest to understand voter turnout strains against the unruly, partisan way we actually run elections.

Americans are struggling with a severe case of electoral dysfunction. They have to navigate bureaucratic hurdles needed to cast a ballot — the hassles of getting and staying registered, finding the polling station, standing in long lines, deciphering ballots and complying with much contested and confusing ID requirements. New restrictions on early voting, limitations on voter registration initiatives and voter roll purges contribute to the dysfunction.

Voters need every bit of emotional resilience they can find. Perhaps the pharmaceutical industry will come up with a little blue pill to make people voters. But until then, we may need to man up and face facts. For all our idealism about voting and democracy, we have created a needlessly complex and burdensome voting system. We can't fix the hormonal fallout from voting, but biology provides another reason we should think about making voting simpler and easier.