



## Mind-boggling decisions: For many Americans - Democrats and Republicans alike - the idea that someone could vote for the other side's candidate is incomprehensible.

Reading time: 10 minutes

If you listen to German journalists, 90% are certainly in favour of Kamala Harris as the clear best choice for the Americans. And you can hear a lack of understanding everywhere as to why the Americans might see it differently. The Germans are not alone - as long as it's about Democrats. I also have to admit that I have a clear preference for Harris, because Donald doesn't work for me at all. But why do the Republicans obviously see it differently? Are they all morally limited people? I recently stumbled across a great [essay](#) by behavioural economist Koen Smets, who writes under the name Koenfucius on Substack. Smets teaches at Saint Louis University. I reproduce his key findings here. And your possible aha-moments about our German situation with the Putin friends of AfD (Alternative for Germany – an extreme right wing party) and BSW (Alliance Sarah Wagenknecht – a very left and at the same time extreme right wing party) are not purely coincidental.

### The notorious liar as president?

In the US presidential election, it seems incomprehensible to many Democratic-leaning voters that someone would support a candidate who is a convicted felon, who is obviously a compulsive liar, who uses decidedly unpresidential and misogynistic language, or who posts messages on social media that don't quite match the qualities one would expect from a president, regardless of his policies.

These Democrats may not necessarily claim that those, who want to vote for Donald Trump, condone the behaviour in question or want to vote for him because of his behaviour,

but at the very least they must surely condone and excuse .it. How else could they want to vote for someone of such questionable character?

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5778 replies



Donald J. Trump  
@realDonaldTrump

What are the chances that Crooked Joe Biden, the WORST President in the history of the U.S., whose Presidency was Unconstitutionally STOLEN from him by Kamabla, Barrack HUSSEIN Obama, Crazy Nancy Pelosi, Shifty Adam Schiff, Cryin' Chuck Schumer, and others on the Lunatic Left, CRASHES the Democrat National Convention and tries to take back the Nomination, beginning with challenging me to another DEBATE. He feels that he made a historically tragic mistake by handing over the U.S. Presidency, a COUP, to the people in the World he most hates, and he wants it back, NOW!!!

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Source: Screenshot Truth Social

Unacceptable or just crude language in an election campaign? That depends on your party affiliation. Asking rhetorical questions to emphasise the alleged insanity of a particular choice is certainly effective in demonstrating your credibility to people who share your opinion.

When we ask: "How on earth can a reasonable, decent person vote for someone like that?", then we are admitting that there is something we don't understand. A good way to get a better understanding is to ask ourselves: "Under what circumstances could I - a reasonable, decent person - vote for someone like this? "How do you decide in favour of a candidate?"



Some people - regardless of ideology - simply won't consider ever voting for anyone other than their party's candidate. This is an extreme case of heuristic information processing based on a single criterion: If the "my party" box is displayed, I ask no questions and vote. Not only are there simply no alternatives, but there are also no aspects such as the candidate's character, competence or policies.

### Interest in candidates is subject to the halo effect

Other voters, however, are interested in the candidate. In their book *How Voters Decide*, political scientists Richard Lau and David Redlawsk describe research into the importance of a number of criteria, which shows that political positions, competence and integrity are rated as "very important" in 65%, 63% and 56% of cases respectively. But we also know this from consumer surveys. Expressed importance has little to do with purchasing behaviour. Here too, party affiliation acts as a powerful heuristic: voters rely on party affiliation as a cognitive shortcut to evaluate candidates. In particular, they tend to disregard the strong qualifications and policy positions of a non-party-affiliated candidate in favour of party-affiliated candidates, even if there are doubts about their competence or policy positions

Smets goes on to say that this is supported by research by political scientists Milton Lodge and Charles Taber, who have identified a so-called "hot cognition" effect, whereby party members automatically evaluate political objects (including candidates) based on pre-existing feelings associated with their party. As a result, feelings - which generally feed into our decision-making much more quickly than strenuous cognitive processes - immediately pre-empt any conscious judgements made about a candidate.

### Party supporters are often sect-like

Another influence on candidate preference that complements partisanship is political sectarianism, which was introduced by social psychologist Eli Finkel and colleagues. They define this as the tendency to identify morally with one political group and against another. This is similar to tribalism, but has its roots not in genetic kinship, but in a strong belief in the moral righteousness and superiority of one's own sect.

It manifests itself through three components: **Othering** (the tendency to view opposing partisans as essentially different or even alien); **Aversion** (the tendency to reject and distrust opposing partisans); and **Moralisation** (the tendency to view opposing partisans as evil). These three components reinforce the differences between the political groups, with moralisation making them particularly absolute and pushing them out of the realm of compromise and middle ground. Research by political scientist Yphtach Lelkes suggests that affective polarisation is primarily caused by political differences of opinion, especially among people with more extreme attitudes. In a way, this underpins the moral component of sectarianism: **the other side's politics are alien to us, we dislike and distrust them, and they are evil**. I have already written about the phenomenon of the outgroup vs. the ingroup in BrainCandy 48. A current example is climate activists who begrudge others a flight on holiday only to fly to Thailand a short time later. A particularly threatening example is violent Islamism, which rejects all others as an outgroup to be fought against. Even if this 'outgroup' provides a lot of aid, as in Germany, for example.

Back to America: Finally, philosopher Dan Williams argues, party affiliation unconsciously distorts the way people gather, evaluate and remember evidence, as it provides a strong motivation to advocate for their party's interests - whatever the cost. For example, they are



selective in the evidence they consider, applying lower standards to evidence that supports their arguments and higher standards to evidence that contradicts them. Partisanship **"transforms the individual into a partisan spokesperson"**.

A dramatic symmetry We thus see a picture in which party affiliation and party-political sectarianism lead to a massive distortion, both in standard candidate preferences and in the evaluation of political options: The policies of one's own party are excellent, the policies of the opposing party are reprehensible. Party affiliation and policy decisions (which are, of course, evaluated through a partisan lens) are decisive for voters. The slightest obvious character flaw or lack of competence in an opposition candidate is magnified. At the same time, the candidate of one's own party is basically okay, and any obvious shortcomings are seen as minor or irrelevant, can be justified, or are even presented as strengths.



Magic lenses: What looks insane through one looks completely normal through the other! (Red is the colour of the Republicans, blue the colour of the Democrats)

### **Trump is not elected because of his person**

There may well be some Republican voters who would not even raise an eyebrow at the competence or character of Donald Trump.

But for many others, his character and competence simply don't matter. Most Republicans support Trump not because of who he is, but in spite of who he is. The reason it seems so surprising from the Democrats' perspective that so many support him is not because these supporters are crazy or not decent citizens, but because of their party affiliation and sectarianism.

### **Harris: Appearances are deceptive too**

And that affects people on all sides. Many Democrats continued to deny that there was anything wrong with former Democratic candidate Joe Biden, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. And while Kamala Harris may not quite be in the same league as Donald Trump, she is not without flaws, as sociologist Musa al-Gharbi notes on X, including questionable political instincts and leadership qualities, accusations of cronyism and scandals of financial impropriety.

In due course, these will no doubt be increasingly exploited by the Republican campaign - along with their "far-left" policies, while they are dismissed or ignored by Democrat supporters.

The question "Under what circumstances could I - a reasonable, decent person, presumably - vote for someone like that? From a Republican perspective, Harris is as crazy a choice as Trump is from a Democratic perspective.

Whether or not an election is brainwashing is ultimately only a question of (party-political) perspective.



## Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

### Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



#### Feedback, suggestions or criticism about this article:

[braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com)

The author

**Ralph Ohnemus, CEO.** Board member and main shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001.

Previously a client of K&A BrandResearch for 15 years. National and international marketing and sales experience in senior management positions, including FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications - most recently as SVP Consumer Sales responsible for marketing, sales and chain stores at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: [r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com)

