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Trends. Rat Psychology During the United States Presidential Election

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Perusing the history of scientific psychology, one quickly notes a significant role of the rat in theoretical, empirical, and experimental pursuits. Many assumptions about human psychology, especially as to learning and motivation, have been based on observations of the rat. In fact, a viable critique of this history comprises allegations of inappropriate generalization--as to both extrapolation and interpolation--from the rat to the human.

In this context, a recent furor within the United States (US) presidential election is quite intriguing. The furor involves allegations that representatives of the Bush campaign employed subliminal perception--viz., the subliminal presentation of the word "Rats" superimposed on an attack of Vice President Gore's health care plans--within a televised advertisement. While most of the furor involves the accuracy of the allegations and counters to the allegations as well as the ethics of employing subliminal perception in a propaganda mode, little has touched on the assumed efficacy of the technique.

Research on subliminal perception suggests that one can, indeed, generate psychological consequences elicited from subliminal stimuli. Consequences have included (1) upbeat feelings towards men and negative feelings towards men and women; (2) generic affective evaluation; (3) evaluative priming effects; (4) associative networks; (5) significant other representations and transference; (6) favorable social evaluations; (7) response preparation; and (8) ecologically significant, temporally stable changes in attitudes and behavior. The upshot of this research suggests at least incremental effects on cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral functioning that can affect voting behavior--as opposed to a compelling and irresistible motivation to vote for a particular candidate. A further implication is that the campaign furor should have an ethical and substantive component. Of course, the fact that the subliminal stimulus was observed by a mere observer of the ad suggests--that for some populations--a variant of supraliminal perception was being used. Does this suggest incompetence or a moral conflict on the part of Republican-funded practitioners? (See Ainsworth, L.L. (1989). Problems with subliminal perception. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 3, 361-365; Arndt, J., Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (1997). Subliminal exposure to death-related stimuli increases defense of the cultural worldview. *Psychological Science*, 8, 379-385; Aylesworth, A. B., Goodstein, R. C., & Kalra, A. (1999). Effect of archetypal embeds on feelings: An indirect route to affecting attitudes? *Journal of Advertising*, 28, 73-81; Bornstein, R. (1989). Subliminal techniques as propaganda tools: Review and critique. *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 10, 231-262; Bruni, F. (September 13, 2000). Bush says rats reference in ad was unintentional. *The New York Times*, p. A17; De Houwer, J., Hendrickx, H., & Baeyens, F. (1997). Evaluative learning with "subliminally" presented stimuli. *Consciousness and Cognition: An International Journal*, 6, 87-107; Draine, S. C., & Greenwald, A. G. (1998). Replicable unconscious semantic priming. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 127, 286-303; Glassman, N.S., & Andersen, S.M. (1999). Activating transference without consciousness: Using significant other representations to go beyond what is subliminally given. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 1146-1162; Sohlberg, S. Birgegard, A., Czartoryski, W., Ovefelt, K., & Stroembom, Y. (2000). Symbiotic oneness and defensive autonomy: Yet another experiment demystifying Silverman's findings using "Mommy and I are one." *Journal of Research in Personality*, 34, 108-126; Underwood, G. (1994). Subliminal perception on TV. *Nature*, 370, 103.) (Keywords: Presidential Elections, Rats, Subliminal Perception, United States Politics.)