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Why We Secretly Want Leaders Who'll Be Unethical On Our Behalf

We want to feel like good people, but we also want self-interested outcomes. Some leaders let us have both.

[PHOTO: A KATZ VIA SHUTTERSTOCK]

BY DAVID MAYER

How did Donald Trump emerge as the Republican presidential nominee? That's a question political analysts and pundits will be trying to answer for years, even though there's already no shortage of theories.

But there's a relatively straightforward explanation for the Donald's unexpected rise that isn't based on opinion polls and doesn't come from the tectonic forces of popular will or political gamesmanship. It results simply from

a feature of human psychology: We *like* leaders who will be unethical on our behalf.

CONFLICTING DESIRES, STRANGE CONSEQUENCES

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Why? Because two powerful impulses that virtually all of us share sometimes converge–so we reconcile them, occasionally in strange ways: We want to feel like *good people*, and we also want *self-interested outcomes*.

Now, the question of Trump's moral center is–at least in the context of the current election–technically up for debate. But it's fair to say that many find his political success shocking given the statements he's made about immigrants, women, Muslims, other politicians, the media, and virtually any person who criticizes him.

Politics is a tough business, but the degree of Trump's vitriol and personal attacks is unparalleled in recent American politics. One well-documented source of Trump's appeal, according to his own supporters, is his willingness to flout (flagrantly and often) the basic rules of public discourse; some experts believe it's precisely Trump's knack for making "non-normative" statements–a neutral scientific euphemism, sure, but one with unavoidable moral implications–that, to some, lends him an air of authenticity.

Dan Ariely, author of *Predictably Irrational* and *The Honest Truth about Dishonesty*, has written about what he calls the "moral fudge factor"–our willingness to be a little unethical (but not *too* unethical) in order to maintain a positive self-view and still get what we want. When those two goals (morality and self-interest) come into conflict, we devise ingenious solutions, one of which is to "outsource" immoral yet expedient conduct to others.

This moral outsourcing allows us to avoid the psychological and social costs of unethical actions–like seeing ourselves or being seen as prejudiced or compassionless–because somebody else, in this case one's leader, is responsible for that poor conduct. This helps explain why many Trump supporters in the GOP primaries are reluctant to admit they voted for him; they like his views but don't want to be stigmatized because of it.

WHY MORAL OUTSOURCING WORKS SO WELL

The classic research on moral outsourcing focuses on moral hypocrisy: Individuals want to *appear* moral while, if possible, avoiding the cost of actually *being* moral. The psychologist Daniel Batson and his colleagues developed several creative studies to understand how people can consider themselves ethical while engaging in unethical conduct for self-interested reasons. They found two key self-deception strategies at play:

1. Misperceiving one's behavior as moral
2. Avoiding measuring one's behavior against ethical standards

Outsourcing immoral conduct to others lets people deploy both of these strategies simultaneously. It allows them to believe that *they* aren't doing anything wrong, somebody *else* is. So Trump supporters rationalize (though not quite consciously), "If Trump enacts my discriminatory views, I get what I want and don't have to come to terms with my own biases."

One of the best examples of moral outsourcing comes from research by prominent moral psychologists Max Bazerman (author of *Blind Spots*) and Joshua Greene (author of *Moral Tribes*) on what's called "indirect agency."

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In a series of experiments, Bazerman and Greene found that when people cause harm, they often do so *indirectly* through others. Harmful actions carried out through other people or institutions (like a pharmaceutical firm selling the rights to a cancer drug to a smaller company so the former can raise the drug's price, or a business selling land to another company to avoid cleaning up toxic waste) were thought of less negatively than harmful actions carried out directly.

Engaging in unethical behavior *ourselves* damages our sense of self, but when we do it through a third party–especially one viewed as a legitimate actor (a corporation, a political leader)–it doesn't feel nearly as bad.

GETTING TO THE GOAL, WHATEVER IT TAKES

And indeed, another area of research suggests that our expectations around goal achievement impact our expectations around leadership–in much the same direction. The psychologist Crystal Hoyt and her colleagues found

in several experiments that when productivity is at stake, people are less concerned that their leaders use unethical means to reach their goals.

This is consistent with recent coverage in the popular press suggesting that jerks can be better bosses because they're efficient, that narcissists are unusually likely to rise into leadership positions, and that we're psychologically vulnerable to trusting obviously untrustworthy people. Many of us want leaders to engage in whatever "goal-pursuit" best serves our self-interest, and we're more willing to make moral accommodations for those who appear hell-bent on doing that.

It's worth mentioning, of course, that neither ambitiously pursuing goals nor making decisions out of self-interest are inherently unethical. But in practice, there are often more materially negative consequences to electing or hiring leaders who show a clear willingness to be ethically "flexible" (a Trumpism and another great euphemism).

Moral outsourcing is a thoroughly nonpartisan phenomenon . . . At times, we all prefer to do wrong through others.

First, the same qualities you like–that the leader will do whatever it takes to get things done–will likely manifest in less desirable ways. For example, the leader may expect *you* to do unethical things and could endanger the company (or nation) by engaging in other types of illicit conduct than the kind that was initially (if tacitly) licensed. Second, the leader is a representative of your team, organization, or community. So while you may get a self-interest boost in the short term, there's a high risk of damage to your own and the group's reputation in the long run.

There are also direct psychological costs to consider. Supporting a leader who'll be unethical on one's behalf leads to a less authentic and integrated existence. Management icon and former Harvard Business School professor, the late Chris Argyris, highlighted the importance of ensuring that "espoused values" align with "values-in-use" in order to be an authentic person and leader. Moral outsourcing disconnects *how we want to see ourselves* from *who we actually are*, and this lack of self-coherence can have wide-ranging negative implications–including for our well-being and living a meaningful life.

The point here isn't to gratuitously bash Trump or his supporters. Moral outsourcing is a thoroughly nonpartisan phenomenon, and it's worth noting as well that Hillary Clinton, Trump's likely general-election opponent, also suffers

from a widespread perception of questionable ethics. The key is to realize that at times we *all* prefer to do wrong through others–whether you define that as letting the military fight unjust wars or simply as asking your accountant to do whatever she can to lower your tax payments.

At all events, let's just hope that morality isn't outsourced to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue come November.

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