

ON THE BRAIN

THE HARVARD MAHONEY NEUROSCIENCE INSTITUTE LETTER

Decision-Making and the Brain



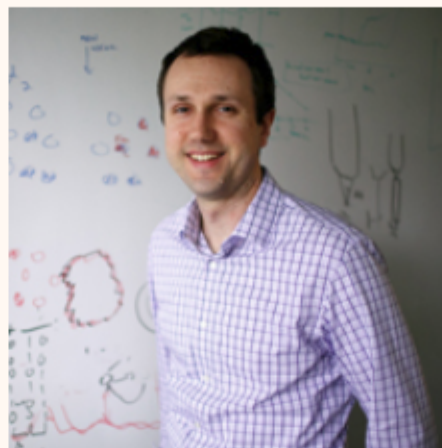
When the race for the 2016 presidential election unofficially kicked off, no fewer than 25 candidates—six Democrats, 17 Republicans, and a handful of third-party entries—threw their hats in the ring to vie for this nation's top job. That's a lot of choices. Yet, whether the number is 25 or two, how do voters decide which candidate is their candidate?

“The number one, overwhelming factor in voting is partisanship,” says Ryan Enos, an associate professor of government in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences and a faculty associate in Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science. “People look at the candidates and say, ‘I'm a Democrat, I'll vote for the Democrat,’ or ‘I'm a Republican, I'll vote for the Republican’.”

But the neurological processing that goes into making decisions is not that simple.

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Faculty First Person



A conversation with Christopher Harvey, PhD

All decisions follow the process of accumulating evidence over time and using that information to make a categorical behavioral decision. If you think about choosing a candidate to vote for, that decision process includes activities like weighing the candidate's policies and viewpoints. In more simple decisions, such as walking down the street, how does your brain use information like street signs, landmarks, and your knowledge about the world to make a decision to turn left or right at an upcoming intersection in order to reach your destination?

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In the News

Autism's Reach

Autism spectrum disorder is generally thought to be caused by deficits in brain development, but a study now suggests that at least some aspects of the disorder, including the perception of touch and the presence of anxiety and social abnormalities, are linked to defects in another area of the nervous system—the peripheral nerves found throughout the limbs, digits and other parts of the body that communicate sensory information to the brain. [Read more »](#)

Brain Drain

Researchers from Harvard Medical School and Hebrew SeniorLife Institute for Aging Research have found increasing evidence that delirium in older surgical patients may be associated with long-term cognitive decline. [Read more »](#)

Turning the Brain Green

Could a better understanding of the brain's reward system help mankind skirt environmental disaster? An HMS professor and neurosurgeon studied whether the brain's inherited drive for stuff and stimulation is making it hard for humans to get by with less, and harming the planet in the process. [Read more »](#)