In the eyes of many, the 2020 US Presidential election is perhaps the most consequential in recent memory. The verdict will either validate those who are convinced that 2016 was an aberration, or substantiate the proposition that President Trump gives a voice to the alienation in large parts of the country.

In 1943, amid a raging World War II, between 2.1 to 3 million people lost their lives due to a famine in the Bengal province of the British dominion of India. In recent times, the legacy of the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill has been questioned for diverting food grain away from dying Indians. His low opinion of non-white subjects of the empire has raised so many hackles that his statue was defaced by protestors in July 2020, who claim he cannot be celebrated as a hero. It might be that time distorts objectivity.

In which case, it might be more instructive to look at Steve Jobs, a more recent icon for voters in the Trump-Biden era, whose legacy adorns many an office desk and jeans pocket. By all accounts, Jobs was quite vicious towards people around him. So much so that the two feature films made about his life are mostly about the darker, unlikable aspects of his personality. Wouldn’t the world be a much better place if leaders like Jobs and Churchill were a little more compassionate? Maybe. But perhaps it would be more meaningful to ask — could they have gotten the outcomes that they achieved without being the kind of people they were?
In the absence of counterfactuals, all we have is conjecture. It is quite possible that the personality trait that enabled these two to pursue seemingly impossible objectives, also made them obnoxious manipulators of people. You cannot have one without the other; the cost of a more loving Churchill might have been a Nazi Europe, that of a more personable Jobs might have been a world full of IBM PCs.

The question that this proposed counterfactual forces us to confront is not merely of academic interest. Till the time we cannot genetically engineer leaders with the grim determination of Churchill, the affability of John F. Kennedy, the personal rectitude of Mahatma Gandhi, and the vision of Steve Jobs, we are stuck making difficult tradeoffs every election, which leads us to the choice between President Donald Trump and former Vice-President Joe Biden. There character examinations are already in sharp focus with the 2020 US presidential election less than two months away.

Many millions would have already made up their minds one way or the other, but there are still likely to be many fence-sitters. The personality of a candidate mediates their interactions with the rest of the world. Nonetheless, personality is not all that a candidate brings to the table. Policies, to the extent that they impact the lived reality of people matter more than their abstract formulations, particularly as one of the candidates is a sitting President.
Preference for Personality

Trump is an abrasive and inconsistent loudmouth who communicates through Twitter. A former TV star who brings the fake reality of reality shows to politics. Joe Biden is a likeable if bumbling veteran who has been struggling to communicate at all in recent times. Which one of the two is more acceptable is down to the preference of individual voters. But the impact of preferences on choice is moderated by the reality of tradeoffs created by the constraint of voting for only one of them. For instance, the affable Biden is unlikely to publicly raise issues that are deemed to be controversial. Trump, on the other hand, is unlikely to temper his speech and bring it in line with common decency. Voters, as much as they would like, cannot have a polite breaker of conventions!

Watch: Is it better to be Polite of Frank?

Preferences for a particular trait also do not exist in a vacuum, they are guided by history and the larger social context. There are times in a society’s history when politeness and decency are valued above all else. At others, they are thought of as social shackles, devious even, such that frankness and plain-speak are considered virtues. Rosseau’s exposition of how ‘norms of good behavior’ are the real impediments to ‘true freedom’ provides a ready example of how social acceptance of ideas is rarely set in stone. It is very likely then that our preferences in the matter are affected by diminishing marginal returns. For instance, too much politeness is likely to put people off, paving the way for an abrasive candidate to develop a substantial following, and vice versa. There is nothing illogical about this preference, even though it might seem self-defeating to the ones on the other side.

Preference for Policies

Preferences may seem whimsical, particularly to those who are more concerned about concrete policy positions. There are of course very sophisticated methods of evaluating the efficacy of policies, though the allegations of partisanship are never far away from any such evaluation. But what is more relevant is that any large scale research study can at best hope to be right on average. The trouble with averages is that they hide a wide variety of disparities within them. For instance, the models of an economist extolling the virtues of migration might be cold comfort to an unemployed voter. So what does an individual voter do when the results of such a study do not match up with his or her lived reality? They rely on their subjective sense of wellbeing.
to decide whom to vote for. Probably this is what loads the electoral dice heavily in favor of an incumbent whose policies (or at least their outcomes) do not have to be evaluated in the abstract.

It is, of course, possible that each individual voting based on their own set of personal outcomes may not lead to the best choice for everyone. But best is a tricky term that requires more studies by experts using averages to aggregate experiences. It is perhaps for this reason that individual citizens and their votes form the basis of most modern democracies, despite the outcome often not being to everyone’s liking.

The Voting Decision

Voting is a strange exercise in decision making. Economists posit that in most circumstances people make incremental choices, not categorical ones. When buying apples, we tradeoff the value of an additional apple with the price we must pay for it. We could always stop buying apples after the fifth one and start buying oranges instead. However, when we vote, there are no increments, the choice is binary and leaders, like people, come in packages. Such categorical choices mean that all tradeoffs have to be evaluated ex-ante or we risk being stuck with a leader we do not like for four years. Not only are these choices riskier, but we also do not have much training in making them.

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What makes this choice even tougher is that the best we can do to is to use proxies, personality and policies to estimate the only thing that we care about, outcomes in the future. No good leader, most people will agree, can merely do as willed by the populace, that would kill the essence of a representative democracy. We expect leaders to have the vision and the grit to face up to new challenges that might arise. Churchill spent years in the wilderness arguing against the British government’s policy of appeasing the Germans. Jobs spent years building up his vision of the future after being kicked out of Apple. It takes a special kind of character to persevere when all around you have given up the ghost and a very high degree of competence to eventually do better than anyone expected. The lives of contentious leaders like Steve Jobs and Churchill offer a useful blueprint with which to judge and identify who to vote for in the 2020 US Presidential Elections – Trump or Biden. Most of us might not want either of them as a friend, but if we were in for a tough fight, we would very likely want them on our side.

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