Our decisions have consequences. Decisions shape our day to day existence and determine our future. Decisions determine what we do, how we spend our time, who we spend our time with, which relationships we nurture, how we pursue goals, how we earn, spend, save, and invest money, where we live, what we eat, when we seek medical treatment, how we cope with adversity and stress, and how we respond to risk. Decisions can be influenced by cold or hot cognitions.

Cold cognitions are those processes without inherent emotional valence (eg, mathematical calculations), whereas hot cognitions integrate intense emotions (eg, in the heat of the moment, fight or flight).

In our current political climate, politicians design advertising, speeches, and events to provoke intense emotions to influence voters’ decision about who should be the next president of the United States. Although some may have cold cognitions about the choice (which policies reflect my values?), most voters will decide based on their emotions and hot cognitions. And the reigning emotions of the day are outrage and fear.

The news is full of stories of people expressing outrage about the federal government’s incompetence in managing the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) crisis and its tone-deaf response to the tragedies of Black people being senselessly murdered by police along with the realization about how pervasive and poisonous systemic racism and white supremacy is an integral part of this country. Those who are outraged support the Black Lives Matter movement and have decided to do something anti-racist, even questioning their own beliefs to try to be better. Those who are outraged about the current administration will decide to vote for former Vice President Joe Biden.

The news is also full of stories of people expressing fear about having their freedom curtailed by the social distancing and mask-wearing requirements mandated by the government and health officials during the COVID-19 crisis. Their narrative is that the government is going to take over all aspects of their lives and destroy their ability to make a living. Some also fear that they will lose their White privilege to people of color and tend to blame Black citizens for their own plight rather than the outcome of systemic racist policies. They also fear that the “radical left” will somehow destroy the country. But President Donald Trump’s overriding central message contains something more ominous and complicated. His emotional arguments appeal to “res-sentiments”—a blend of resentment and nostalgic sentiment. In a fascinating analysis of rhetoric, Trump consistently evokes an unending cast of threatening enemies who want to destroy a (paradoxical impotent) section of his base (White men) who feel that they are the victims who then feel resentful and seek revenge. In this way, Trump keeps the emotional heat up, provokes hot cognitions in his followers, and convinces them that only he can save them from calamity.

One can only hope that voters can use more cold cognitions to make the best choice in November.

REFERENCES
