

## Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

« Room for Debate Home

« Back to Discussion

### The Psychology of the 'Birther' Myth

What does it say about the country that 45 percent of Republicans believe Obama is foreign-born?

#### A Matter of Motivated 'Reasoning'

April 21, 2011

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Are people who believe that Obama was not born in the United States simply ill informed? That seems unlikely, given the substantial media coverage of the issue, and how many Republicans give this response. They can't all be uninformed. And if we look at so-called "birther" Web sites, it turns out many have quite a lot of information – mostly efforts to call into question the authenticity of the Certificate of Live Birth that has been released.

The reality is that "facts" are unlikely to mean much to those who believe in their gut that Obama is not American. Political psychologists call this "motivated reasoning." It goes something like this: I dislike someone; I learn something positive that should make me feel better about him; instead, I dislike him as much or even more. This is clearly irrational, but our feelings about people are complicated, and we tend to hold on to them even in the face of contradictory information. This is not unique to those who dislike Obama.

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We are all somewhat impervious to new information, preferring the beliefs in which we are already invested. We often ignore new contradictory information, actively argue against it or discount its source, all in an effort to maintain existing evaluations. Reasoning away contradictions this way is psychologically easier than revising our feelings. In this sense, our emotions color how we perceive "facts."

A great deal of research, including a paper colleagues and I published in the August 2010 *Political Psychology* shows this effect to be pretty strong, but not unlimited. After all, we do change our minds about people from time to time. But it appears to require both a lot of data that challenges our beliefs and the motivation to want to change.

In the case of President Obama, people who already dislike him at a gut level have little motivation to revise their beliefs, whether about his place of birth or, as we have found in other research, the persisting belief that he is Muslim. It's not the evidence that matters. Feelings come first, and evidence is used mostly in service of those feelings. Evidence that supports what is already believed is accepted, that which contradicts it is not.

So the smart bet is that the birthplace issue, the Muslim issue, and any other ways in which Obama can be portrayed as outside the mainstream are not going away. And no amount of data to the contrary will change that for some people. The simple reality is people feel before they think. And when those feelings are strong enough, facts take a back seat.

Topics: Barack Obama, Politics

<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/04/21/barack-obama-and-the-psychology-of-the-birther-myth/a-matter-of-motivated-reasoning>