Behavior

Political heckler: Throw the bum out!

There are lots of theories on political heckling, but most psychologists feel that it is influential in shaping audience attitudes. Some think heckling hurts the politician; others think it helps the politician by causing a backlash. And still others think it polarizes audience opinions, exacerbating positive and negative feelings.

A new study in the October JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY sports more theories, and calls the others "myths." Ohio State University psychologists Lloyd R. Sloan, Robert E. Love and Thomas M. Ostrom showed videotapes of 1970 political speeches by Richard Nixon and Edmund Muskie (D-Me.) to about 200 Ohio State students. Hecklers were planted in some of the small viewing groups and assailed the speakers. Questionnaries filled out before, immediately after and two months after the viewing, showed some unexpected results.

Viewers who considered themselves neutral before the speeches and who were exposed to heckling were found afterwards to be more negative toward the speakers than neutral viewers not exposed to heckling. A second finding is that heckling did not help the speaker through a backlash effect. And, third, the team found that rather than polarizing audience members, heckling actually nudged extremists toward the middle. All the effects were found to persist over two months.

These findings, the team says, could have great political importance. If it is true that neutral audience members are the most persuadable and are the targets of much political campaigning, then the finding that heckling turns "neutrals" to "negatives" and keeps them that way for two months (the duration of many campaigns) could lead to some new strategies by politicians.

A fright in time saves nine

Did you ever close your eyes or cover your face during the scariest scene of a monster movie, only to peek through your fingers out of uncontrollable curiosity? Well, this temporary triumph of curiosity over fear may be part of an innate behavior pattern, common both to people and monkeys, according to a report in the Oct. 11 NATURE.

Cambridge University animal behaviorists N. K. Humphrey and G. R. Keeble measured monkey's preferences for "monkey monster movies" and blank white screens. Young male rhesus monkeys were placed before two screens and given buttons that controlled the duration of frightening visual stimuli and blank white images. The team chose 15 "anomalous objects" to scare the monkeys, including a toy snake, burning paper, a mop-head wearing a human mask and a lavoratory brush.

On the basis of this and other tests, the team found that fear, noise or redness (monkeys hate red) evoke a common factor of "unpleasure" in the animals which is "strictly subservient to 'interest.'" On the average, during the first quarter of the test time, the monkeys chose to see the frightening objects more than half of the time, but soon sated their curiosities and for the remainder of the test time, chose the blank white screens more than half the time.

The things a man or animal most needs to know often are not pleasant, the team says, but probably aid future understanding and avoidance of danger or discomfort. In a larger sense, the team says, the lesson to be learned is this: "The benefits that come from increased understanding outweigh the immediate rewards of a comfortable life."