Hunger increases support for social welfare

If we are hungry when we're asked about our attitude towards welfare, we are more likely to show support for a social welfare policy. This is a biological impulse which ensures survival, new research suggests.

Are you one of those people whose mood changes when your blood sugar levels are low?

Then read on, because new research reveals that this may not only affect your mood; it may also affect your political leanings.

Two new studies, published in the journals *Psychological Science* [1] and *Political Psychology* [2], show that when we are hungry and when our blood sugar levels are low, we tend to be more supportive of left-wing political parties than those on the right wing, at least when it comes to questions about social welfare policy.

"Whether you answer immediately before or after lunchtime is just as important when it comes to assessing your political leanings as your education or your job, or whether you are unemployed,” says Michael Bang Petersen, an associate professor of political science at Aarhus University.

Blood sugar levels affect our political stance

In one of the two studies, the researchers asked participants to fast for four hours after which they were served a glass of either Sprite or Sprite Zero, which contains no sugar.

This meant that one group was left with a low blood sugar level, while the other had a high blood sugar level.

"We carried out blood sugar tests on both groups before and after, and we observed that the group with low blood sugar levels was more inclined to support a left-wing welfare policy than the group with high blood sugar levels,” says Petersen, who carried out the two studies together with colleague Lene Aarøe, also of Aarhus University.

The second study consisted partly of comparing attitudes to social welfare policies in regular voters, who had participated in the study either immediately before or after lunchtime.

This study also showed that people were more likely to support a social welfare policy before lunch.

Sharing is a basic instinct

It is well documented in psychology and biology that humans are equipped with basic impulses and instincts, formed through our evolutionary history in which our ancestors have lived in groups over many millennia.

“What’s interesting when you look at politics in a slightly broader perspective is that it has been an integral
part of our species for millions of years,” says Petersen. “As herd creatures, we have constantly had to discuss and figure out how to share the group’s resources.”

Evolution is driven by the genes that survive long enough in one organism to be passed on to another organism. When resources were scarce, it was important to be able to argue for a distribution which facilitated one’s own survival and reproduction in the best possible way.

"We know from anthropological studies that a crucial context in which this discussion takes place is when people are hungry. Here, scientists found – not surprisingly – that hungry people tend to ask others for help,” says the researcher.

"So the hypothesis and the thought behind our experiment is that if we have inherited psychological mechanisms that represent questions about welfare and sharing, then perhaps it’s fair to expect that hunger affects people’s attitudes to such questions in a modern political context.”

So, according to Petersen, when we feel hunger and have low blood sugar levels, our bodies register this deficiency as a sign of scarce resources and as a result it signals us to support a policy of sharing, so we can get help from others.

**Biological impulses are potent political factors**

Research into the possible link between hunger and attitudes falls into the category of basic research, which means that the researchers set out to learn something new, without it necessarily having any practical use.

Petersen believes, however, that one of the consequences of this research is that politicians can change the way they perceive us as citizens.

"When politicians try to figure out how to get the citizens to behave appropriately, it is not fair to expect that dangling a financial carrot in front of them is all that’s needed. They also need to take into account that we are complex psychological and biological beings.”

The two studies form part of a new series of political and psychological research which indicates that we humans are affected by a long series of biological impulses when it comes to political issues.

"Researchers have long had a notion that political stances are mainly determined by our reason and the environment and culture in which we travel,” says Petersen. “But our research suggests that our biological impulses are quite potent in this context.”

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Read the Danish version of this article at videnskab.dk [13]

A new study suggests that people are more likely to show support for a social welfare policy before lunch than after lunch. (Photo: Colourbox) [14]

When we feel hunger and our blood sugar levels are low, our bodies register the lack of food as a sign of scarce resources, signalling that we should support a policy of sharing, so we can get help from others. (Photo: Colourbox) [15]

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Fact box
The study of political attitudes before and after lunch is based on statistics from four survey studies of regular voters’ attitudes to issues such as social welfare.

Two of the studies were carried out in England and two in Denmark.

The studies also show that participants who completed the survey before lunch were more positively inclined towards a social welfare policy than those who were asked after lunch.

The hypothesis and the thought behind our experiment is that if we have inherited psychological mechanisms that represent questions about welfare and sharing, then perhaps it’s fair to expect that hunger affects people’s attitudes to such questions in a modern political context.

Michael Bang Petersen


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