

## WHY WORRY? BECAUSE IT'S GOOD FOR US

by Stephen Boucher and George E. Marcus

**Viewpoint Vol. 12 No. 33 : 14 September 2006**

How can we deal with immigration and revitalize economic growth? How quickly should EU membership be extended? Where should Europe end? What future for the EU?

The lifeblood of democracy is healthy deliberation – not mere conversations and one-sided debates, but discussions which require exposure to conflicting views and, on the part of the participants, a willingness to be challenged and to listen.

Yet people read newspapers, attend political debates, take part in election polls, and watch political debates on TV in ever-diminishing numbers. Recent elections highlighted this alienation throughout the EU. Even in free societies awash with information, people rarely expose themselves to conflicting opinions.

Social psychologists have shown how most of us shut off when faced with contradictory opinions. This is known as 'selection bias'. People hear and retain arguments better when they support their original opinion. And the process of 'group polarization' means that in a group conversation a dominant viewpoint tends to submerge contrary viewpoints.

So how to make society listen more carefully to dissident and new arguments?

Recently, neuroscience has revealed that emotion plays a key role in people's receptiveness, and it also seems that the ability to take in new ideas increases with anxiety levels.

If you or I are in a comfortable routine, we will not feel compelled to face contradiction. If an outside party tries to force his or her views on us, we will feel threatened and shut out the arguments.

The – unusual – state conducive to increased receptivity is that middle ground which scientists call 'anxiety'.

It occurs when we are faced with unfamiliar terrain, encourages exploration of new possibilities and alignments, and promoted consideration of opposing viewpoints, compromise, and accommodation with those who hold different views.

The unresolved future of the Constitutional Treaty, the open-ended debate on the European project, the eerie feeling that everyone is waiting for leadership to take the EU forward leave us in a state of expectation. That might just increase society's overall ability to listen.

In France, the presidential campaign offers the prospect of a renewed political landscape. For the first time in nearly 20 years, the two – so far – leading presidential contestants are untested. Nicolas Sarkozy talks of bringing in a 'rupture'. Ségolène Royal is perceived as an outsider within her own ranks. Both strategically blur traditional ideological lines between Left and Right.

This generates a suspense unseen in recent presidential campaigns.

In fact, more uncommon policy proposals are being aired –whether they are valuable or not is another matter. The range of options on the future of Europe is open, from a federalist vision, proposed by Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, to, for instance, Sarkozy's suggestion of a 'directoire' of Europe's six largest countries.

France's economic and social model is openly questioned. The debate on the Constitutional Treaty, although imperfect, demonstrated citizens' keen desire to be part of the discussion.

France and the EU may well have reached that emotional state which neuroscience suggest can foster a genuine debate. This openness can help overcome constrained political mindsets if politicians introduce bold visions and innovative ideas, bring in different stakeholders to overcome societal rigidities, and appeal to people's true needs, rather than follow the grain of focus groups and electoral stereotypes.

Will today's anxiety be put to good use? We are anxious to believe so.

*Stephen Boucher is Co-Secretary General of Notre Europe, a think tank dedicated to European integration [www.notre-europe.asso.fr](http://www.notre-europe.asso.fr)*

*George E. Marcus is Professor of Political Science at Williams College (Williamstown), editor of the forthcoming *The Affect Effect: The Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking* and author of *Behavior and The Sentimental Citizen**