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SIMI AN LOGIC

By KYLE SMITH

October 28, 2007 -- The evidence is in. Science has spoken. Democrats are dumber than chimpanzees.

But let me back up a bit, to something that fascinates economists, psychologists and cognitive scientists. Ready to play? It's called "The Ultimatum Game."

Say you're sitting half-consciously over your \$7 cost-a-lot-tay in Starbucks. You're alone. Meanwhile, at that exact moment, someone else is sitting alone in some other Starbucks. Suddenly Glinda the Good Witch walks in with her magic wand and tells you: Great news! I've got a thousand bucks here and I'm giving it away!

Glinda gives the money to you, on two conditions. One, you must offer some of it - a penny or more - to the other customer, Person X, whom you will never meet. If X accepts what you offer, X gets to keep that amount and you get the rest.

If X rejects your offer, though, Glinda takes her money and disappears with a wave of the wand. Both you and X get nothing.

So what do you do? If you offer X \$500, X is bound to say yes. But what if you offer only \$400 and reserve \$600 for yourself? Not fair, is it? But how could X turn it down? Even if you offered ten bucks, X should say yes. Ten bucks buys a drink. Who would turn down a free drink?

A shelf full of experiments, though, says that if you were the one being offered \$100, or ten percent of the total - free money, no strings attached - you would say no, and wind up with bupkis. Why?

Prof. Angela Stanton of Chapman University, who has extensively researched various aspects of the ultimatum game, says that even those offered ten percent - \$100 in this case - are at least 95 percent likely to reject it. These rejecters don't misunderstand the rules, nor are they crazy, experiments show.

The rejecter is acting entirely in his own interest: X gets a payoff that's easily worth a hundred bucks - a groovy high from a chemical released in the brain. I call this the Spite High. "The reward is a drug," says Prof. Stanton. "Dopamine."

The Spite High reminds me of the Democratic reaction to tax cuts. Say Glinda the Good President offers to cut taxes for everyone. President Bush did indeed do this, to howls of protest from virtually every Dem in the land, because though an across-the-board tax cut benefits everyone, it especially benefits those who pay lots of taxes: the rich.

The Democrats said they were worried about being fair, but look back to the ultimatum game. Stanton says that experiments have shown that a concern for fairness, or "altruistic punishment," is not a motive for rejectionitis. (The Democrats also moaned about the deficit. They can no longer be taken seriously. Over the last 40 years the deficit has averaged 2.4 percent of GDP. Today it's 1.2 percent.)

Stopping the tax cut would have given selfish Democrats a big reward: it would have made them drunk on their own spite.

Chimps, it turns out, don't have this problem when they play the ultimatum game. If you offer them something or nothing, they take something, even if they know the other chimp is hogging most of the goodies, according to an experiment from the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology published in the Oct. 5 issue of the journal *Science*. If you're getting richer, why should it bother you that others are doing even better?

Politics has more variables than the ultimatum game, and if 95 percent of Americans would reject the 10 percent offer, then Republicans would fail the chimp test too. Voters often choose against their own long-term interests; see John Kerry, who never misses a chance to vote to raise his own taxes. But Republicans are smart enough to vote like chimps when they cast a ballot for tax cuts.

Is that because they're the Greedy Old Party, a bunch of plutocrats who are in the position of the decider who gets the thousand dollars and decides how much to give away? What about working-class rural Republicans who shop at Wal-Mart? Shouldn't they get a spite surge by voting against tax cuts? In other words: What's the matter with Kansas?

There are limits to what a lab experiment can tell us, but maybe the lab hasn't tried. There hasn't been a major published experiment, says Prof. Stanton, that tried to distinguish how Democrats stack up to Republicans in the ultimatum game.

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