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BASICS

Political Animals (Yes, Animals)

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Correction Appended

As the candidates have shown us in the succulent telenovela that is the 2008 presidential race, there are many ways to parry for political power. You can go tough and steely in an orange hunter's jacket, or touchy-feely with a Kleenex packet. You can ally yourself with an alpha male like Chuck Norris, befriend an alpha female like [Oprah Winfrey](#) or split the difference and campaign with your mother. You can seek the measured endorsement of the town elders or the restless energy of the young, showily handle strange infants or furtively slam your opponents.

Just as there are myriad strategies open to the human political animal with White House ambitions, so there are a number of nonhuman animals that behave like textbook politicians. Researchers who study highly gregarious and relatively brainy species like rhesus monkeys, baboons, dolphins, sperm whales, elephants and wolves have lately uncovered evidence that the creatures engage in extraordinarily sophisticated forms of politicking, often across large and far-flung social networks.

Male dolphins, for example, organize themselves into at least three nested tiers of friends and accomplices, said Richard C. Connor of the [University of Massachusetts](#) at Dartmouth, rather like the way human societies are constructed of small kin groups allied into larger tribes allied into still larger nation-states. The dolphins maintain their alliances through elaborately synchronized twists, leaps and spins like Blue Angel pilots blazing their acrobatic fraternity on high.

Among elephants, it is the females who are the born politicians, cultivating robust and lifelong social ties with at least 100 other elephants, a task made easier by their power to communicate infrasonically across miles of savanna floor. Wolves, it seems, leaven their otherwise strongly hierarchical society with occasional displays of populist umbrage, and if a pack leader proves a too-snappish tyrant, subordinate wolves will collude to overthrow the top cur.

Wherever animals must pool their talents and numbers into cohesive social groups, scientists said, the better to protect against predators, defend or enlarge choice real estate or acquire

mates, the stage will be set for the appearance of political skills — the ability to please and placate, manipulate and intimidate, trade favors and scratch backs or, better yet, pluck those backs free of botflies and ticks.

Over time, the demands of a social animal's social life may come to swamp all other selective pressures in the environment, possibly serving as the dominant spur for the evolution of ever-bigger vote-tracking brains. And though we humans may vaguely disapprove of our political impulses and harbor "Fountainhead" fantasies of pulling free in full glory from the nattering tribe, in fact for us and other highly social species there is no turning back. A lone wolf is a weak wolf, a failure, with no chance it will thrive.

Dario Maestriperi, a primatologist at the [University of Chicago](#), has observed a similar dilemma in humans and the rhesus monkeys he studies.

"The paradox of a highly social species like rhesus monkeys and humans is that our complex sociality is the reason for our success, but it's also the source of our greatest troubles," he said. "Throughout human history, you see that the worst problems for people almost always come from other people, and it's the same for the monkeys. You can put them anywhere, but their main problem is always going to be other rhesus monkeys."

As Dr. Maestriperi sees it, rhesus monkeys embody the concept "Machiavellian" (and he accordingly named his recent popular book about the macaques "Macachiavellian Intelligence").

"Individuals don't fight for food, space or resources," Dr. Maestriperi explained. "They fight for power." With power and status, he added, "they'll have control over everything else."

Rhesus monkeys, midsize omnivores with ruddy brown fur, long bearded faces and disturbingly humanlike ears, are found throughout Asia, including in many cities, where they, like everybody else, enjoy harassing the tourists. The monkeys typically live in groups of 30 or so, a majority of them genetically related females and their dependent offspring.

A female monkey's status is usually determined by her mother's status. Male adults, as the ones who enter the group from the outside, must establish their social positions from scratch, bite, baring of canines and, most importantly, rallying their bases.

"Fighting is never something that occurs between two individuals," Dr. Maestriperi said. "Others get involved all the time, and your chances of success depend on how many allies you have, how wide is your network of support."

Monkeys cultivate relationships by sitting close to their friends, grooming them at every

possible opportunity and going to their aid — at least, when the photo op is right. “Rhesus males are quintessential opportunists,” Dr. Maestriperi said. “They pretend they’re helping others, but they only help adults, not infants. They only help those who are higher in rank than they are, not lower. They intervene in fights where they know they’re going to win anyway and where the risk of being injured is small.”

In sum, he said, “they try to gain maximal benefits at minimal cost, and that’s a strategy that seems to work” in advancing status.

Not all male primates pursue power by appealing to the gents. Among olive baboons, for example, a young male adult who has left his natal home and seeks to be elected into a new baboon group begins by making friendly overtures toward a resident female who is not in estrous at the moment and hence not being contested by other males of the troop.

“If the male is successful in forming a friendship with a female, that gives him an opening with her relatives and allows him to work his way into the whole female network,” said Barbara Smuts, a biologist at the [University of Michigan](#). “In olive baboons, friendships with females can be much more important than political alliances with other males.”

Because males are often the so-called dispersing sex, while females stay behind in the support network of their female kin, females form the political backbone among many social mammals; the longer-lived the species, the denser and more richly articulated that backbone is likely to be.

With life spans rivaling ours, elephants are proving to possess some of the most elaborate social networks yet observed, and their memories for far-flung friends and relations are well in line with the species’ reputation. Elephant society is organized as a matriarchy, said George Wittemyer, an elephant expert at the University of California, Berkeley, with a given core group of maybe 10 elephants led by the eldest resident female. That core group is together virtually all the time, traveling over considerable distances, stopping to dig water holes, looking for fresh foliage to uproot and devour.

“They’re constantly making decisions, debating among themselves, over food, water and security,” Dr. Wittemyer said. “You can see it in the field. You can hear them vocally disagree.” Typically, the matriarch has the final say, and the others abide by her decision. If a faction disagrees strongly enough and wants to try a different approach, “the group will split up and meet back again later,” said Dr. Wittemyer.

Age has its privileges, he said, and the older females, even if they are not the biggest, will often get the best spots to sleep and the best food to eat. But it also has its responsibilities, and a matriarch is often the one to lead the charge in the face of conflicts with other elephants or

predatory threats, sometimes to lethal effect.

Hal Whitehead of Dalhousie University and his colleagues have found surprising parallels between the elephant and another mammoth mammal, the sperm whale, possessor of the largest brain, in absolute terms, that the world has ever known. As with elephants, sperm whale society is sexually segregated, the females clustering in oceanic neighborhoods 40 degrees north or south of the Equator, and the males preferring waters around the poles.

As with elephants, the core social unit is a clan of some 10 or 12 females and their offspring. Sperm whales also are highly vocal. They communicate with one another using a Morse code-like pattern of clicks. Each clan, Dr. Whitehead said, has a distinctive click dialect that the members use to identify one another and that adults pass to the young. In other words, he said, "It looks like they have a form of culture."

Nobody knows what the whales may have to click and clack about, but it could be a form of voting — time to stop here and synchronously dive down in search of deep water squid, now time to resurface, move on, dive again. Clans also seem to caucus on which males they like and will mate with more or less as a group and which ones they will collectively spurn. By all appearances, female sperm whales are terrible size queens. Over the generations, they have consistently voted in favor of enhanced male mass. Their dream candidate nowadays is some fellow named Moby, and he's three times their size.

Correction: January 23, 2008

Because of a production error, the continuation of an article in Science Times on Tuesday about politics in some species of animals was published out of order. The top of the second column of type, above the illustration, is continued at the top of the third column, followed by the bottom of the third column, the bottom of the second column and the top of the fourth column.

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