Why do So Many People have so Much Difficulty Forming Accurate Political Beliefs?

Part 1: How two ubiquitous but highly error-prone forms of reasoning make it difficult for even highly intelligent people to discover truth

Are you perplexed by the extent to which people on the side of the political aisle opposite yours form such strong political beliefs and supporting arguments – beliefs and arguments you are *certain* are flawed -- from so little, and such incredibly one-sided, information? Do you wonder why even many highly intelligent and highly educated people have so much difficulty reasoning objectively and discovering truth? Do you wonder why they are so darned resistant to considering other perspectives? Do you wonder why their entire view of the world is so … crazy?

An understanding of the Science of Epistemic Rationality – the science of how we form our beliefs, and whether our beliefs are true – sheds significant light on how most people form their political beliefs, as well as beliefs about scientific, economic, sociologic, and many other complex issues. In the present-day era of misinformation and disinformation, an era in which various factions are utilizing highly sophisticated methods and technology in an attempt to shape peoples' entire worldview, this science may be one of the most important things you could learn.

In this three-part essay, I make the case that there is a small minority of people who truly do reason in the objective, highly epistemically rational ways I outline just a few paragraphs from now. However, I also show that political reality for most of us is a construct, consisting of sets of beliefs and supporting arguments we have subconsciously selected to support each other, our deep convictions, our worldview, our political ideology, and the beliefs of those we know, love, and trust. In other words, people tend to manufacture their own political reality. Many others, however, have their political worldviews deliberately manufactured for them, by entities with a deep understanding of their flawed forms of reasoning.

In the present essay, Part 1, I explain that two natural, automatic forms of reasoning we all utilize -- *intuitive reasoning* and *argumentative reasoning* -- are not optimized for truth discovery, especially in politics. Indeed, our reasoning frequently leads us astray. In Part 2, I will explain that intelligence, versus (epistemic) rationality, are *very* different concepts. Many highly intelligent and highly educated people are not great at either objective reasoning or truth discovery, and vice versa. Finally, in Part 3, I will explain that if a group of information sources a segment of society trusted worked together to mislead or even to change the worldview of the people who trusted them, most of the people would have no way to know. In an age of information overload and highly sophisticated, highly targeted messaging, therefore, an understanding of the Science of Epistemic Rationality, has become critical.

How we should form political beliefs, if objective reasoning and truth discovery were our sole goals

If your sole goal was objective truth when forming a new political belief (or a belief about a scientific, economic, or other issue that has become political):

1. You would begin by asking yourself -- *am I attempting to build or bolster an argument, or am I trying to arrive at objective truth?* As I'll explain, these are *very* different goals, requiring *very* different approaches.
2. You would make a conscious effort to stay as open-minded and objective as possible. You would resist the urge to simply defer to the first intuitive answer that pops into your mind, recognizing that your intuitions are highly subject to bias. And you would attempt to separate yourself from your existing beliefs, convictions, worldview, and political ideology; from your favored party's political platform; and from the beliefs of those you associate with as you draw your conclusions.
3. You would carefully gather the best evidence and arguments you can find on each side of an issue. You would spend at least as much time considering evidence and arguments that conflict with your existing beliefs, deep convictions, worldview, and political ideology as you spend on evidence and arguments that reinforce them.
4. You would assimilate and analyze the information gathered.
5. You would spend a significant amount of time reflecting, and just *thinking*.
6. You would reach a conclusion you then treat as a working hypothesis, as opposed to a firmly established fact gripped in a tightly clenched fist. In other words, you would keep an open mind, you would challenge your belief regularly, and you would adjust or even change your belief as often as evidence and superior arguments lead you to do so.

You would take a similar approach when determining your overall worldview and overarching political ideology, as open-mindedly as possible reading, assimilating, and contemplating many diverse political and philosophical viewpoints before settling on your own perspectives.

You would again take a similar approach when choosing which politicians, media organizations, and other sources to trust for political information and opinions. You would thoroughly vet them by carefully comparing the information and opinions provided by sources that generally support your existing views with the information and opinions provided by sources from the other side of the political spectrum, and by open-mindedly comparing and contrasting the issues and events each side chooses to cover in the first place. And you would constantly remind yourself that the sources you pay attention to – the sources that almost always tell you good things about the politicians and political party you support and bad things about the politicians and political party you don't support – are not honest, objective, and accurate just because they reinforce your existing political leanings.

The above styles of reasoning would be considered highly epistemically rational, prioritizing objectivity and truth discovery above all else. Unfortunately, however, few people utilize these types of reasoning when forming their political beliefs, as well as their beliefs about economic, scientific, sociologic, and other issues that have become political. Humans find the above styles of reasoning unpleasant. They are extremely time consuming, and they demand a great deal of mental energy.

So what do most of us do instead?

How most of us actually do form political beliefs

When forming beliefs about politics, the significant majority of humans (including the highly intelligent and highly educated) rely on two forms of reasoning that allow them to reach conclusions quickly, without the expenditure of significant mental energy, and without going through any of the above-outlined steps. These forms of reasoning, *intuitive reasoning* and *argumentative reasoning*, allow people to become highly confident in their conclusions, but also make truly objective thinking impossible and frequently lead to error. *Confident,* as I will explain, does not mean *accurate.*

First, we utilize mental shortcuts, such as deferring to our intuitions (i.e. intuitive reasoning).

When most of us form our political beliefs, we utilize mental shortcuts, such as deferring to our intuitions, or relying on "common sense." However, a wide body of literature in the field of judgment and decision making (beginning with a seminal paper in the 1970s from Amos Tversky and Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman) reveals that when people utilize intuitive reasoning (which Tversky and Kahneman referred to as a judgment heuristic), the beliefs they form are highly susceptible to a whole host of mental errors, which they referred to as cognitive biases. The most important biases related to political thinking include:

1. *myside bias*, the tendency to form new beliefs that are highly biased by one's existing beliefs, opinions, attitudes, convictions, worldview, and political ideology. Subconsciously, we seek new beliefs that fit well with our existing worldview, that allow us to keep our vision of the world intact. And we seek new beliefs that support our side.
2. *the tendency to form new beliefs biased by the beliefs of our associates*. Subconsciously, we want to form new beliefs that align well with those of people we know, love, and trust. Those we know, love, and trust; with whom we already have many existing beliefs in common, exert tremendous influence over new beliefs we form.

You are utilizing intuitive reasoning when you come to a conclusion without performing deep analysis, without searching for and analyzing the best evidence and arguments you can find on both sides of an issue, and without then spending time reflecting on the information you have gathered. In other words, you have probably utilized intuitive reasoning if you have come to a conclusion regarding a complex political issue without utilizing a truth discovery process resembling the six-point epistemically rational process provided earlier in this essay. If you are typical – and yes, even if you are highly intelligent and highly educated -- you have probably utilized your intuitions for a large number of your political beliefs

When you accept the first conclusion that pops into your mind, when you defer to your gut feelings or insist that for a particular issue, deep analysis and open-minded reflection are unnecessary and common sense is all that is needed, you are utilizing intuitive reasoning. Your intuitions, though, are not as accurate as you think they are. As above, they frequently lead to bias.

Rationality expert Keith Stanovich has argued compellingly that the most significant of the cognitive biases when it comes to political thinking is *myside bias* (defined above). The political beliefs we form are highly influenced by our existing convictions, those deep beliefs for which we have emotions and even our sense of self-identity involved, including our political party alignment. Once again, our existing beliefs, opinions, and attitudes all influence the new beliefs we form. *Myside bias* is a form of motivated reasoning. We *want* certain beliefs – those that line up nicely with what we already believe and that allow us to keep our worldview intact – to be true. And we *want* to believe them.

Myside bias explains why we so often think the coach of our child's sports team should have given our own child more playing time. It's why we so often feel the referees were biased against the team we favor. *Myside bias* explains why we generally see political leaders on our side as all good, while seeing the other side's leaders as all bad. Far more often than not, *myside bias* leads us to conclude that if a politician accused of a scandal belongs to the party we support, they are innocent, and vice versa. It explains why we so often believe our own side's conclusions about complex scientific issues we barely understand. It explains why we generally support the military actions our political party supports, and why we generally oppose military interventions supported by the other side (unless, of course, our side supports the intervention as well). *Myside bias* is why we generally believe that any new law or policy proposed by politicians on our side of the political aisle is likely to be successful, while believing that the policies favored by the other side are destined to fail. It explains why we so often think our favored candidate won the latest debate. It explains why we so often attribute favorable stock market performance to our side's leaders, and down markets to the other side. It helps explain why we so often form very strong beliefs about highly complex and controversial issues after consulting only the information sources that support our side, and explains why we consider only these sources reliable.

Stanovich and others have argued compellingly that *myside bias* is as least as prevalent in the reasoning of the highly intelligent and highly educated – and may even be *more* prevalent. It

permeates all of our thinking. It is very easy to recognize in those we disagree with. It is *extremely difficult* to recognize in ourselves.

Second, we think backward (that is, our reasoning is argumentative, as opposed to epistemic).

Commonly, we begin by forming a new belief intuitively; the belief is then highly subject to the above biases. Only then do we seek out and identify evidence and arguments to support the belief we have formed. We feel like it's the other way around – that we form a new belief in response to an open-minded and objective review of the evidence -- but it rarely is. So while we may be able to fortify our belief with a large amount of supporting evidence, truly objective, epistemically rational reasoning (such as the 6-step process described earlier) usually does not occur. While a belief-and-supporting-evidence narrative (argument) may be highly sophisticated and seem convincing, the evidence the arguer has armed oneself with is frequently confirmatory only, specifically chosen to support a belief the arguer has formed intuitively. Any evidence that might cause one to reconsider is ignored. *Myside bias* is not limited to the formation of beliefs. Stanovich and other have made the strong case that it also highly influences the gathering of evidence.

Reasoning researcher David Perkins has demonstrated that while the highly intelligent argue more effectively, they tend to use their intelligence to simply store more confirmatory evidence. They generally do not use their intelligence to develop a more complete and balanced understanding of their subject. Yet the ability to store large amounts of supporting evidence in memory, and to produce it during arguments, gives highly intelligent people a high sense of confidence from which they often feel little need to investigate further.

Additionally, highly intelligent people often have superior debating skills. Researcher Peter Ditto has pointed out that "cognitive sophistication may allow people to more skillfully argue for their preferred conclusions, thus improving their ability to convince others – and themselves – that their beliefs are correct".

Argumentative reasoning is ubiquitous, and it may even be biologically ingrained. Reasoning researcher Hugo Mercier and cognitive scientist and philosopher Dan Sperber have made a strong case that objective thinking and the pursuit of objective truth are not even our primary goals when we reason. They make the case that as humans evolved, it was the ability to make and interpret arguments, not objective truth, that was the most crucial. Mercier and Sperber theorize that cooperation was critical to survival, and that effective communication is critical to cooperation. They suggest that the primary purpose of human reasoning relates to communication, and that making persuasive arguments and effectively evaluating the arguments of others are the primary means by which we effectively communicate. According to Sperber and Mercier, "communication plays an obvious role in human cooperation, both in setting common goals and in allocating duties and rights. Argumentation is uniquely effective in overcoming disagreements that are likely to occur." They point out that even when we reason

internally, we are still often making arguments, only proactively, in anticipation of a future verbal exchange that may or may not eventually take place. They therefore hypothesize that reasoning evolved to allow us to persuade others via argumentation, and for evaluating the arguments of others. It did not evolve for the purpose of discovering objective truth.

Argumentative reasoning is very useful for convincing jurors in a courtroom, for winning high school or college debate competitions, and for winning political debates. However, regardless of whether Sperber and Mercier are correct, it is not optimized for truth discovery.

These two forms of reasoning, intuitive reasoning and argumentative reasoning, are associated with at least 3 other "mis-thinking" phenomena that interfere with objective reasoning and with truth discovery:

- *We ignore conflicting evidence and arguments.* In creating our beliefs and arguments, we simply ignore evidence and arguments that would cause us to consider an alternative conclusion, and we write off sources that might provide it as unreliable and dishonest. We now have the sense of satisfaction that we *know*, and we typically feel no need to question or explore further. As we form a new belief-and-supporting-evidence narrative, most of us spend very little mental energy considering that there are still books we have not read, perspectives we have not considered, and theories of which we are not even aware. But this doesn't stop us from developing a high sense of confidence that our belief is correct.
- *We become quite confident – yes, overconfident – in the belief and the narrative we have formed.* As long as the story is coherent with the beliefs we already have, as long as the story we have created makes sense to us, we *know* we are right. The level of confidence we have, however, is much greater than the level of confidence we should have, given the approach we have used to arrive at our conclusion.

  Confidence, it turns out, comes from having created a coherent story that makes sense to us, with little or no conflicting information. It comes from having a set of beliefs that fit together well. As Kahneman has explained, however, while a high level of confidence in one's beliefs is generally associated with the illusion of knowing, it has little to do with whether objective truth has been achieved. A high level of confidence is often even a warning sign that one does not understand the complexity of one's subject matter, does not understand how much information they still have not considered, and does not understand one's own belief-forming approaches and limitations!
- *We develop belief perseverance.* That is, we cling ferociously to the belief we have formed, and refuse to entertain any evidence and arguments that might cause us to reconsider. And we steadfastly refuse to even consider changing our minds.

The above insidious, ubiquitous, permeating, but largely subconscious forms of reasoning allow us to become highly confident in the beliefs we form; the belief-and-supporting-evidence

narratives (arguments) we form this way become part of our reality. While these forms of reasoning are common across the political spectrum, it appears that *myside bias,* which profoundly impacts both the intuitive beliefs we form and the evidence we gather as we form our arguments, is at least as common -- and may be both *more* common and *more* powerful -- in the highly intelligent and the highly educated.

Beliefs are built on beliefs are built on beliefs. Eventually, we end up with a series of myside-biased narratives, all essentially chosen to support each other and our ideology, that together comprise our worldview. For most of us, then, our political worldview is essentially a construct, created in service to our ideology. This worldview becomes our reality, and it becomes extremely difficult to see the world from any other point of view.

Yet where does our ideology, which as explained above serves as the foundation for (and exerts tremendous influence over) our political beliefs, come from? A wide body of evidence reveals that for most, ideology is based largely on the beliefs of those who are most influential in one's life at the time our ideology crystallizes. Often, this occurs in childhood or early adulthood, though there are of course exceptions. We lock it in. Importantly, though, genetics appears to play an important role as well!

As our ideology forms and crystallizes, few of us actively seek out and consider literature that explains the reasoning behind opposing ideologies, and few of us seek out and read political philosophical works on which both one's chosen and opposing ideologies are based. Rather, most simply choose an ideology that makes sense to them, and that allows them to form a coherent view of the world. And most allow those who believe similarly to define opposing ideologies for them. Most of us then hang on to our ideology for life.

But I turn to political information sources that are highly reliable, you may be telling yourself. Yet how do we determine the reliability (accuracy, objectivity, and honesty) of the sources we turn to for political information and opinions? In November, 2023, at the annual meeting of the Society for Judgment and Decision Making in San Francisco, I made the argument that once again, almost all of us utilize the non-reflective, intuition-based approaches outlined above. For most of us, the vetting process I describe earlier in this essay never occurs. If a politician or other political information source provides information that meshes well with our existing beliefs, deep convictions, worldview, and ideology; that meshes well with the beliefs of those we associate with; and that our associates also trust; we tend to consider the source as competent, objective, and honest. We even assume its goals are aligned with our own. Once again, we generally write off sources favorable to the other side as incompetent and untruthful, and we often assign malevolent motives. In other words, *myside bias* affects not only belief formation and evidence gathering; it also exerts tremendous influence over to whom we turn to for information. And as I will explain in greater detail in Part 3 of this essay, if the sources we deem reliable ever worked together to deliberately mislead us or to even shape our entire worldview -- most of us would have no way to know.

Many have claimed that so-called "fact checkers" allow them to determine information source reliability without going through a time-consuming vetting process. However, most

determine that reliability of fact checkers the same way they determine the reliability of their information sources. If a fact checker routinely gives the thumbs up to information that aligns with our existing worldview and ideology, we tend to deem the fact checker reliable. (Notably, in 2025, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta -- the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and Threads -- announced Meta would end its fact-checking program due to fact checker bias.)

In Part 1 of this essay, I have explained how two ubiquitous but highly error-prone forms of reasoning that go hand-in-hand, intuitive reasoning and argumentative reasoning, are common in all people, including the highly intelligent and the highly educated -- and that highly intelligent and highly educated people may actually be *most* susceptible to errors associated with these forms of reasoning.

In Part 2 of this essay, to be published soon, I will explain the key differences between *intelligence* versus *(epistemic) rationality*. As you will see, these are *very* different concepts.

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