

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

Part 2: Intelligence, versus (epistemic) rationality, are VERY different concepts.

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 Part 1 of this essay, I explained how people *should* form political beliefs, when objective reasoning and truth discovery are the primary goals (This 6-step process is summarized in Table 1.). I also explained how two ubiquitous, automatic forms of reasoning we all utilize, *intuitive* reasoning and *argumentative reasoning*, are so often tainted by *myside bias* (defined in Part 1); subconsciously, we search for both beliefs and evidence that support our side, and that allow us to keep our existing view of the world intact.

These forms of reasoning are to at least some extent utilized by everyone, but are at least as common and impactful in the highly intelligent and highly educated as they are in the rest of us. In the present essay, I will explain how *intelligence*, versus (epistemic) *rationality*, are *very* different concepts.

The 6-step process for epistemically rational thinking provided in Part 1 of this three-part essay (and in Table 1, below) demonstrates the three key mental components of epistemically rational thinking according to the model outlined by Stanovich, West, and Toplak in their 2015 academic volume *The Rationality Quotient* (Stanovich and his colleagues have argued compellingly that *intelligence* versus epistemic *rationality* are such different concepts that they should be measured separately.)

The three components include:

1. thinking dispositions, or cognitive styles, associated with the reflective mind.
2. algorithmic-level processing.
3. mindware.

Thinking Dispositions, or Cognitive Styles, Associated with the Reflective Mind:

Thinking dispositions, also referred to as cognitive styles, are those that in the words of Stanovich, foster “thorough and prudent thought, unbiased thought, and unbiased knowledge acquisition.” Thinking dispositions are essentially “ways of thinking.” Thinking dispositions associated with epistemically rational reasoning (and therefore, both objective thinking and truth discovery) include:

- the tendency to base new beliefs on evidence.
- the tendency to weight new evidence against a favored belief heavily.
- the tendency to seek various points of view before coming to a conclusion.
- the tendency to calibrate the degree of strength of one’s opinion to the degree of evidence available.
- the tendency to seek nuance and avoid absolutism.
- the willingness to change one’s mind in the face of new evidence.
- the willingness to consider alternative opinions and evidence.
- the tendency to think extensively about a problem before responding.
- the tendency to spend a great deal of time on a problem before giving up.

Algorithmic-level Processing:

Examples of algorithmic-level processing include:

- reading and comprehending.
- assimilating and applying information.
- analyzing.

These are the types of thinking that are measured by IQ tests. It follows that people who are good at these types of thinking have high IQs, and tend to do well on standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT. Keep in mind, though, that this is only one of the three key components of epistemically rational thinking. Intelligence by itself is not enough, when objective truth is the goal!

Mindware:

Still, what if you have the ideal thinking dispositions, you have great reading, comprehending, assimilating, and analytical skills and are willing to put in some work; but you don’t have the right specialized thinking skills for the political issue in question? For example, what if you are

highly intelligent but have no background in scientific reasoning nor the scientific method, and you are attempting to tackle a science-related question that has become political (or to tackle a non-scientific question using rigorous, scientific-style thinking)?

When a reasoner has the ideal thinking dispositions and high-level algorithmic processing ability, missing or insufficient *mindware*, or specialized “process knowledge,” is still often a barrier to reaching objective truth. Scientific reasoning isn’t the only type of mindware that may be required. A few examples of key mindware include:

- probabilistic thinking (such as Bayesian reasoning).
- scientific thinking, including understanding of the scientific method.
- general statistical reasoning and understanding of general statistical methodology.

But what about myside bias?

When it comes to forming maximally accurate and objective political beliefs, however, ideal thinking dispositions, high-level algorithmic processing, and sufficient mindware still aren't enough!

Stanovich and others have argued compellingly that the above components of epistemically rational thinking still leave us susceptible to *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 and supporting evidence that fit well with our existing worldview, that allow us to keep our vision of the world intact. And we seek new beliefs and supporting evidence that support our side. In Part 1 of this essay, I define and elaborate on the concept of *myside bias*, emphasizing that people of all levels of intelligence, all levels of education, and all political ideologies appear to be equally susceptible – and that if anything, the highly intelligent and highly educated may actually be *more* susceptible. While it is relatively easy to recognize in people on the other side of the political aisle, however, it is much more difficult to recognize in those with whom we are politically aligned. Meanwhile, it is *extremely* difficult recognize in ourselves.

The 6-step process for epistemically rational thinking shown in Table 1 of this essay includes two mechanisms for minimizing *myside bias*, including:

- resisting the urge to simply defer to the first intuitive answer that pops into your mind.
- attempting 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.

The above techniques may sound easy enough. In reality, however, implementing them is profoundly challenging. Unfortunately, if overcoming argumentative reasoning (Step 1 of the 6-stop process) and minimizing *myside bias* (Step 2) cannot be accomplished, attempting Step 3 become pointless – gathering and *open-mindedly* considering the best evidence and arguments on each side of a political issue becomes futile as well.

For most people, eliminating myside bias is likely impossible. This does not mean that we should not try. It does mean, however, that all of our new political beliefs are to at least some extent influenced by our existing day-to-day political beliefs (about issues such as the likely effectiveness of a new policy, the integrity of a recent election, and the appropriate response to a political protest), our deeply held convictions (beliefs about issues such as equality versus equity, systemic racism, climate change, gun control, and abortion), our overarching worldview, and our political ideology.

So what are we to do?

Eliminating intuitive reasoning, argumentative reasoning, and their associated biases (especially *myside bias*) altogether is impossible. So what should we do?

We should begin by understanding the aforementioned six-step epistemically rational process, and by utilizing it when possible, when we form our political beliefs. We should learn about the pervasiveness and the dangers of intuitive reasoning, argumentative reasoning, and myside bias; and we should learn to recognize their presence in others and in ourselves as we form new political beliefs and create new belief-and-supporting-evidence narratives. We should fully vet our information sources, learn about the dangers of deferring to “fact checkers,” and realize that most people determine the reliability (accuracy, objectivity, and honesty) of the information sources they turn to based simply on the extent to which the sources provide information that jibes well with their existing beliefs, opinions, deeply held convictions, worldview, and political ideology. We should understand the profound differences between *intelligence* versus *epistemic rationality*, our ability to reason in ways that maximize both objectivity and our odds of reaching objective truth. We should recognize that intelligence is just one component of fully rational thinking, and that the highly intelligent and highly educated utilize intuitive and argumentative reasoning, and are susceptible to myside bias, at least as often and as much as the rest of us. Once again, many people (in fact, most people) who are highly intelligent and/or highly educated do not think in highly epistemically rational ways when they form their political beliefs. Meanwhile, many who do not possess elite-level intelligence and who do not have advanced degrees approach political issues in ways that are much more objective and accurate.

We should understand that while argumentative reasoning (essentially, backward thinking) frequently leads to a high degree of confidence, *confident* does not mean *accurate*. To quote Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman:

"Confidence is a feeling, which reflects the coherence of the information and the cognitive ease of processing it. It is wise to take admissions of uncertainty seriously, but declarations of high confidence mainly tell you that an individual has constructed a coherent story in his mind, not necessarily that the story is true."

Perhaps most importantly, we can all become a bit more humble -- and yes, a bit less certain -- as we form our political beliefs.

In Parts 1 and 2 of this 3-part essay, I explained that for most of us, our worldview is a construct, consisting of belief-and-supporting-evidence narratives that we subconsciously chose to support our side, and to allow us to keep our existing beliefs intact. In Part 3, I will explain that your worldview can also be deliberately constructed by others -- by those who have a deep understanding of belief science, who have mastery over highly-targeted information delivery techniques, and who want to influence what you believe.

An understanding of the Science of Epistemic, once again, has therefore become critical.

Table 1 -- 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.

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