

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

Part 3: Yes, your political worldview is a construct, that can be remodeled and even entirely reconstructed by others

In Parts 1 and 2 of this 3-part essay, I provided a general introduction to the Science of Epistemic Rationality – the science of how we form our beliefs, and whether our beliefs are true. My emphasis was on politics, and on scientific, economic, sociologic, and other issues that have become political; as I explained the error-prone ways of reasoning we all utilize as we form our beliefs.

To briefly summarize, while some do regularly utilize highly epistemically rational reasoning such as the process shown in Table 1, most of us utilize two forms of reasoning that frequently lead us astray: *intuitive reasoning* and *argumentative reasoning*. We end up with both beliefs and belief-and-supporting-evidence narratives (arguments) that are highly susceptible to *myside bias*.

In other words, our new beliefs and the evidence we use to support them are highly influenced by our existing beliefs, convictions, worldview, and political ideology. They are also highly influenced by the beliefs of our associates. Subconsciously, we search for beliefs that allow us to support our side, and to keep our view of the world intact. We then reason argumentatively, essentially “thinking backward” as we search for confirmatory evidence to support our intuitive belief.

Most of us believe we are forming beliefs based on a careful review of the evidence. For almost all of us, however, most of the time it’s the other way around. A small subset of us are relatively immune from these forms of belief and argument formation, and are relatively immune to *myside bias*. Again, though, this subset is small. Though most of us believe we are part of this select, epistemically rational group, most of us are mistaken. *Myside bias is everywhere*.

It is possible that *myside bias* is biologically ingrained, that there were evolutionary advantages to supporting our side, and to rejecting out-groups. Our brains may have also evolved to adopt the beliefs of those we associate with, the only way to learn (other than by personal experience) for well over 99% of the duration of human existence. While these are just theories, what is clear is that relative to the length of time during which humans have roamed the earth, the information explosion is extremely new. Natural selection takes time. Your brain and your mind clearly did not evolve for the purpose of discovering objective truth from the massive avalanche of never-ending, constantly rotating, fragmented, one-sided, and incomplete political information constantly bombarding you in today’s Information Age.

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, are at least as common -- and may be both *more* common and *more* powerful -- in the

highly intelligent and the highly educated. High IQ, highly educated people can create extremely detailed and compelling one-sided arguments that can convince others, but that can also convince themselves. As I explained in Part 2, *intelligence* and *epistemic rationality* are very different concepts.

Beliefs are built on beliefs are built on beliefs. Our view of the world, then, is a construct of beliefs and narratives we subconsciously choose to support each other and our ideology. Our error-prone forms of reasoning, however, also make it possible for others to construct (or at least remodel) our worldview for us. As I explain in Part 1, *myside bias* also profoundly influences our determinations of which information sources are reliable – that is, accurate, objective, and honest. If a group of information sources we consider reliable worked together to mislead us, or over time to even construct a new worldview for us?

Most of us would have no way to know.

Based on the ways in which we reason, we are much more susceptible to disinformation than we think we are.

By now, we are all familiar with the concept of “fake news,” and much has been written about the dissemination of both disinformation and propaganda. Similarly, much has been written about indiscreet methods governments and other power-seeking organizations use to “nudge” you toward certain behaviors or beliefs. Most of us assume that only other people – generally, those on the other side of the political aisle, and those who are less intelligent – are susceptible to misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and nudges. Most of us assume our own political beliefs and behaviors are rooted in logic, meticulous reasoning, objectivity, and truth. But based on the way we form our beliefs and our arguments about politics, and based on the way we form our beliefs about the reliability of our information sources, the Science of Epistemic Rationality does not back up these assumptions. And once again, it is not just the simple-minded and minimally educated who are susceptible to error-prone thinking, to error-prone identification of information and opinion sources, to disinformation, and to propaganda.

A carefully-worded message repeated over and over tends to sink in – *if* it’s the right message. While we generally reject propaganda and other information that flies in the face of our existing ideology, most of us readily accept information that supports our worldview and/or that is favorable to our side. When we hear that our favored politicians and/or their policies are good, we believe it. When we are told that our side and its policies are bad, or that the other side and its policies are good, we tend to reject it.

Utilizing nothing but factual information, one can make any argument, and tell any story, one wants. So can those who want to influence and even change your beliefs and modify your entire worldview.

In addressing mental shortcuts (such as intuitive reasoning), cognitive biases such as *myside bias*, creation of arguments via backward thinking, and the ignoring of contradictory evidence in my prior essays; I have thus far focused on subconscious processing, whereby a person believes one is pursuing maximally objective thinking and the pursuit of objective truth -- but actually is not.

It should now be apparent that via the *deliberate* use of carefully-selected facts, quotes, and evidence; one can create any argument, and tell any story, one wants.

Think about it. If someone who does not particularly care for you was able to locate and interview many of the people who think the least of you, was willing to take things you have said and done out of context, and was willing to focus exclusively on incriminating evidence while ignoring the exculpatory – and then carefully wove the information into a ‘you suck’ narrative – could they convince people that you are a jerk? Or that you are not very bright? Or both? For almost all of us, the answer is yes. Providers of political information can construct similar narratives regarding political leaders (such as presidents!) the same way. For almost everyone, the extent to which we are willing to believe these narratives, and to incorporate them into our own worldview, is highly dependent on the extent to which we favor the politician in question, and on the extent to which we trust the information sources.

Could they influence your view of your country in the same manner? For example, do you view the United States as a just and admirable country, where everyone has equal opportunity, that should be commended for having created a Constitution and Bill of Rights based on liberty and freedom, for having fought a war to free the slaves, and for having defeated the Nazis? Do you view the United States as a country that was built via theft of Native American land and on the backs of slave labor, and in the present day, as so unjust and unequal that it should be torn down and re-created from scratch? Or, do you believe (as I do) that the U.S. is somewhere in between — a nation built on a solid bedrock of worthy principles and ideals but that still has significant flaws and room for improvement? Yes, there is a good chance that repeated messaging from politicians and media sources you trust, and even agenda-driven social medial influencers, have influenced your view of your country.

Democracy itself is now at stake.

We have entered a dangerous era. Armed with a rapidly improving understanding of the ways in which people think and form beliefs, and with increasingly sophisticated information delivery technology (including highly targeted messages on social media, but now also including artificial intelligence), those propagating disinformation in the pursuit of power are becoming more and more effective. America and many other countries are becoming more and more polarized. And yes, democracy itself is now at stake.

An understanding of the Science of Epistemic Rationality has become critical

We all turn to sources we trust in helping us to decide *what* to believe about the world around us. Few of us, in contrast, turn to sources that teach us *how* to believe. However, in this era of misinformation, disinformation, technologically enhanced propaganda distribution and amplification, and hyperpolarization; I believe that *how to believe is one of the most important things you could learn*. Misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and propaganda are not going away; too many people benefit by disseminating it, and they are becoming better at it.

But why not just teach people *what* to believe, instead of *how*?

While providing information and opinions for the purpose of helping people determine *what* to believe regarding political issues (and other issues, such as scientific issues, that have been politicized) is a critically important function, and while some news and opinion organizations do it competently, honestly, and accurately; I believe it is also critically important to teach people *how* to believe. People will always form many of their political beliefs under the influence of their friends, their family, their teachers, their co-workers, and agents who are actively trying to change their opinions; via both traditional media and social media. And of course, they will also continue to form beliefs about which information and opinion sources are both objective and honest in the first place. Those who understand the Science of Epistemic Rationality – including both their own belief-forming limitations as well as approaches that are more likely to lead to objective truth – are more likely to identify and choose accurate and honest information sources, and they are more likely to form accurate beliefs from the available evidence. In addition, maybe – just *maybe* -- a mutually understood belief-forming framework will begin to allow people with very different beliefs, who trust very different information sources, to begin to relate and communicate.

Perhaps the way to keep society from breaking apart is to teach people the processes by which political beliefs are formed in the first place, and how incredibly susceptible those processes are to error. Perhaps instead of attempting to argue our opinions, we should instead first try to teach our political adversaries about the Science of Epistemic Rationality.

We have now reached a crossroads.

We can learn how to form beliefs and to choose reliable information sources more accurately. Or we can live in a manufactured reality, in which we think how others want us to think, think about what others want us to think about, and believe what others want us to believe.

An understanding of the Science of Epistemic Rationality has become critical. Forming beliefs via the use of intuitions and other mental shortcuts and then confidently proclaiming them as accurate (while having little or no understanding of rationality science) must become socially

unacceptable. The uncritical acceptance of various news and information sources as objective, accurate, and honest; simply because they give us information that we are comfortable with and that meshes with our existing convictions and political leanings, must become unacceptable as well.

If democracy is going to survive, we are going to have to advance in the way we believe. Epistemically rational thinking must become commonplace. Teaching of the Science of Epistemic Rationality to schoolchildren, before their ideologies and worldview are cemented into place, must become ubiquitous. An understanding of rationality science must become expected, and because of the belief-forming limitations we all have, *we must all become much humbler in the conclusions we reach*. When we form our beliefs intuitively, we must become less certain!

The Science of Epistemic Rationality – again, the science of where our political beliefs come from, and whether our beliefs are true -- *must no longer be confined to the world of academia*. It must be taught to all, and it must be understood by all. People must have a common framework for understanding how political beliefs are generally formed, for understanding their limitations, and for understanding how to believe better.

Success is far from guaranteed. But I think it's important to try. Because, once again, democracy itself is now at stake.

For a large number of beliefs, we believe them only because sources we trust told us they are true. From whether climate change represents an existential threat, to whether voting machines can be hacked, to whether the earth truly rotates around the sun, to whether a circle's circumference divided by its diameter truly is pi (3.14), to whether the woman who claims to have given birth to you truly is your biological mother, you have likely independently verified very little. Yet based on the way we form beliefs, we have a tremendous amount of confidence in these and many other beliefs – about politics, economics, science, and many other matters. However, as Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman stated:

“The amount of evidence and its quality do not count for much, because poor evidence can make a very good story. For some of our most important beliefs we have no evidence at all, except that people we love and trust hold these beliefs. Considering how little we know, the confidence we have in our beliefs is preposterous.”

Those whom you trust the most are most capable of fooling you.

And yes, it's easier to fool you than to convince you you've been fooled.

References:

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