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THE IRRATIONAL ATTEMPT TO IMPUTE IRRATIONALITY TO ONE'S POLITICAL OPPONENTS

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In the wake of the surprising 2016 election results—Brexit in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States—the prevailing opinion among political elites in both Europe and America was that the winning electorates in both of these cases were characterized by psychological defects. They were thought to be uninformed and/or xenophobic. They were said to be unintelligent. Subsequent to the 2016 election in the United States, high-caliber publications, from *The Atlantic* (Serwer, 2017) to *The New Republic* (Heer, 2016) to *The Wall Street Journal* (Stephens, 2016), were nearly uniform in their relentless portrayal of the Trump voter as racist, sexist, and xenophobic. In *Foreign Policy* magazine, we were told that “Trump owes his victory to the uninformed” and that his victory was due to “the dance of the dunces” (Brennan, 2016). In the United Kingdom, the portrayal of the Brexit voter in the elite media was largely similar (see Fuller, 2019). The agenda here was sometimes baldly displayed, as in Traub’s (2016) essay titled “It’s Time for the Elites to Rise Up Against the Ignorant Masses.”

The list of psychological defects ascribed to these voters extended to my own specialty area—individual differences in rational judgment and decision-making. In September of 2016, I published, in collaboration with my colleagues Richard West and Maggie Toplak, a book titled *The Rationality Quotient*. As the author of a rationality test, I began to receive many communications that assumed I was the perfect person to prove what my interlocutors thought was beyond doubt: that both the Brexit voters and the Trump voters were irrational. I was in a good position to engage with these queries at the time because I had already moved on from the 2016 book and was working on a book on mysided reasoning (Stanovich, 2021). Many of the main convictions that fuel mysided thinking derive from partisanship and ideology. However, my examination of this literature did not provide comfort for my correspondents. In this chapter, I will outline my two discomfiting conclusions. The first is that I find no strong converging evidence that the partisan *opponents* of the largely left-wing social science researchers who study voter psychology (Duarte et al., 2015) are any less rational than are their partisan supporters (not only the Trump voters, but other ideological opponents as well). This null finding regarding partisan differences in rationality suggests a second, somewhat ironic, conclusion: that the social scientists who study partisan differences are subject to a particularly virulent version of the so-called bias blind spot (Pronin, 2007).

1 Instrumental and epistemic critiques of the Trump voters

Partisan overlap in voting patterns at the presidential level is quite high from election to election in the United States. Thus, when we talk about the Trump voters, the first thing to understand is that the vast majority of them were Romney voters in the previous election and McCain voters in the election before that. Statistically, most Trump voters were standard-issue Republicans. Some analyses, such as that of Ganzach et al. (2019) attempt to analyze whether there were characteristics on the margin (that is, over and above party affiliation) that were different among the Trump voters, but it is important to realize that analyses such as these are isolating a tiny sliver of voters on the margins (al-Gharbi, 2018). The small sliver who may have tipped the election toward Trump in the Electoral College are not the same as the much, much larger entity “Trump voters.” Ganzach et al. (2019) analyzed affective warmth ratings of Trump (and other presidential candidates) in a regression equation using a number of predictor variables. They found that the dominant beta weight (a statistic indicating the strength of a variable independent of others with which it is correlated) when predicting ratings of Trump was for party affiliation (0.610). That predictor was orders of magnitude stronger than other significant predictors such as sex (−0.091) and verbal ability (−0.061).

It follows, then, that when the claim is that the Trump voters were irrational, statistically, it entails that the Romney voters and the McCain voters were irrational too. Thus, when I analyze the evidence on rationality in this chapter, I will use research which looks at partisan affiliation and ideology as well, because it has a 90% overlap with comparisons based strictly on the Trump vs. Clinton voters in 2016.

Another caveat is that my focus is on the comparison between voters of different types (Clinton voters vs. Trump voters)—not the more global question of the absolute level of rationality among voters, which is a much larger and more difficult issue. The absolute level question is, in fact, much more conceptually complex (see Caplan, 2007; Fuller, 2019; Lomasky, 2008).

A common complaint about less-affluent Republican voters (and by implication, Trump voters) among Democratic critics is that they were irrational because they were voting against their own interests. Over a decade ago, this was the theme of Thomas Frank’s (2004) popular book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* and it has recurred frequently since. The idea is that lower income people who vote Republican are voting against their interests because they would receive more government benefits if they voted Democratic. Many of these critiques contain the presumptions that, to be instrumentally rational, preferences must be self-interested and that people’s primary desires are monetary. But theories of utility maximization contain no such presumptions. Utility refers to the good that accrues when people achieve their goals—and a person’s goal is not always to maximize pleasure. More important for discussions of voter rationality, however, is that utility does not just mean monetary value. For instance, people gain utility from holding and expressing specific beliefs and values (more on this below). Utility theory also does not dictate that every goal has to reflect strict self-interest in a narrow sense. We can have as our goal that other people achieve their goals.

These *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* critiques of working-class Republican voters are thus misplaced. They gratuitously insult their targets by assuming that these voters *should* care only about their material interests. For example, liberals who work for nonprofit organizations are often choosing their values over monetary reward. And likewise, conservatives

joining the military are often also choosing their values over monetary reward. The *What's the Matter with Kansas?* argument seems to ignore or deny this symmetry. Even if part of the *Kansas* critique is correct (Republicans are voting against their purely economic interests), these voters are not necessarily irrational because they may be sacrificing monetary gain in order to express their values or worldview.

If you are particularly ill-disposed toward Trump voters, at this point you may still be feeling that, deep down, there is something else wrong with them that was not covered in my discussion of instrumental rationality. You might feel that something in the domain of knowledge is wrong with the Trump voters: they don't know enough, or they seem to be misinformed, or they don't seem to listen to evidence. You would be right that there is another aspect of rationality that we must assess: epistemic rationality.

Concern with Trump voters in the epistemic domain is, however, not unique because this is a charge (the charge of epistemic irrationality) that Democrats have made about Republicans for some time now. We have become accustomed to critiques of conservative Republicans who do not accept the conclusions of climate science, or of evolutionary biology. These critiques are correct, of course. The role of human activity in climate change is established science, and evolution is a biological fact. Thus, it would be very tempting to say: well, the Democrats get climate science right, and Republicans get it wrong; the Democrats get evolution right, and conservative Republicans get it wrong; so therefore we liberal Democrats are getting everything factually right about all of the other charged topics that figure in political disputes—crime, immigration, poverty, parenting, sexuality, etc. Such an argument is essentially the claim that Democrats are epistemically more rational than Republicans—that they acquire knowledge in better ways.

Some years ago, this type of thinking prompted the Democratic Party to declare itself the “party of science” and to label the Republican Party as the science deniers. That stance spawned a series of books with titles like Mooney's *The Republican War on Science* (2005). As a political strategy, this “party of science” labeling might be effective, but epistemic superiority cannot simply be declared on the basis of a few examples. In fact, any trained social scientist would be quick to point out the obvious selection effects that are operating. The issues in question (climate science and creationism/evolution) are cherry-picked for reasons of politics and media interest. In order to correctly call one party the party of science and the other the party of science deniers, one would of course have to have a representative sampling of scientific issues to see whether members of one party are more likely to accept scientific consensus (Lupia, 2016).

In fact, it is not difficult at all to find scientific issues on which it is liberal Democrats who fail to accept the scientific consensus. Ironically, there are enough examples to produce a book parallel to the Mooney volume cited above titled *Science Left Behind: Feel-Good Fallacies and the Rise of the Anti-Scientific Left* (Berezow & Campbell, 2012). To mention an example from my own field, psychology: liberals tend to deny the overwhelming consensus in psychological science that intelligence is moderately heritable and that the tests are not biased against minority groups (Deary, 2013; Haier, 2016; Plomin et al., 2016; Rindermann et al., 2020). They become the “science deniers” in this case.

Intelligence is not the only area of liberal science denial, though. In the area of economics, liberals are very reluctant to accept the consensus view that when proper controls for occupational choice and work history are made, women do not make 20% less than men for doing the same work (Bertrand et al., 2010; Black et al., 2008; CONSAD, 2009; Kolesnikova & Liu, 2011; O'Neill & O'Neill, 2012; Solberg & Laughlin, 1995). Liberals tend to deny or obfuscate the data indicating that single-parent households lead to more behavioral problems

among children (Chetty et al., 2014; McLanahan et al., 2013; Murray, 2012). Overwhelmingly liberal university schools of education deny the strong scientific consensus that phonics-based reading instruction facilitates most readers, especially those struggling the most (Seidenberg, 2017). Many liberals find it hard to believe that there is no bias at all in the hiring, promotion, and evaluation of women in STEM disciplines and other departments in universities (Jussim, 2017; Madison & Fahlman, 2020; Williams & Ceci, 2015). Gender feminists routinely deny biological facts about sex differences (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Buss & Schmitt 2011; Pinker, 2002, 2008). I will stop here because the point is made.¹ Each side of the ideological divide finds it hard to accept scientific evidence that undermines its own ideological beliefs and policies.

However, beyond scientific knowledge, possessing information relevant to social and political issues is also part of epistemic rationality. Perhaps the Trump/Republican voters have a deficit here, compared to the Clinton/Democratic voters. Most studies have indicated, however, that there are few differences in factual knowledge between Republicans and Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2013, 2015).

Similar findings are obtained in specific areas of knowledge related to voting, such as economics. Klein and Buturovic (2011) gave a 17-item questionnaire on knowledge of economics to over 2,000 online respondents. They found that individuals labeling themselves libertarian or very conservative scored higher than individuals labeling themselves as liberal or progressive. Importantly, their major conclusion was not that conservatives were more economically knowledgeable than liberals. Instead, they stressed how such surveys can be tilted by the selection of questions (see Lupia, 2016, for an extensive discussion). For example, the item “rent-control laws lead to housing shortages” (correct answer: true) is more difficult for liberals because it challenges their ideology; whereas the item “a dollar means more to a poor person than it does to a rich person” (correct answer: true) is more difficult for conservatives because it challenges their ideology. Measures of so-called “knowledge” in such a domain are easily skewed in a partisan manner by selection effects. This is a version of the “party of science” problem discussed previously. Whether the Democrats or the Republicans are the “party of science” depends entirely on how the issue in question is selected.

Similar sampling problems plague studies of conspiracy beliefs. These are important to study because perhaps the problem with the Trump voters is not that they have acquired too little knowledge but that they have acquired too much *misinformation*. The early research literature on the relation between ideology and conspiracy belief seemed to suggest that conspiratorial thinking was, in fact, more strongly associated with the political right. However, more recent research has suggested that this finding was simply a function of the distribution of specific conspiracy beliefs that were studied. Research using more balanced items has suggested that conspiracy beliefs are equally prevalent on the political right and left (Enders, 2019; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Stanovich et al., 2016).

Although there is no strong evidence that there are differences in the knowledge that liberal and conservative voters have accumulated, it might be that the problem with conservatives (and Trump voters) is in the *process* of knowledge accumulation (in belief *forming* mechanisms). There are right and wrong ways to acquire knowledge. A person can acquire a true fact in the wrong manner. If a person acquired a true political fact by a process of searching exclusively for things that support their political position, they may well be acquiring knowledge in the technical sense, but the knowledge base will be skewed and selective. The degree of myside bias is a direct measure of this general tendency. Myside bias occurs when people evaluate evidence, generate evidence, and test hypotheses in a manner biased toward their own prior beliefs, opinions, and attitudes.

In a recent paper, Ditto et al. (2019) meta-analyzed 41 experimental studies of partisan differences in myside bias that involved over 12,000 subjects. After amalgamating all of these studies and comparing an overall metric of myside bias, Ditto and colleagues concluded that the degree of partisan bias in these studies was quite similar for liberals and conservatives.² Thus, the lack of partisan differences found in actual acquired knowledge discussed previously is mirrored by a lack of partisan differences in the biasing process of myside thinking.

In summary, both in terms of the knowledge acquisition process and in terms of knowledge content, there is no strong evidence that the Republicans who were the bulk of those who voted for Trump were less epistemically rational than the Democrats who were the bulk of the Clinton voters. In terms of both components of rationality—instrumental and epistemic—there is no support in the empirical literature for attributing a unique problem of rationality to Trump voters. However, there remain broader types of rationality to consider.

2 Myside bias in critiques of the expressive rationality

Many human communications are not aimed at conveying information about what is true (Tetlock, 2002). They are, instead, signals to others and sometimes signals to ourselves. Such communications are *functional* signals because, when sent to others they bind us to a group that we value (Haidt, 2012; Kahan, 2013; Kahan et al., 2017), and when sent to ourselves they serve motivational functions. These signals are sometimes termed exemplars of expressive rationality (or symbolic utility, see Nozick, 1993) to reflect the fact that they are not aimed at maximizing first-order desires or immediate consumption utility (see Abelson, 1996; Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; Anderson, 1993; Stanovich, 2004, 2013).

We are quite prone to view acts of expressive rationality as irrational (at least in our political opponents) in cases where the lack of a causal link between the action and the actual outcome has become manifestly obvious yet the symbolic action continues to be performed. Some anti-drug measures possibly fall in this category. In some cases, evidence has accumulated to indicate that an anti-drug program does not have the causal effect of reducing actual drug use (or the effect is minimal, or it is not cost-effective), but the program is continued because it has become the symbol of our concern for stopping drug use. In the present day, many actions signaling a concern for global warming are expressive (their immediate efficaciousness is less important than the meaning of the signal being sent by the signaler). Likewise, analyses of voting as an expressive act de-emphasize the instrumental utility of the voting and emphasize the signaling and psychological benefits (Brennan & Lomasky, 1993; Johnston et al., 2017; Lomasky, 2008). The buying of books that we know we will never read is perhaps another example. Expressive rationality encompasses Kahan's (2013, 2015) and Kahan et al.'s (2017) concept of identity protective cognition.

Evaluations of the expressive rationality of our partisan opponents are invariably saturated with myside bias (Stanovich, 2021). Why your own side would choose to signal a value at a utility cost seems perfectly obvious—yet when your political opponents do it, it seems utterly irrational. Republicans can clearly see the irrationality of Democratic city councils divesting themselves of investments in corporations disliked by the left (often at a cost in real return on city-invested dollars). Democrats likewise denigrate the enthusiasm of Republicans for “just say no” campaigns surrounding drugs and sex and point out the irrationality of the Republicans not caring if the programs work or not. Such judgments are overwhelmingly determined by myside bias. The other side is judged deeply irrational when they abandon cost-benefit analysis to signal a value choice, but when my own side sacrifices

utility, money, or outcome goals in order to signal a value, that is OK because our values are the right ones (seems to be the reasoning!).

In short, each side accuses the other of epistemic irrationality when the opposing side switches from purely epistemic modes to expressive modes. Even if we were to stipulate that expressive modes are less rational, there is no extant evidence that they are more prevalent among Trump voters than they are among Clinton voters.

3 Blindness to bias in the study of political psychology

The overwhelmingly left/liberal professoriate has been on a quest to find psychological defects in their political opponents for quite some time, but the intensity of these efforts has increased markedly in the last two decades. The intensity of the quest has led Shermer (2011) to quip that

much as medical scientists study cancer in order to cure the disease, liberal political scientists study political attitudes and voting behavior in order to cure people of the cancer of conservatism. This liberal bias in academia is so deeply entrenched that it becomes the political water through which the liberal fish swim—they don't even notice it. (p. 233)

The classic psychological work linking authoritarian thinking to conservatism (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1981) was given new impetus by the much-cited Jost et al. (2003) literature review reviving the “rigidity of the right” theme in modern social and political psychology. In the years subsequent to the Jost et al. (2003) review, it has not been hard to find in the literature many correlations linking conservatism with intolerance, prejudice, low intelligence, close-minded thinking styles, and just about any cognitive and personality characteristic that is undesirable.

The problem is that most of these relationships have not held up when subjected to critiques that used frameworks different from the ideological assumptions that fueled much of the earlier research (Brandt & Crawford, 2019; Chambers et al., 2013; Crawford & Jussim, 2018; Reyna, 2018; Stanovich, 2021). Despite the low yield of the psychological research attempting to link conservatism with negative psychological traits, the impetus to find such relationships became magnified by the surprising US presidential election results of 2016. Trump's victory made political and cognitive elites even more sure that their political opponents were cognitively defective. However, the search for the deficient cognitive characteristics of the Trump voters has backfired. You can say whatever you want about the irrationality of Trump *himself*, but cognitive science does not support the claim that his *voters* were irrational—or, more precisely, that they were any less rational than the Clinton voters. The judgment that these voters were irrational was, ironically, driven by convictions of just the type that cause intense myside bias (Stanovich, 2021). Politics is a bad place to look for the validation of our beliefs. Our judgments in this domain are uniquely susceptible to myside bias.

In a recent book (Stanovich, 2021), I reviewed evidence indicating that myside bias was not attenuated by cognitive sophistication indicated in a variety of ways: by high cognitive ability; by education; or by well-developed rational thinking dispositions. In this concluding section, I will describe how these facts about myside bias interact to create a particularly virulent form of metacognitive failure among cognitive elites in the political domain.

The bias blind spot is an important meta-bias demonstrated in a paper by Pronin et al. (2002). They found that people thought that various motivational biases were much more

prevalent in others than in themselves, a much-replicated finding (Pronin, 2007; Scopelliti et al., 2015). Bias turns out to be relatively easy to recognize in the thinking of others, but often difficult to detect in our own judgments.

In two studies, my research group (see West et al., 2012) demonstrated that there is a bias blind spot regarding most of the classic cognitive biases in the literature (anchoring bias, outcome bias, base rate-neglect, etc.)—people think that most of these biases are more characteristic of others than of themselves. We found *positive* correlations between the blind spots and cognitive sophistication—more cognitively skilled people were more prone to the bias blind spot. This makes some sense, however, because most cognitive biases in the heuristics and biases literature *are* negatively correlated with cognitive ability—more intelligent people are less biased (Stanovich, 1999, 2011; Stanovich & West, 1998, 2000; Stanovich et al., 2016). Thus, it would make sense for intelligent people to say that they are less biased than others—because they are!

However, one particular bias—myside bias—sets a trap for the cognitively sophisticated. Regarding most biases, they are used to thinking—rightly—that they are less biased. However, myside thinking about your political beliefs represents an outlier bias where this is not true (Drummond & Fischhoff, 2019; Kahan & Corbin, 2016; Kahan et al., 2012; Kahan et al., 2017; Stanovich, 2021; Stanovich & West, 2008; Van Boven et al., 2019). This may lead to a particularly intense bias blind spot among cognitive elites. Specifically, they may be prone to think that traits such as intelligence (which they have) and experiences such as education (which they will also have in abundance) provide them with very generalizable inoculations against biased political thinking. In many areas of thinking this is true, but not in the domain of myside bias about politics.

If you are a person of high intelligence, if you have lots of education, and if you are strongly committed to an ideological viewpoint, you will be especially prone to think that you thought your way to your viewpoint. You will be even less likely than the average person to be aware that you derived your beliefs from the social groups around you and because they comported with your temperament and innate psychological propensities (see Haidt, 2012; Stanovich, 2021). There is in fact a group of people who tick all of these boxes: people who are highly intelligent, highly educated, and are strongly committed to an ideological viewpoint. That group happens to be the group of social scientists who have been looking for psychological deficiencies in their political opponents!

The university professoriate is overwhelmingly left/liberal. This demographic fact has been demonstrated in numerous studies (Abrams, 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Peters et al., 2020; Turner, 2019). The trend is particularly strong in the social sciences (sociology, political science, etc.), and it is especially strong in psychology, the source of many of the studies looking for cognitive differences among voters (Buss & von Hippel, 2018; Ceci & Williams, 2018; Clark & Winegard, 2020; Duarte et al., 2015).

I am not suggesting here that all areas of research in psychology have this problem, or even a majority of them. However, we know that ideological beliefs lead to the unwarranted projection of prior attitudes on the evidence concerning a variety of issues, for example, topics such as: sexuality, morality, the psychological effects of poverty, family structures, crime, child care, productivity, marriage, incentives, discipline techniques, educational practices, and many more such topics where distal political attitudes are intertwined with people's beliefs on specific issues. Of course, the place where we would most expect ideology to skew experimental findings is in the study of ideology itself!

A combustible brew of facts accounts for the existence of a massive myside bias blind spot among university faculty studying the psychological characteristics of voters. The first

consists of the studies showing that academics are largely of one ideological persuasion (e.g. Clark & Winegard, 2020; Duarte et al., 2015). The second is the Ditto et al. (2019) meta-analysis demonstrating that the particular ideological position they hold is equally susceptible to myside bias (see also, Guay & Johnston, 2021). The social sciences in academia are full of people who believe that they have *thought* their way to their positions, whereas their ideological opponents have not—and this group of social scientists are not characterized by the kind of ideological variability that would help them to ferret out myside bias in conclusions. This myside bias blind spot in the academy is a recipe for disaster when it comes to studying the psychology of political opponents.

The highly educated professoriate seems to have a hard time accepting the fact that voting is largely a matter of value conflicts and not differential rationality, intelligence,³ or knowledge. The thinking seemed to have been that “well, as an academic, I am a specialist in rationality and knowledge, and therefore that expertise confers on me special wisdom in the domain of politics.” Lupia (2016, p. 116) terms this stance the error of transforming value differences into ignorance—that is, mistaking a dispute about legitimate differences in the weighting of the values relevant to an issue for one in which your opponent “just doesn’t know the facts.” Cognitive elites think that if a dispute can be resolved by reasoning about facts, then they will always win because they are the experts on facts and reasoning. This leads them to overestimate the extent to which political disputes are about differential possession of factual knowledge and underestimate how much they are actually based on a clash of honestly held values.

Industrialized nations have ameliorated an enormous number of societal problems that have solely empirically based solutions (Pinker, 2011, 2018). All of the non-zero-sum problems where we can easily find a Pareto improvement (where some people can gain from a policy without anyone else in society losing) likely tend to be problems that have already been ameliorated. The contentious issues that we are left with are those that are particularly refractory to solution via the use of knowledge that we already have. If an issue is squarely and contentiously in the domain of politics, it is probably *not* “just a matter of facts.” Thinking that your political opponents have knowledge deficits across the incredibly wide range of (often uncorrelated, see Joshi, 2020) issues that define modern ideological stances is itself a form of irrationality.

Notes

- 1 The point here being only the weak conclusion that a claim for a partisan difference in science denial would have to be based on a study with representative sampling of the domains of policy-related science. Such a study has not been conducted.
- 2 Baron and Jost (2019) have criticized the conclusions of Ditto et al. (2019). However, Guay and Johnston (2021) have recently conducted a more refined meta-analysis focused on the Baron and Jost criticisms and have come to the same conclusion as Ditto et al. (2019).
- 3 Partisan differences and voter differences in intelligence are either nonexistent or miniscule (Ganzach, 2016; Ganzach et al., 2019; Stanovich, 2021).

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