

# WHY PEOPLE ARE IRRATIONAL ABOUT POLITICS

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## 1. Introduction: The Problem of Political Disagreement

Perhaps the most striking feature of the subject of *politics* is how prone it is to disagreement—only religion and morality rival politics as a source of disagreement. There are three main features of political disagreements I want to point out: (i) They are very *widespread*. It isn't just a few people disagreeing about a few issues; rather, any two randomly-chosen people are likely to disagree about many political issues. (ii) They are *strong*, that is, the disagreeing parties are typically very convinced of their own positions, not at all tentative. (iii) They are *persistent*, that is, it is extremely difficult to resolve them. Several hours of argumentation typically fails to resolve political disputes. Some have gone on for decades (either with the same principles or with different parties over multiple generations).

This *should* strike us as very odd. Most other subjects—for instance, geology, or linguistics, or algebra—are not subject to disagreements at all like this; their disputes are far fewer in number and take place against a backdrop of substantial agreement in basic theory; and they tend to be more tentative and more easily resolved. Why is politics subject to such widespread, strong, and persistent disagreements? Consider four broad explanations for the prevalence of political disagreement:

- A. *The Miscalculation Theory*: Political issues are subject to much dispute because they are very difficult issues; accordingly, many people simply make mistakes—analogueous to miscalculations in working out difficult mathematical problems—leading them to disagree with others who have not made mistakes or have made different mistakes leading to different conclusions.
- B. *The Ignorance Theory*: Rather than being inherently difficult (for instance, because of their complexity or abstractness), political issues are difficult for us to resolve due to insufficient information, and/or because different people have *different* information available to them. If everyone had adequate factual knowledge, most political disputes would be resolved.
- C. *The Divergent-Values Theory*: People disagree about political issues principally because political issues turn on moral/evaluative issues, and people have divergent fundamental values.
- D. *The Irrationality Theory*: People disagree about political issues mainly because most people are irrational when it comes to politics.

Political disagreement undoubtedly has more than one contributing cause. Nevertheless, I contend that explanation (D), irrationality, is the most important factor, and that explanations (A) - (C), in the absence of irrationality, fail to explain almost any of the salient features of political disagreement.

## **2. Political Disputes Are Not Explained by Miscalculation or Ignorance**

We begin with the two cognitive explanations—that is, theories that attempt to explain political disputes in terms of the normal functioning of our cognitive faculties. This is the most natural kind of explanation to look to, in the absence of specific evidence against a cognitive explanation.

Cognitive explanations, however, fail to explain the following salient features of political beliefs and political disputes:

### ***a. The strength of political beliefs***

If political issues are merely very difficult, then we should expect most people to hold at most tentative opinions, or to suspend judgment altogether. This is what happens with other issues that are intrinsically difficult. If we have just worked out a very complicated mathematical problem, we tend to hold at most tentative belief in the answer arrived at. If another, intelligent person reports having worked out the same problem and obtained a different answer, this shakes our confidence in our answer; we take this as strong evidence that we may be in error. But in political matters, people tend to hold their beliefs with great confidence, and to regard them as *not* very difficult to verify, that is, as *obvious*. Nor does the mere presence of another person with an opposing political belief typically shake our confidence.

The Ignorance Theory fares slightly better, since if people were ignorant, not only of the facts pertaining to the political issue, but also of their own level of ignorance, their confidence in their political beliefs would be understandable. However, it remains puzzling why people would be ignorant of their own level of ignorance—this itself calls for a further explanation. Moreover, the Ignorance Theory has difficulty explaining the following feature of political disputes.

### ***b. The persistence of political disputes***

If political disputes had a purely cognitive explanation, we would expect them to be more easily resolvable. One party might point out to the other party where he had made an error in reasoning—a miscalculation—whereupon the latter person could correct his error. Or, in case the two parties have different information available to them, they could simply meet, share their information, and then come to an agreement. Although partisans of political disputes *do* commonly share their reasons and evidence with each other, the disputes persist.

### ***c. The correlations of political beliefs with non-cognitive traits***

People's political beliefs tend to correlate strongly with their race, sex, socioeconomic status, occupation, and personality traits. Members of minorities are much more likely to support affirmative action than white men are. The poor are much more likely than the rich to believe in wealth-redistribution (welfare,

etc.) Members of the entertainment industry are much more likely to be liberal than conservative. And so on. None of these trends would be expected if political beliefs had a solely, or even primarily, cognitive origin. The fact that the 'mistakes' people make about politics tend very often to be in the direction favorable to the interests of the social group with whom they identify suggests that bias, rather than mere miscalculation, plays a major role.

#### ***d. The clustering of political beliefs***

Two beliefs are 'logically unrelated' if neither of them, if true, would constitute evidence for or against the other. Many logically unrelated beliefs are correlated—that is, you can often predict someone's belief about one issue on the basis of his opinion about some other, completely unrelated issue. For example, people who support gun control are much more likely to support welfare programs and abortion rights. Since these issues are logically unrelated to each other, on a purely cognitive theory of people's political beliefs, we would expect there to be no correlation.

Sometimes the observed correlations are the *opposite* of what one would expect on the basis of reason alone—sometimes, that is, people who hold one belief are *less* likely to hold other beliefs that are supported by the first one. For instance, one would naively expect that those who support animal rights would be far more likely to oppose abortion than those who reject the notion of animal rights; conversely, those who oppose abortion should be much more likely to accept animal rights. This is because to accept animal rights (or fetus rights), one must have a more expansive conception of what sorts of beings have rights than those who reject animal rights (or fetus rights)—and because fetuses and animals seem to share most of the same morally relevant properties (e.g., they are both sentient, but neither are intelligent). I am not saying that the existence of animal rights *entails* that fetuses have rights, or vice versa (there are some differences between fetuses and animals); I am only saying that, if animals have rights, it is much more likely that fetuses do, and vice versa. Thus, if people's political beliefs generally have cognitive explanations, we should expect a very strong *correlation* between being pro-life and being pro-animal-rights. But in fact, what we observe is exactly the opposite.

*Some* clustering of logically unrelated beliefs could be explained cognitively—for instance, by the hypothesis that some people tend to be good, in general, at getting to the truth (because they are rational, intelligent, etc.) So suppose that it is true both that affirmative action is just and that abortion is morally permissible. These issues are logically unrelated to each other; however, if some people are in general good at getting to the truth, then those who believe one of these propositions would be more likely to believe the other.

But note that, on this hypothesis, we would not expect the existence of an *opposite* cluster of beliefs. That is, suppose that liberal beliefs are, in general, true, and that this explains why there are many people who generally embrace this cluster of beliefs. (Thus, affirmative action is just, abortion is permissible, welfare programs are good, capital punishment is bad, human beings are

seriously damaging the environment, etc.) Why would there be a significant number of people who tend to embrace the opposite beliefs on all these issues? It is not plausible to suppose that there are some people who are in general drawn toward falsity. Even if there are people who are not very good at getting to the truth (they are stupid, or irrational, etc.), their beliefs should be, at worst, *unrelated* to the truth; they should not be systematically directed away from the truth. Thus, while there could be a 'true cluster' of political beliefs, the present consideration strongly suggests that neither the liberal nor the conservative belief-cluster is it.

### 3. Political Disputes Are Not Explained by Divergent Values

Political issues are normative; they concern what people *should* do: should abortion be permitted?, should we increase the defense budget?, and so on. Perhaps political disputes persist because people start from different fundamental values, and correctly reason from those values to divergent political conclusions.

This hypothesis invites the further question, why do people have different fundamental values? If values are objective, then this question is just as puzzling as the initial question, "Why do people disagree about political issues?" But many people think that value questions have no objective answers, and that value is merely a matter of personal feelings and preferences. This would tend to explain, or at least render it none too surprising, that many people have divergent values and are unable to resolve these value-differences.

There are three reasons why I disagree with this explanation. The first is that value questions are objective, and [moral anti-realism is entirely unjustified](#). But to say no more of that, the second reason is that this hypothesis fails to explain the clustering of political beliefs described above. On the Divergent Fundamental Values theory, we should expect prevalent political belief clusters to correspond to different basic moral theories. Thus, there should be some core moral claim that unites all or most 'liberal' political beliefs, and a different moral claim that unites all or most 'conservative' political beliefs. What underlying moral thesis supports the views that (a) capitalism is unjust, (b) abortion is permissible, (c) capital punishment is bad, and (d) affirmative action is just? Here, I need not claim that those beliefs always go together, but merely that they are correlated (if a person holds one of them, he is more likely to hold another of them); the Divergent Values hypothesis fails to explain this. And the earlier example of abortion and animal rights (section 2, d) shows that in some cases, the political belief clusters we find are the opposite of what we would expect from people who were correctly reasoning from fundamental moral theories.

The third and biggest problem with the Divergent Values theory is that political disputes involve all sorts of factual disputes. People who disagree about the *justice* of capital punishment also tend to disagree about the non-moral *facts* about capital punishment. Those who support capital punishment are much more likely to believe that it has a deterrent effect, and that few innocent people have

been executed. Those who oppose capital punishment tend to believe that it does not have a deterrent effect, and that many innocent people have been executed. Those are factual questions, and my moral values should not have any effect on what I think about those factual questions. Whether capital punishment deters criminals is to be determined by examining statistical evidence and scientific studies on the subject—not by appealing to our beliefs about the nature of justice. Of course, it may be that my moral values affect my beliefs about those factual questions because I am irrational—that would be consistent with the theory put forward in this paper.

Similarly, people who support gun control generally believe that gun control laws significantly reduce violent crime. Those who oppose gun control generally believe that gun control laws do not significantly reduce violent crime, and even that they increase violent crime. This, too, is a factual question, and one cannot determine what effect gun control laws have on crime by appealing to one's moral beliefs.

As a final example, socialists tend to blame capitalism for the poverty of the Third World; but supporters of capitalism typically view capitalism as the *solution* to Third World poverty. Once again, this is a factual issue, which cannot be solved by appeal to moral beliefs.

Are there *some* differences of fundamental values? Probably. Are some political disagreements due to moral disagreements? Almost certainly (affirmative action is a good candidate). Nevertheless, the point is that *many* political disagreements are factual disagreements and cannot be explained—without invoking a hypothesis of irrationality—by appeal to moral disagreements.

#### **4. Rational Ignorance and Rational Irrationality**

The preceding considerations make a *prima facie* case for the importance of irrationality in explaining political disagreement—none of the other explanations seem to be very good. But we need to hear more about the Irrationality Theory—how and why are people irrational about politics?

First, a related theory. The theory of Rational Ignorance holds that people often choose—rationally—to remain ignorant because the costs of collecting information are greater than the expected value of the information.<sup>1</sup> This is very often true of political information. To illustrate, on several occasions, I have given talks on the subject of this paper, and I always ask the audience if they know who their Congressman is. Most do not. Among senior citizens, perhaps half raise their hands; among college students, perhaps a fifth. Then I ask if anyone knows what the last vote taken in Congress was. So far, of hundreds of people I have asked, not one has answered affirmatively. Why? It simply isn't worth their while to collect this information. If you tried to keep track of every politician and bureaucrat who is supposed to be representing (or serving) you, you'd probably spend your whole life on that. Even then, it wouldn't do you any good—perhaps you'd know which politician to vote for in the next election, but the other 400,000

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<sup>1</sup> See Downs (1957).

voters in your district (or the 200,000 who are going to turn up to vote) are still going to vote for whomever they were going to vote for before you collected the information.

Contrast what happens when you buy a product on the market. If you take the time to read the Consumer Reports to determine which kind of car to buy, you then get that car. But if you take the time to research politicians' records to find out which politician to vote for, you do not thereby get that politician. You still get the politician that the majority of the other people voted for (unless the other voters are exactly tied, a negligible possibility).<sup>2</sup> From the standpoint of self-interest, it is normally irrational to collect political information.

Similarly, the theory of Rational Irrationality holds that people often choose—rationally—to adopt irrational beliefs because the costs of rational beliefs exceed their benefits.<sup>3</sup> To understand this, one has to distinguish two senses of the word “rational”:

*Instrumental rationality* (or “means-end rationality”) consists in choosing the correct means to attain one’s actual goals, given one’s actual beliefs. This is the kind of rationality that economists generally assume in explaining human behavior.

*Epistemic rationality* consists, roughly, in forming beliefs in truth-conducive ways—accepting beliefs that are well-supported by evidence, avoiding logical fallacies, avoiding contradictions, revising one’s beliefs in the light of new evidence against them, and so on. This is the kind of rationality that books on logic and critical thinking aim to instill.

The theory of Rational Irrationality holds that it is often *instrumentally* rational to be *epistemically* irrational. In more colloquial (but less accurate) terms: people often think illogically because it is in their interests to do so. This is particularly common for political beliefs. Consider one of Caplan’s examples.<sup>4</sup> If I believe, irrationally, that immigrants are no good at running convenience marts, I bear the costs of this belief—e.g., I may wind up paying more or traveling farther for goods I want. But if I believe—also irrationally—that immigrants are harming the American economy in general, I bear virtually none of the costs of this belief. There is a tiny chance that my belief may have some effect on public policy; if so, the costs will be borne by society as a whole (and particularly immigrants); only a negligible portion of it will be borne by me personally. For this reason, I have an incentive to be more rational about immigrants’ ability to run convenience marts than I am about immigrants’ general effects on society. In general, just as I receive virtually none of the benefit of my collecting of political information, so I receive virtually none of the benefit of my thinking rationally about political issues.

The theory of Rational Irrationality makes two main assumptions. First, individuals have *non-epistemic belief preferences* (otherwise known as “biases”). That is, there are certain things that people *want* to believe, for reasons

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<sup>2</sup> Friedman (1989, pp. 156-9) makes this point.

<sup>3</sup> The theory originates with Caplan (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Caplan (2003).

independent of the truth of those propositions or of how well-supported they are by the evidence. Second, individuals can exercise some control over their beliefs. Given the first assumption, there is a “cost” to thinking rationally—namely, that one may not get to believe the things one wants to believe. Given the second assumption (and given that individuals are usually *instrumentally* rational), most people will accept this cost only if they receive greater benefits from thinking rationally. But since individuals receive almost none of the benefit from being epistemically rational about political issues, we can predict that people will often choose to be epistemically irrational about political issues.

There may be some people for whom *being epistemically rational* is itself a sufficiently great value to outweigh any other preferences they may have with regard to their beliefs. Such people would continue to be epistemically rational, even about political issues. But there is no reason to expect that everyone would have this sort of preference structure. To explain why some would adopt irrational political beliefs, we need only suppose that some individuals’ non-epistemic belief preferences are stronger than their desire (if any) to be epistemically rational.

In the next two sections, I discuss and defend the two main assumptions of the theory of Rational Irrationality just mentioned.

## **5. Sources of Belief Preferences**

Why do people prefer to believe some things that are not true or not supported by the evidence? What kinds of non-epistemic belief preferences do we have?

A reasonably thorough answer to this would require extensive psychological study. Here I will just mention a few factors that seem to play a role in what people prefer to believe—no doubt these factors merit scientific study (which I have not done), and no doubt there are more factors to consider as well.

### ***a. Self-interested bias***

People tend to hold political beliefs that, if generally accepted, would benefit themselves *or the group they identify with*. Thus, those who stand to benefit from affirmative action programs are much more likely to believe in their justice; the poor are much more likely to believe in the justice of redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor; and public school teachers are much more likely to support increases in budgets for public education.

The italicized phrase, “the group they identify with,” is important for some cases. University professors, for instance, prefer to identify with the working class rather than businessmen; hence, they support policies they believe would benefit blue-collar workers. As this example illustrates, a group one identifies with need not be a group to which one actually belongs. (For this reason, “self-interested bias” is a slightly misleading term.)

### ***b. Beliefs as self-image constructors***

People prefer to hold the political beliefs that best fit with the images of themselves that they want to adopt and to project. For example, a person may want to portray himself (both to himself and to others) as a compassionate, generous person. In this case, he will be motivated to endorse the desirability and justice of welfare programs, and even to call for increases in their funding (regardless of what the current levels are), thereby portraying himself as *more* generous/compassionate than those who designed the present system. Another person may wish to portray himself as a tough guy, in which case he will be motivated to advocate increases in military spending (again, regardless of what the current levels are), thereby showing himself to be *more* tough than those who designed the present system.

It was presumably in recognition of this sort of bias that President Bush proclaimed his philosophy of “compassionate conservatism.”<sup>5</sup> The degree of compassion experienced by conservatives has no logical relevance to the merits of conservative policies, but Bush evidently recognized that some individuals gravitate towards liberalism from a desire to be (or be seen as) compassionate.

### ***c. Beliefs as tools of social bonding***

People prefer to hold the political beliefs of other people they like and want to associate with. It is extremely unlikely that a person who doesn't *like* most conservatives would ever convert to conservative beliefs. Relatedly, the physical attractiveness of people influences others' tendency to agree with them politically. A study of Canadian federal elections found that attractive candidates received more than two and a half times as many votes as unattractive candidates—although most voters surveyed denied in the strongest possible terms that physical attractiveness had any influence on their votes.<sup>6</sup>

The social role of political beliefs probably goes a long way towards explaining the clustering of logically unrelated beliefs. People with particular political orientations are more likely to spend time together than people with divergent political orientations. Quite a lot of evidence shows that people tend to conform to the beliefs and attitudes of those around them, particularly those they see as similar to themselves.<sup>7</sup> Thus, people with a substantial degree of initial political agreement will tend to converge more over time—although what particular collection of beliefs they converge *on* may be largely a matter of historical accident (hence the difficulty of stating a general principle that unites either conservative or liberal beliefs).

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<sup>5</sup> In a speech given April 20, 2002 ([www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020430-5.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020430-5.html)). His inaugural address of January 20, 2001 also features the words “compassion” and “compassionate” prominently (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>).

<sup>6</sup> Cialdini (1993, p. 171).

<sup>7</sup> Cialdini (1993, chapter 4).



#### **d. Coherence bias**

People are biased towards beliefs that ‘fit well’ with their existing beliefs. In one sense, of course, the tendency to prefer beliefs that fit well with an existing belief system is rational, rather than a bias. But this tendency can also function as a bias. For instance, there are many people who believe capital punishment deters crime and many who believe it doesn’t; there are also many who believe that innocent people are frequently convicted and many who believe that they aren’t. But there are relatively few people who think *both* that capital punishment deters crime, *and* that many innocent people are convicted. Likewise, few people think capital punishment fails to deter crime, but few innocent people are convicted. In other words, people will tend to either adopt both of the factual beliefs that would tend to support capital punishment, or adopt both of the factual beliefs that would tend to undermine capital punishment. On a similar note, relatively few people believe that drug use is extremely harmful to society *but* that laws against drugs are and will remain ineffective. Yet, a priori, there’s no reason why those positions (i.e., positions in which a reason *for* a particular policy and a reason *against* that policy both have a sound factual basis) should be less probable than the positions we actually find to be prevalent (i.e., positions according to which all or most of the relevant considerations point in the same direction).

In one psychological study, subjects were exposed to evidence concerning the deterrent effect of capital punishment. One study had concluded that capital punishment has a deterrent effect; another had concluded that it does not. All experimental subjects were provided with summaries of both studies, and then asked to assess which conclusion the evidence they had just looked at most supported, overall. The result was that those who initially supported capital punishment claimed that the evidence they’d been shown, overall, supported that capital punishment has a deterrent effect. Those who initially opposed capital punishment thought, instead, that this same evidence, overall, supported that capital punishment had no deterrent effect. In each case, partisans came up with reasons (or rationalizations) for why the study whose conclusion they agreed with was methodologically superior to the other study. This points up one reason why people tend to become polarized (sc., to adopt very strong beliefs on a particular side) about political issues: we tend to evaluate mixed evidence as supporting whichever belief we already incline towards—whereupon we increase our degree of belief.<sup>8</sup>

### **6. Mechanisms of Belief Fixation**

The theory defended in the last two sections assumes that people have control over their beliefs; it explains people’s beliefs in the same manner in which we often explain people’s actions (by appeal to their desires). But many philosophers think that we can’t control our beliefs—at least not directly.<sup>9</sup> To show this, they

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<sup>8</sup> Summarized in Gilovich (1991, pp. 53-4).

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Hume (*Enquiry*, V.II) and David Owens (*Reason without Freedom*).

often give examples of obviously false propositions, and then ask if you can believe them—for instance, can you, if you want to, believe that you are presently on the planet Venus?

Perhaps we cannot believe obviously false propositions at will. Still, we can exercise substantial control over our political beliefs. A “mechanism of belief fixation” is a way that we can get ourselves to believe the things we want to believe. Let’s look at some of these mechanisms.

### ***a. Biased weighting of evidence***

One method is simply to attribute *slightly more* weight to each piece of evidence that supports the view one likes than it really deserves, and *slightly less* weight to each piece of evidence that undermines it. This requires only a slight departure from perfect rationality in each case, but it can have great effects when applied consistently to a great many items of evidence. The biased weighting need not be, and probably will not be, conscious and explicit; our desire to support a given conclusion just causes us to see each piece of favorable evidence as a little more significant. A related phenomenon is that we have an easier time *remembering* facts or experiences that support our beliefs than ones that fail to.

### ***b. Selective attention and energy***

Most of us spend more time thinking about arguments supporting our beliefs than we spend thinking about arguments supporting alternative beliefs. A natural result is that the arguments supporting our beliefs have more psychological impact on us, and we are less likely to be aware of reasons for doubting our beliefs. I think that most of us, when we hear an argument for a conclusion we disbelieve, immediately set about finding “what’s wrong with the argument.” But when we hear an argument for a conclusion we believe, we are much more likely to accept the argument at face value, thereby further solidifying our belief, than to look for things that might be wrong with it. This is illustrated by the capital punishment study mentioned above (section 5, d): subjects scrutinized the study whose conclusion they disagreed with closely, seeking methodological flaws, but accepted at face value the study with whose conclusion they agreed. Almost all studies have some sort of epistemological imperfections, so this technique almost always enables one to hold the factual beliefs about society that one wants.

### ***c. Selection of evidence sources***

Similarly, people can select whom to listen to for information and arguments about political issues. Most people choose to listen mainly or solely to those they agree with. If you see someone sitting in the airport reading the *National Review*, you assume he’s a conservative. The man reading the *New Republic* is presumably a liberal. Similarly, conservatives tend to have conservative friends,

from whom they hear conservative arguments, whereas liberals have liberal friends. One reason is that it is unpleasant to listen to partisan (or as we sometimes say, “biased”) assertions and arguments, unless one agrees with them. Another reason may be that we don’t wish to be exposed to information that could undermine our desired beliefs. Naturally, if I don’t listen to what the people I disagree with say, it is virtually impossible that I will change my beliefs. (Rarely is one side to a debate so incompetent that they can’t win if they get 95% of the speaking time.)

#### ***d. Subjective, speculative, and anecdotal arguments***

People often rely on anecdotal arguments—arguments appealing to particular examples, rather than statistics—to support generalizations. For example, in arguing that the American justice system is ineffective, I might cite the trials of O.J. Simpson and the Menendez brothers. Logically, the problem is that a single case, or even several cases, are insufficient evidence for drawing inductive generalizations. I cite this as a mechanism of belief fixation because, for most controversial social issues, there will be cases that support either of two contrary generalizations—certainly there would be cases one could cite, for instance, in which the justice system worked correctly. Thus, the method of anecdotes is usually capable of supporting whichever belief we want to hold.

A ‘subjective’ statement, in the sense relevant here, is one that is difficult to verify or refute decisively, because it requires some kind of judgment call. There are degrees of subjectivity. For example, the statement, “American television programs are very violent” is relatively subjective. A much less subjective statement would be, “The number of deaths portrayed in an average hour of American television programming is greater than the number of deaths portrayed in an average hour of British television programming.” The second statement requires much less exercise of judgment to verify or refute. Scientists have come up with ways of reducing as much as possible their reliance on subjective statements in evaluating theories—a scientist arguing for a theory must use relatively objective statements as his evidence. But in the field of politics, subjective statements abound. Subjective statements are more easily influenced by bias; hence, the reliance on statements of this kind to evaluate theories makes it easier to believe what we want to believe.

A related phenomenon is the reliance on *speculative* judgments. These are judgments which may have clear truth-conditions, but we simply lack decisive evidence for or against them. For example, “The Civil War was primarily caused by economic motives” is speculative; “This table is about 5 feet long” is not. In the sciences, we rest our theories as much as possible on unspeculative claims like the latter. In politics, we often treat speculation as evidence for or against political theories.

An interesting implication emerges from the consideration of the mechanisms of belief fixation. Normally, intelligence and education are aides to acquiring true beliefs. But when an individual has non-epistemic belief preferences, this need not be the case; high intelligence and extensive

knowledge of a subject may even *worsen* an individual's prospects for obtaining a true belief (see chart below).<sup>10</sup> The reason is that a biased person uses his intelligence and education as tools for rationalizing beliefs. Highly intelligent people can think of rationalizations for their beliefs in situations in which the less intelligent would be forced to give up and concede error, and highly educated people have larger stores of information from which to selectively search for information supporting a desired belief. Thus, it is nearly impossible to change an academic's mind about anything important, particularly in his own field of study. This is particularly true of philosophers (my own occupation), who are experts at argumentation.

### *Prospects for attaining truth with different intellectual traits*

	<u>Intelligence</u>	<u>Bias</u>	
1.	+	-	(best)
2.	-	-	
3.	-	+	
4.	+	+	(worst)

## **7. What to Do**

The problem of political irrationality is the greatest social problem humanity faces. It is a greater problem than crime, drug addiction, or even world poverty, because it is a problem that *prevents us from solving other problems*. Before we can solve the problem of poverty, we must first have correct beliefs about poverty, about what causes it, what reduces it, and what the side effects of alternative policies are. If our beliefs about those things are being guided by the social group we want to fit into, the self-image we want to maintain, the desire to avoid admitting to having been wrong in the past, and so on, then it would be pure accident if enough of us were to actually form correct beliefs to solve the problem. Analogy: suppose your doctor, after diagnosing your illness, picks a medical procedure to perform on you from a hat. You would be lucky if the procedure chosen didn't *worsen* your condition.

What can we do about the problem?

*First:* Understanding the nature of political irrationality is itself a big step towards combating it. In particular, explicit awareness of the mechanisms discussed in section 6 should cause one to avoid using them. When learning about a political issue, for example, we should collect information from people on all sides of the issue. We should spend time thinking about objections to our own arguments. When we feel inclined to assert a political claim, we should pause to ask ourselves what reasons we have for believing it, and we should try to rate the

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<sup>10</sup> Kornblith (1999, p. 182) makes this point.

subjectivity and speculativeness of those reasons—and perhaps downgrade our confidence in them accordingly. We should avoid anecdotal arguments.

*Second:* We should identify cases in which we are particularly likely to be biased, and in those cases hesitate to affirm the beliefs that we would be biased towards. (Aside: surveys indicate that most people consider themselves to be more intelligent, more fair-minded, and less prejudiced than the average person—but evidently most of these beliefs are themselves biases.<sup>11</sup>) These include: (a) Cases in which our own interests are involved. (b) Issues about which we feel strongly. If, for example, you get upset when talking about abortion, then your beliefs about that subject are probably not reliable. (c) If your beliefs tend to cluster in the traditional way (see section 2, d), then many of them are probably the product of bias. (d) If your political beliefs are pretty much the ones that would be expected on the basis of your race, sex, occupation, and personality traits, then most of them are probably the product of bias. (e) If you have beliefs about an empirical question prior to gathering empirical data—or if your beliefs about some question *do not change* when you gather much more data—then you are probably biased about that question. As one particularly striking example, 41% of Americans believe that foreign aid is one of the two largest areas of federal government spending.<sup>12</sup> This belief would be straightforward to check, and any effort to do so would show it to be drastically inaccurate; so it seems that this must be a belief held in the absence of evidence.

*Third:* We should take account of the irrationality of others, and adjust our confidence in reported information accordingly. We should recognize that much of the information that is presented to us in political arguments is probably (a) false, (b) highly misleading, and/or (c) incomplete. This is one reason why we need to hear from both sides before accepting any argument. Logically, the problem is that, by listening to an individual arguing for a specific position, we are *screening* evidence. The evidence that individual presents to us is not a random selection from the available evidence; all evidence *against* the conclusion being defended has been screened out. If we bear this in mind, we will be, rightly, much less impressed by the arguments political ideologues present. Example: a proponent of gun control presents us with murder statistics from England (which has strict gun control) and the United States (which has less gun control). The numbers seem impressive. Then we remember that England and the United States were not randomly chosen from the countries for which we have data—they were most likely chosen because they were the cases most favorable to the position being defended, and any other examples that were not favorable to that position were excluded.

*Fourth:* Should you accuse other people of irrationality, if you suspect them of it? There's a dilemma here. On the one hand, recognizing one's irrationality may be necessary to combat it. Merely presenting evidence about the issue in dispute may not be enough, as this evidence will continue to be evaluated irrationally. The victim of bias may need to make a deliberate effort to combat it.

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<sup>11</sup> Gilovich (1991, p. 77).

<sup>12</sup> From the National Survey of Public Knowledge of Welfare Reform and the Federal Budget (1995); discussed in Caplan (2001). Foreign aid actually accounts for less than 1% of the budget.

On the other hand, people accused of irrationality may take the accusation as a personal attack, rather than as a point relevant to the political debate, and respond defensively. If that occurs, it is virtually impossible that they will change their political position.

I have witnessed few political conversions, so the most I can offer is speculation as to how one might occur. One point that is pretty clear is that, if a person is to be reasoned into a change of position, he must not see the argument as a personal contest. For this reason, we must avoid insulting remarks in the course of political discussions—whether directed at the individuals actually present or at others with whom they might identify.

A second suggestion is that one should first attempt to move an interlocutor to suspense of judgment, rather than to the position opposite to his own. One might try to accomplish this by first identifying empirical claims that his position depends upon. After securing agreement on what the relevant empirical issues are, one might attempt to secure agreement on what sort of evidence would be needed to resolve those issues. In most cases, one could then point out that neither party to the discussion actually has that sort of evidence. The rationale behind this procedure is that the question, “What sort of evidence is relevant to X?” is usually easier to answer than the question “Is X true?” For example: suppose you are arguing with someone about why America has a high rate of violent crime. He proposes that it is because of violence on television and movies. This is an empirical claim. How would we find out if it was true? Here are some suggestions: time series data about the amount of violence (for instance, the number of murders per hour of entertainment) portrayed on television over a period of many years; violent crime rates over the same time period; similar data for other countries; psychological studies of actual violent criminals that drew some conclusions about why they committed their crimes; data on the statistical correlation between owning a television set and crime; data on the statistical correlation between number of hours of television individuals watch and their risk of committing crimes. These are just a few examples—other kinds of evidence may also be relevant. Nevertheless, the important point is that, in most cases, neither party to the debate has *any* data of this kind. Upon realizing this, both parties should agree to suspend judgment on whether and how much television violence contributes to crime.

My third and final suggestion is to display fair-mindedness, which may induce an interlocutor to trust one and to attempt to display similar fair-mindedness. One displays fair-mindedness by (a) qualifying one’s claims appropriately, i.e., acknowledging possible limitations of one’s arguments and not making stronger claims than the evidence will warrant; (b) bringing forward evidence one knows of that goes against one’s favored position; (c) acknowledging correct points made by the interlocutor.<sup>13</sup>

I don’t know whether these suggestions would be successful. They seem to conflict with accepted practice among those whom we might consider the experts in political debate; on the other hand, accepted practice seems to be highly

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<sup>13</sup> Compare Feynman’s (1974) excellent discussion of the requirements of science, paralleling points (a) and (b).

unsuccessful at producing agreement (though it *does* appear successful at producing polarization, i.e., increasing the confidence of those who already hold a particular position).

## 8. Summary

Based on the level of disagreement, human beings are highly unreliable at identifying correct political claims. This is extremely unfortunate, since it means that we have little chance of solving most social problems and a good chance of causing or exacerbating them. The best explanation lies in the theory of Rational Irrationality: individuals derive psychological rewards from holding certain political beliefs, and since each individual suffers almost none of the harm caused by his own false political beliefs, it often makes sense (it gives him what he wants) to adopt those beliefs regardless of whether they are true or well-supported.

The beliefs that people want to hold are often determined by their self-interest, the social group they want to fit into, the self-image they want to maintain, and the desire to remain coherent with their past beliefs. People can deploy various mechanisms to enable them to adopt and maintain their preferred beliefs, including giving a biased weighting of evidence; focusing their attention and energy on the arguments supporting their favored beliefs; collecting evidence only from sources they already agree with; and relying on subjective, speculative, and anecdotal claims as evidence for political theories.

The irrationality hypothesis is superior to alternative explanations of political disagreement in its ability to account for several features of political beliefs and arguments: the fact that people hold their political beliefs with a high degree of confidence; the fact that discussion rarely changes political beliefs; the fact that political beliefs are correlated with race, sex, occupation, and other cognitively irrelevant traits; and the fact that numerous logically unrelated political beliefs—and even, in some cases, beliefs that rationally *undermine* each other—tend to go together. These features of political beliefs are not explained by the hypotheses that political issues are merely very difficult, that we just haven't yet collected enough information regarding them, or that political disputes are primarily caused by people's differing fundamental value systems.

It may be possible to combat political irrationality, first, by recognizing one's own susceptibility to bias. One should recognize the cases in which one is most likely to be biased (such as issues about which one feels strongly), and one should consciously try to avoid using the mechanisms discussed above for maintaining irrational beliefs. In the light of widespread biases, one should also take a skeptical attitude towards evidence presented to one by others, recognizing that the evidence has probably been screened and otherwise distorted. Lastly, one may be able to combat others' irrationality by identifying the sort of empirical evidence that would be required to test their claims, and by taking a fair-minded and cooperative, rather than combative, attitude towards discussion. It remains a matter of speculation whether these measures will significantly alleviate the problem of political irrationality.

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