

Our Usual Approach to Political Belief Formation Resembles a Juror Reaching a Verdict after the Prosecutor's Opening Statement:

The U.S. Trial System as a Comparison Model for both Epistemically Rational and Heuristics-based Political Belief Formation

Introduction: Both *myside bias* (the tendency to form beliefs biased by one's existing beliefs and opinions) and *the tendency to form beliefs biased by the beliefs of one's associates* exert pervasive influences over political belief formation. While these cognitive biases are easily recognizable in those who reach conclusions different from ours, they are extremely difficult to recognize in ourselves and in those who conclude similarly.

A thought experiment is provided. A basic model for epistemically rational and *myside bias*-free reasoning, plus the analogy of the U.S. trial system, are then compared and contrasted with heuristic-based belief formation, as a potential means of facilitating bias self-recognition.

Thought experiment: Imagine that a national level politician has been accused of a crime. The news sources you turn to have interviewed witnesses and legal experts, revealed evidence, and woven interview soundbites and evidence into a highly convincing guilty narrative. Based on this narrative, you have concluded that the politician is, in fact, guilty.

The trial venue is changed -- to your town, coincidentally -- and you are selected to sit on the jury. On trial day one, the prosecuting attorney delivers an impeccable, incredibly convincing opening argument that the politician is guilty, confirming your existing opinion. You rise, announce you are voting *guilty*, and walk out of the court room before the defense's opening argument, presentation of cases, and jury deliberation.

Model for epistemically rational reasoning: A reasonable model for epistemically rational reasoning, defined as reasoning such that objective thinking and the odds of discovering objective truth are maximized, includes:

1. Begin by asking yourself: *am I attempting to build or bolster an argument, or am I attempting to arrive at objective truth?* These are *very* different goals, requiring *very* different thought processes.
2. Attempt to minimize *myside bias*. Resist the temptation to defer to the first intuitive answer that enters your mind. And attempt to separate yourself from your existing beliefs, convictions, worldview, and political ideology; from your favored party's political platform; and from the beliefs of those you associate with.
3. Carefully gather evidence and arguments from the most credible sources on each side of the issue.
4. Assimilate and analyze the information gathered.
5. Spend a significant amount of time reflecting, and just *thinking*.
6. Reach a conclusion you treat as a working hypothesis, as opposed to a firmly established fact. In other words, maintain an open mind, and remain open to adjusting or even changing your belief as often as evidence and superior arguments lead you to do so.

US Trial System: A situation for which the discovery of objective truth is critical is the establishment of an accused individual's guilt versus innocence. The U.S. trial system is

designed for this purpose. Americans have been conditioned to believe that in the courtroom, maximizing the odds of reaching an accurate and unbiased conclusion requires:

- A jury selection process that attempts to weed out those who already have strong preconceived notions
- A judge, to make sure the evidence presented is accurate and fair, and that the accepted trial process is followed
- Opening statements
- Presentation of cases, including evidence presentation, witness examination, witness cross examination, and redirect examination
- Closing arguments
- Jury instructions. The judge “charges the jury,” informing jurors of the relevant law and of what they must do to reach a verdict.
- Jury deliberation, whereby jurors are exposed to perspectives and conclusions they may disagree with
- An appeals process, if the defense believes the proceedings were unfair or that the law was not properly applied
- The ordering of a new trial, if substantial evidence is later discovered

Heuristics-based belief formation: Judgment heuristics are mental shortcuts – such as deferring to intuitions -- that allow us to reach conclusions quickly and without putting in much work. Heuristics-based reasoning is associated with multiple forms of “mis-thinking”;

1. Cognitive biases. The most significant of the cognitive biases influencing political beliefs are *myside bias*, as well as the *tendency to form new beliefs biased by the beliefs of our associates*.
2. Backward thinking, whereby we build an argument by gathering confirmatory evidence in support of the belief we have formed
3. Ignoring of conflicting evidence and arguments
4. Overconfidence in the belief and the narrative (argument) we have formed
5. Belief perseverance, whereby we cling ferociously to the belief we have formed, and refuse to entertain any evidence and arguments that might cause us to reconsider.

Conclusion: As will be shown in table format, the rationality model and the trial system are quite similar. While we are conditioned to recognize the importance of each step in the trial process, we are not conditioned to follow a rationality model when we form our political beliefs. Our usual (heuristics-based) approach to political belief formation resembles leaving the courtroom after the prosecutor’s opening argument, without bias screening, consideration of the other side’s evidence and arguments, a judge to monitor the reliability of the information received, or any prompt to reexamine new evidence that might cause us to change our mind.