

# 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.*

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## Introduction

Both *myside bias* (the tendency to form new 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. They permeate all of our political thinking. 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 believe what we believe.

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 heuristics-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.

## Conclusion

The below models for epistemically rational reasoning and the trial system are quite similar. However, while we have been 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 statement.**

**Virtually all of us utilize heuristic shortcuts when we form our political beliefs, which are subject to bias and to multiple additional forms of "mis-thinking" (provided below).**

**This thought experiment may be useful for inducing bias self-recognition.**

### Model for Epistemically Rational Reasoning

### U.S. Trial System

### How We Almost Always Form Political Beliefs

1. Begin by asking yourself: am I attempting to build or bolster an argument, or am I attempting to reach objective truth? These are *very* different goals, requiring *very* different thought processes.

The trial process is specifically designed to attempt to reach objective truth.

We have many subconscious, instrumental goals that supersede the discovery of objective truth. These are summarized on the EpistemicCrossroads.com website (home page).

2. Make a conscious effort to stay as open-minded and objective as possible. Resist the temptation to simply defer to the first intuitive answer that pops in to your mind. And attempt to separate yourself from your exiting beliefs, convictions, worldview, and political ideology; from your favored party's political platform; and from the beliefs of those you associate with as you draw your conclusion.

The jury selection process attempts to weed out jurors who already have strong pre-conceived notions about guilt versus innocence, and those who seem unable to be objective. After the closing arguments are made (see below), a judge provides instructions to the jury, and typically reminds jurors to base their conclusions solely on the evidence presented.

We usually begin by utilizing judgment heuristics (intuitions) to form our beliefs, whereby our beliefs are biased by our existing beliefs, opinions, and attitudes (myside bias); as well as by the beliefs of our associates.

3. Carefully gather evidence and arguments from the most credible sources on each side of the issue.

Cases are presented by the prosecution and defense teams, including evidence presentation, witness examination, witness cross examination, and redirect examination. Closing arguments are then delivered by each side.

Once we have formed our belief, we think backward, building an argument by gathering confirmatory evidence in support of the belief we have formed. We ignore evidence and arguments that would cause us to consider an alternative conclusion, and we write off those who provide them as unreliable and dishonest.

4. Assimilate and analyze the information gathered, including using "specialized" forms of thinking as indicated, such as probabilistic reasoning, scientific reasoning, and statistical reasoning.

The jury deliberation process involves jurors meeting to openly discuss arguments, testimony, and evidence

Generally does not occur.

5. Spend a significant amount of time reflecting, and just thinking.

Generally does not occur.

6. Reach a conclusion you treat as a working hypothesis, as opposed to a firmly established fact gripped in a tightly clenched fist.

The verdict can be appealed if the proceedings were not fair or if the law was not correctly applied. A new trial can be granted if new evidence presents itself.

We develop belief perseverance. That is, we cling ferociously to the belief we have formed, we refuse to entertain any evidence and arguments that might cause us to reconsider.