

Both myside bias and the tendency to base one's beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates, in combination with multiple forms of "mis-thinking" that help form and fortify these cognitive biases, are likely natural selection-derived cognitive mechanisms that make objective political thinking difficult or impossible.

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Abstract

In forming political beliefs, people often utilize non-reflective heuristics-based approaches that lead to multiple "mis-thinking" phenomena. These include substitution (replacement of complex questions with simpler, easier to answer questions); belief formation influenced by cognitive biases such as the basing of new beliefs on existing convictions, including political allegiances (i.e. myside bias), and the basing of beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates; backward thinking (identification of confirmatory evidence *following* belief formation); ignoring of conflicting evidence; overconfidence; and belief perseverance. In our ancestors' environments, myside bias, by facilitating beliefs empathetic to and supportive of in-groups (especially kin) and antipathetic toward out-groups, likely conferred selection advantages. The tendency to base beliefs on those of one's associates, by facilitating learning in an information-sparse environment, also likely conferred selection advantages. The above additional "mis-thinking" phenomena would have helped form and fortify advantageous, cognitively-based beliefs. Both myside bias and the tendency to base beliefs on those of one's associates, each combined with multiple phenomena that reinforce cognitively biased thinking, are likely thinking mechanisms designed by natural selection. Cognitively-biased political thinking is likely innate. Open-minded reasoning, as well as independent learning, are likely unnatural ways of political thinking that for most people are difficult or impossible.

Hypothesis

1 – The tendency to base one's political beliefs on one's existing convictions (i.e., *myside bias*), as well as multiple forms of "mis-thinking" that facilitate and fortify myside-biased beliefs, and

2 – The tendency to base one's political beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates, as well as multiple forms of "mis-thinking" that facilitate and fortify beliefs influenced by this cognitive bias, are

Natural selection-derived cognitive mechanism, or ways of thinking.

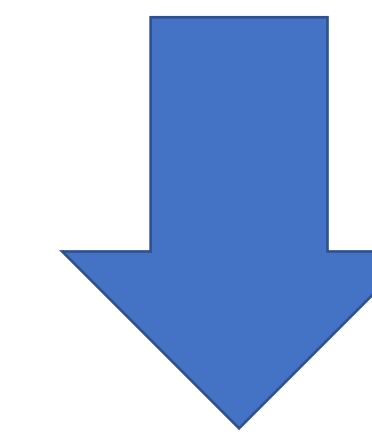
The former cognitive mechanism is designed to facilitate group membership, in-group flourishing, and out-group antipathy.

The latter cognitive mechanism is designed to facilitate learning from others.

Background

1. Myside bias

- Myside bias is a pervasive bias that involves the tendency to "evaluate evidence, generate evidence, and test hypotheses in a manner biased toward our own beliefs, opinions, and attitudes – where the attitudes in question are convictions" (Stanovich, 2021). By *convictions*, Stanovich refers to non-testable beliefs that are protected values, highly valued opinions generally stemming from our worldview or political ideology, to which we show "emotional commitment and ego preoccupation" (Stanovich, 2021). As examples, our beliefs concerning equality, racism, climate change, gun control, abortion, and party loyalty are convictions.
- Abundant data demonstrate that *myside bias* affects all aspects of our political thinking, and that it is at least as common in the highly intelligent and highly educated as it is in everyone else. It is also equally pervasive amongst the political left versus the political right (Stanovich, 2021).



2. Most of our political beliefs are formed via the use of judgment heuristics (cognitive "shortcuts"). This results in multiple forms of "mis-thinking":

- We *substitute* easy questions for complex, difficult ones.
- We answer the substitution questions – that is, we form our belief -- in a manner that is highly susceptible to cognitive biases, such as *myside bias* and the *tendency to base our beliefs on the beliefs of our associates*.
- We *think backward*, lazily gathering confirmatory evidence to support the belief we have formed, to create belief-plus-evidence-and-other-reasons narratives.
- We *ignore contradictory evidence and arguments*.
- We become quite confident – yes, *overconfident* – in the belief and the narrative we have formed.
- We develop very strong *belief perseverance*, clinging strongly to our belief and steadfastly refusing to even consider changing our minds.

3. Heuristics-associated mis-thinking facilitates the pursuit of modern day non-epistemic, instrumental goals, such as:

- Speed, with minimal expenditure of mental energy
- A sense of confidence, with minimal doubt
- Social goals, such as the desire to be seen favorably by others, group acceptance, group communication, group cohesion, and group cooperation
- The ability to feel good about ourselves and our groups
- The desire for a sense of purpose, to have meaning in our lives
- Material goals, ranging from food, housing, physical safety, and access to healthcare; to financial security, college educations for our children, exotic vacations in faraway places, diamonds, fancy watches, and private jets

4. Epistemic goals that were not important to our human ancestors:

- Reaching objective conclusions about our in-groups versus our out-groups
- Learning via the assimilation and open-minded analysis of large amounts of information from disparate sources
- Finding objective truth from short, carefully selected snippets of political information on a wide range of constantly rotating complex political issues most people know little about
- Developing a highly objective, extensively-reasoned, open-minded, and comprehensive worldview and / or political ideology

Argument

Some instrumental and epistemic goals important to our human ancestors

- Group acceptance
- In-group flourishing
- Out-group antipathy
- Learning from one's associates

Myside reasoning, to foster group acceptance, in-group flourishing, and out-group antipathy

Group-based living improved our human ancestors' odds of survival and reproduction, for a multitude of reasons (Buss, 2019). Myside-biased reasoning would have supported multiple instrumental goals related to group-based living:

- group acceptance
- group communication, group cohesion, and group cooperation
- the desire to feel good about oneself and one's group
- belief in the group's mission(s)
- antipathy toward one's out-groups

Basing one's beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates, to facilitate the ability to learn from others

Our human ancestors had two ways to acquire knowledge and know-how for the ultimate goals of surviving and reproduction: learning from personal experience, and learning from their associates. Learning from others would have enhanced their abilities to procure food and water, to protect oneself from the elements, to protect oneself from predators, to protect oneself from aggressive rival groups, and to wage war against rival groups for access to their resources and for additional mating opportunities. The tendency to base one's beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates would have facilitated a key epistemic goal:

- The ability to learn from others

Conclusion

- Myside-biased belief formation, in conjunction with the forms of judgment heuristics-associated mis-thinking (outlined above) that help facilitate and fortify myside-biased beliefs, is a natural selection-derived way of thinking oriented toward group acceptance, in-group flourishing, and antipathy toward one's out-groups.
- The tendency to base one's beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates, in conjunction with the forms of judgment heuristics-associated mis-thinking (outlined above) that help facilitate and fortify beliefs formed under the influence of this cognitive bias, is a natural selection-derived way of thinking oriented toward learning from others.
- These two cognitive biases intersect and overlap when those on whose beliefs we are basing ours are those belonging to our in-groups.
- The six forms of "mis-thinking" previously outlined are biologically ingrained. They are our natural way of thinking.
- Formation of objective political beliefs, unbiased by existing political convictions and by the beliefs of those we associate with, is extremely difficult or impossible.
- Because belief formation influenced by these biases is our natural way of thinking, it is extremely difficult to recognize in ourselves.

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