



Why do we think the past is better than the future?

Declinism, explained.

What is Declinism?

Declinism is the tendency to see the past in an overly positive light and to view the present or future in an overly negative light, leading us to believe that things are worse than they used to be. Declinism is often a feeling harbored about the overall state of a country, society, or institution, with the view that it is in decline or getting worse.



Think back to the last time you tuned into the news. You are likely to have been presented with negative and violent stories, whether they be about racism, COVID-19, or the climate crisis.

How are those news stories likely to make us feel? Probably like society is in impending doom. It is difficult not to think that things are constantly getting worse when these are the images we are presented with. When these kinds of news stories are combined with hearing our parents or grandparents tell stories about “the good old times”, we tend to overestimate how great the past was and overestimate how negative the present is. This leads to declinism, a **negative bias** that makes us believe that the worst is yet to come.



Even our smallest decisions are greatly influenced by our overarching views and beliefs. Declinism clouds our judgment of the present as negative, while we think about the way things once were with rosy retrospection, commonly known as nostalgia or romanticism. Rosy retrospection is the tendency to view the past more positively than it actually was.

Because of another cognitive bias, the confirmation bias, where we purposefully seek out information that corroborates with our current beliefs and ideologies, declinism can cause us to feel pretty dire about the state of the world. When we begin with a negative worldview, we will unconsciously seek out facts and evidence that support that worldview, such as focusing on negative news stories.

The outlook brought on by declinism can lead to people being overly pessimistic, and therefore not make decisions that rationally help them prepare for their future. Emotional wellbeing, health, and decision-making are all negatively impacted by declinism.



Declinism occurs, in part, due to a survival instinct. To pass on our genes, we have to survive, leading to an evolutionary instinct that causes us to always be on the lookout for threats and dangers and never become complacent.

Although we have moved away from our more primitive days in today's world, declinism can cause us to feel like our current socio-economic position is under threat, which could lead to negative attitudes towards others.

The feeling that society is in decline can also cause us to mistrust authority, as found by a study that showed people will agree with populism because they feel like the political elite have failed them by not having their best interest at heart.¹

Often, we blame our view of society getting worse on the political elite and fail to trust them. While some doubt and resistance against the political elite can be healthy, at times, declinism can leave us feeling like there is no hope and no future.

Additionally, declinism can have negative implications on our mental health. Rates of depression are increasing in the U.S but this could be due to declinism, rather than actually being a reflection of the world being worse than it used to be.²



As mentioned, the 24-hour news cycle that bombards us with negative and violent images contribute to declinism and end up confirming our existing beliefs that the world is getting worse. News stations, which have to compete with one another, capitalize on confirmation bias. They know that if they continue to present viewers with shocking and disturbing stories, viewers will continue coming back for more.

But how do our overly pessimistic views of the present begin? Unfortunately, humans give greater weight to the negative things that happen to us in the present than the positive things. Something traumatic is more likely to have a short-term impact on us than something pleasant, called **the negativity bias**, because in the past, this cognitive bias helped us survive. Yet, when we look backwards, at our memories, the opposite is true: we are more likely to remember the good things, called the positivity effect.

Even if we believe that we are looking at the past, present and future objectively when making decisions, the reality is that our brains think subjectively. Our present emotions, that are skewed by the negativity bias, have much greater weight in decision-making than our past emotions. They lead us to believe that things are worse now than they once were, and that things are only going to continue in that negative trend.



If everyone in our society believes that society is getting worse, it can lead to a **self-fulfilling prophecy**,³ where our expectations cause us to act in a way that eventually confirms those expectations. With declinism, such actions can range from giving up because things are so bad, and therefore negatively impacting our own lives as well as the wider economy, to wishing things were like the past, even though there is evidence that there is less violence, warfare and cruelty today than ever before.⁴ We have more rights, greater health and prosperity, yet continue that society is getting worse.

In romanticizing the past, we forget how much progress has been made. For example, Jessica Mann, a 1960s full-time mother and housewife, talks about a common misperception where women might think that it was simpler to be a stay-at-home mother in the past.⁵ Today, they might face societal judgment for the same decision and are led to believe simpler times were better. Viewing the past under this romantic gaze can make us feel negative about our own situation and cause us to fail to recognize the fortunate position that women are in today. When economically viable, they can choose whether to work or be a stay-at-home mother, whereas in Jessica's time, no such choice was possible.



Being aware of declinism could help us remember that when we think back fondly over the past, we are romanticizing our memories. However, emotions have a powerful impact on our cognitive processes, and awareness of the bias alone may not be enough to counter the effects of declinism on our mindset and wellbeing.

It may be difficult to try to use rational logic when making decisions if we are clouded by a pessimistic view of the present and future. Countering the negative view may therefore be the place to start. This could include relying on measurable statistics such as life expectancy, levels of poverty, and reported happiness when deciding what the climate of our society is really like.

We can also try to focus on the positive things that are happening in our daily lives and in society as a whole. This can be in the form of creating a list of all the good things that are happening or to make an effort to seek out news outlets that are committed to sharing positive stories. One such source is the COVID-19 Recovery Website created by three young academics who were committed to sharing positive news while the world faces a pandemic.⁶

Even when things are tough, it is important to recognize the challenges society faces, but to also remind ourselves that they are challenges, not indicators of a looming doomsday.



Declinism was given its name by Oswald Spengler, a German historian, in his book *The Decline of the West*. It was released after WW1 and speculated that each civilization is destined to fail, as part of a cycle.⁷ If we consider the pessimistic atmosphere that followed WW1, a prediction of inevitable doom might be understandable. Yet, even today, we still tend to believe in declinism.

A study conducted by YouGov in 2015 showed that 71% of participants thought the world was getting worse, and only 5% of participants thought the world was getting better.²

Yet a study led by Angelina Sutin, a psychologist scientist, whose team looked into self-reported levels of happiness of different age cohorts, found that “relative to their starting points, all of the cohorts increased rather than decreased in well-being with age” (2013, pp. 382).⁸ Things aren’t actually getting worse, but we continue to believe that they are.



Politicians have, and often will, capitalize on declinism for their own political gain. Mark Elchardus, a professor of sociology, examined speeches made by political leaders like Barack Obama and Donald Trump and found that they commented on the negative state of current affairs, positioning themselves as the leaders that would change that present.⁹ Promises about bringing “back” the way things were made, playing into voters’ perspectives of the past as positive and of the present as negative.

Consider Donald Trump’s main campaign slogan, “Make American Great Again.” “Again” supposes that America was once great, but currently, it is in worse condition. As Elchardus notes, Trump used declinism to run a populist campaign by “dramatizing the decline [...] and blaming the political establishment.”

Declinism can also cause us to never be satisfied with the political state of our country, because we are overly negative about the present. If our preferred party is currently in power and we think society’s state is worse than it was in the past, when a different party was in power, declinism could cause us to vote for a different party that our views are not necessarily aligned with.



We might think that if everyone believes the world is getting worse, declinism would act as a good motivator to make things better. However, the opposite could actually be true.

Along with other researchers, Astrida Neimanis, a posthuman feminist (posthumanism indicates a turn away from viewings humans as above other organisms), examined four problems that the environmental humanities is facing today.¹⁰

One of the problems the researchers identified was that negative framing actually stifles innovation and activism around environmental issues. While it is important to educate people on the challenges our society is facing, headlines that the researchers quote, like “Climate change more dangerous than terrorism,” can cause people to believe in an “no-future” scenario and give up on trying to improve conditions.

As declinism often leads to a mistrust in authorities and elites, tension is created between the population and the people trying to convey the societal issues that we all must band together to fight. This creates a feeling of alienation, which in turn, is likely to further enhance the negative bias of declinism.



What it is

Declinism is the belief that the world and our society is inevitably getting worse. It is caused by our tendency to view the past with rosy retrospection, a positive outlook, and to view our present with a negative bias.

Why it happens

In the present, we tend to focus on the negative things that happen as a survival instinct to always be on the lookout for threats that could harm us. Since we do not need to have the same survival instinct when thinking of the past, positive memories are more likely to be remembered. When we compare our negative view of the present with our positive view of the past, it is easy to think that things are getting worse and worse.

When we approach the world with a negative mindset, we are then more likely to seek out information that confirms that mindset. This is called the confirmation bias and leads to a repetitive and vicious cycle of determinism that can negatively affect our emotions, health, and decision-making.

Example 1 - political strategy

When we feel that the state of the world is in decline, we are likely to blame the political elite. Emerging political leaders can capitalize on declinism by positioning themselves as different to the current leaders and using language that is reminiscent of bringing things back to the way they once were. Declinism therefore allows populist campaigns to



Example 2 - Environmental activism

Declinism causes us to feel pretty hopeless about the state of our society and the problems it is facing. These pessimistic feelings are further perpetuated by news outlets that grab our attention with violent headlines. If we believe the decline is inevitable, we are unlikely to be motivated to take action. Declinism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy where because we do not do anything to counter the challenges we face, they get worse and worse.

How to avoid it

Emotions, especially negative ones, have a strong impact on our decision-making. They make it hard to make rational and logical decisions. To counter declinism, we can try to remind ourselves that nostalgia warps our view of the past and negative bias does the same for our present. To change our view of the present, we can seek out and write down positive statistics and stories that are happening, in order to remind ourselves that things aren't always as bad as they may seem.