Critical Thinking for Voters

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**--- Introduction: Critical Thinking for Voters ---**

My name is Payton Wolf Bailey VanZandt and I keep a blog called Adventuring: The Bear Creek Commentaries, which is a lifelong learning blog. In it, I try to encourage folks to leave their computers and televisions for a while by recounting my own learning adventures on the trails and streets around Denver, Colorado.

I take a theme or two each year (at this writing, I'm studying language and mathematics) and pretty close to the first of the year, I include my background in that/those areas. It's not that I believe that the reader should be that interested in me. I don't ever expect to have a best selling biography written about me. But I feel like, if the reader is going to read my ideas on a topic, they need to know where I'm coming from. Why should they put any stock at all in what I have to say?

By the same account, if you're going to read this online book, you should know a little about the author - me.

I was born in a South that still lynched people (the last recorded lynching was James Craig Anderson, who was lynched in Mississippi in 2011.) Although "lynching" is defined as "extrajudicial" much of the murder in the South was known of and condoned by the legal system. I heard plenty of the rhetoric of the South used to justify hate crimes against black people and I continue to hear the same fallacies and outright lies used to justify positions on issues in other parts of the country. Irrationality never seems to go out of style. For an intimate look at the legal system of the South during the last half of the twentieth century, read Bryan Stevenson's "Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption".

I'm not a political scientist but I am an applied social scientist. A graduate of Auburn University in Alabama, my degree is in social psychology with minors in sociology and literature. Ten years allowed me time for forays into physiology, criminal justice, computer science, and music history. I aimed to be well rounded. The other ten years between entering college in 1971 and 1991, were spent working through college and I consider those parts of my education as those years allowed me exposure to many other cultures that my life in the southeastern United States would not have allowed. My graduate work was in vocational evaluation and research.

My career was as a vocational rehabilitation specialist. I worked 20 years at an Easter Seals facility in Selma, Alabama. As a professional, I was expected to be active in my community's affairs. I rarely got more than 4 hours of sleep during a workweek. I was a district leader for the Boy Scouts and I worked for the church. I was a founding member of Selma's Citizens Against Violence and the local chapter of the Christian Motorcyclists Association, and I was the chairperson for the Dallas County Department of Human Resources Quality Assurance team the year before and the year that DHR asserted conversion to the court's RC Decree. That last one is complicated, but you can read about it here:

<http://www.dhr.alabama.gov/services/Child_Protective_Services/RC_Consent_Decree.aspx>

and elsewhere on the Internet.

My spare time was also spent helping others find resources and solve problems. It was a busy 20 years.

Since retiring to Denver, I've continued helping individuals get their lives started back up and I've worked as a tutor, both formally and informally. I live with a nontraditional family - my adopted son, his husband, a cousin, a friend, a most extraordinary canine, and three extraordinary cats (I may be biased, here). My hobbies are lifelong learning and statistics. I sold my van and am a pedestrian - the better to study everything.

Where I have been a community activist most of my adult life, I've shifted slightly to political activism. There are differences.

A community activist looks around their communities (everyone has several) and asks, "What does this community need to be a better place?" and then they go to work to try to procure those things. A political activist looks around and asks, "What's preventing this community from being a better place?" and they go to work trying to remove the barriers that interfere with progress.

I am non-partisan. I might campaign (and have campaigned) for a candidate, but I'm not concerned about whether they are liberal or conservative, or what party they belong to. I work for the people I think will work for the community. So I won't be trying to sway you to vote for any particular ideology.

In this book, I will try to encourage you to vote at every opportunity and to vote intelligently and I want to give you tools to do so. The United States is special in that it gives its citizens great political power - if they will wield it.

I want you to have that power.

**--- Why think critically? ---**

Why think critically?

I'm actually getting the cart before the horse, here. First we need to ask, "Why vote?" because only 55.7% of the voting population in the United States voted in the 2016 elections - the lowest voter turnout in the nation's history. (The Sanders Institute, <https://www.sandersinstitute.com/blog/why-dont-americans-vote> , accessed 5/20/19). On off years, years that do not have a presidential election, turnout is typically much smaller. In 2014, voter turnout was 36.4%.

The Sanderson Institute, in the article cited above, asked why Americans don't vote. Here are their answers.

Only 16 of the 50 states have open primaries. In America, there are two large parties, the Democratic party and the Republican party. There can be many other smaller parties but the last time a third party candidate won any state's electoral college vote was in 1968. Primaries are held to decide who the two candidates with any chance of winning will be and, in most states, only voters who declare an affiliation with one of the two parties can vote in the primary. 19 states have rules that partially restrict unaffiliated voters from voting in the primaries. In comparison, according to a 2018 Gallup poll, 46% of Americans do not identify with a political party.

More than 21 million Americans do not have government issued photo identification and 34 states request or require voters to show some form of identification to vote. This selectively eliminates the elderly, the poor, and minorities. Whereas only 8% of white Anericans do not have a photo identification, 25% of voting-age African American citizens do not have a government issued ID.

6.1 million Americans cannot vote due to prior felony convictions. In Maine and Vermont, felons can vote. In 16 states, felons cannot vote while incarcerated. In 25 states, felons have to wait until after incarceration, parole, and/or probation before they regain the right to vote. and in 9 states, voter restoration must come from the action of the governor or court.

D.C. residents have three electoral college votes in presidential elections but American citizens from Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, North Mariana Islands, and Guam do not have electoral colleges, so they cannot vote in presidential elections. About 4.4 million Americans live in these territories and the District of Columbia.

Citizens of voting age must register to vote and laws governing how to vote differ significantly from state to state. Voters must do considerable research to even know how to vote, much less to understand who they should vote for. In addition, there is a strong correlation between voter turnout and states that offer same-day registration.

In most democratic countries around the world, voting happens on a day on which people are not working (Sunday, weekend, or voting holiday). In the United States, voting traditionally occurs on a Tuesday and people have to get off work to vote in states that only have poll sites. Polls in different states open and close at different times in different states. 13 states do not allow for early voting except for absentee ballots that require a written excuse. 7 states allow early voting. 27 states allow early voting and non-excused absentee voting. Only three states have mail in voting.

And, of course, electoral college representation skews state voting power in ways almost incomprehensible to voters.

Through published surveys and direct interviews, the National Public Radio found that, where the turnout for midterm elections in older adults is about 50%, the turnout for young voters is about 20% and commonly stated reasons is that they don't feel they know enough about the system to vote intelligently and they don't feel that their vote has any impact on election outcomes. (National Public Radio (2018) On the Sidelines of Democracy: Exploring Why So Many Americans Don't Vote. <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/10/645223716/on-the-sidelines-of-democracy-exploring-why-so-many-americans-dont-vote> last accessed 5/20/19)

The same study found that many older adults also feel that their votes do not matter. People with only a high school education and who make less than $30,000 a year, and minorities are less likely to vote.

For a detailed analysis of these factors that keep American citizens away from the polls, see the Pew Research Center study, Who Votes, Who Doesn't, and Why: Regular Voters, Intermittent Voters, and Those Who Don't (2006) <https://www.people-press.org/2006/10/18/who-votes-who-doesnt-and-why> (accessed 5/20/19).

So, how do you feel about voting? I hope, through this book, to give you some good reasons and ways to make them work.

Let's look at how the United States is supposed to work - how the founders set things up to protect the country from things like tyrannical government officials, imbalances of power, and special interest groups that might harm the country for the sake of their own benefit.

It is usually said (I've said it myself many times) that there are three branches of government. That isn't supposed to be true. There are actually four branches of the government, as intended by the founders. The legislative branch makes the laws, the judicial branch interprets the laws, the executive branch carries out the laws, and the popular branch - the citizens - you and me - set up the whole machine to work the way we want it to - with some important limitations. All four branches are restricted from extreme and harmful actions by "balances of power." Each branch has ways to restrict the other branches.

Unless the balance of power is upset, it's not easy to change things. It, as they say, "takes an act of congress" and the president and supreme court have ways to stand in the way of congress from acting.

There are a few dynamics that I want to emphasize here and I'm going to use something that is in just about everyone's life - the computer - to do that.

As a sociologist, I look at organizations (like the United States) as individuals. Philosophy comes into play when you try to figure out how we "know" anything. Plato, at least according to the Meno, believed that the human soul was immortal, existing before and after it acquired a body, and that everyone was born with all the knowledge that is. Learning is just remembering what you already know. At the other extreme, John Locke held that the human mind is completely empty at birth and ready to be loaded with knowledge. Somewhere between, Immanuel Kant figured that, if there was not something in the mind at first, then people wouldn't know how to learn and that learning would be impossible. He thought that the mind is never blank. It comes with "programming" that allows a person to acquire knowledge.

Your computer has a Kantian mind. Some of it's programming is built into the hardware part of its makeup - mostly in the CPU (Central Processing Unit) and in the BIOS (Basic Input/Output System chips). The programming in the CPU is mostly instructions for performing calculations, translating binary codes (computers can only work, at base, with 0s and 1s), and moving data around in memory. The programming in the BIOS chip tells the computer how to interact with the outside world (keyboards, mice, external memory devices, graphics boards, monitors, etc.). Without the BIOS, the computer would just sit and stare into space.

And you wouldn't want this basic programming to be easily changed. Temporary memory, the data storage that most people interact with, is temporary because it can be changed. Data and software can be loaded into and deleted out of it.

The problem is that things can spontaneously change in temporary memory because of noise in the environment, if nothing else. If one of those 1s in the computer's memory changes to a 0, it could completely cripple the program it's in. If the change were in the basic programming, it could destroy the computer's ability to "think" or to interact with you, so you don't want this programming to be changeable. That's why the basic instruction set is built into the material circuitry of the computer.

And that's why you can't change this programming unless you replace the CPU and BIOS chips (which would essentially create a different computer.)

What you recognize as your computer's "mind" is an operating system like MacOS, Windows, Linux, etc. When you buy a computer, the operating system is either already loaded into the computer's temporary memory or you load the operating system into it when you first start it up.

Early computers kept the CPU and BIOS programming on the CPU chip and the user had to enter information as lines of text, and very specific lines of text at that called "machine code" (all 1s and 0s) and assembly language code, which consisted of three or more letter abbreviations of the individual actions that the CPU could do. Now, operating systems let users click buttons, drag scroll bars, and do other things on the screen to get things done.

If something in the operating system program code changes, either because of some random noise or because the computer picks up a malicious program like a virus, the operating system is said to be corrupted. There is corruption in the code. Remember that word - "corruption". Corruption makes things not work right.

Early computer users were programmers by necessity. Things have evolved to the point that a user may never program, indeed, may only use a few specific programs loaded before the computer was purchased or loaded from the Internet after purchase. To these users, the computer's inner workings are often invisible.

So, how does the computer's programming look to modern users?

Many modern computer users do not even know that CPUs and BIOSs exist. Those that do rarely interact with them. They don't really need to. The only way to change the CPU is to change the chip (or buy a new computer, which amounts to much the same thing.) The user can tweek the BIOS by changing parameters stored elsewhere and accessed by the BIOS. Generally the values set at the factory are optimal for most computers. Sometimes an advanced user will want to change the clock speed or set the system clock, reallocate chunks of memory for certain applications, select devices to get instructions from in case of a crash, and other things that most users don't want to be bothered with.

Tweaking the BIOS is not a straightforward operation. The user has to press a specific key at just the right time as the computer is starting up. Many advanced users will just repeatedly press the key until the BIOS control panel appears. The labels for the parameters are often rather esoteric. For instance, what is a BCV Priority? And, you can change the values so that your computer just doesn't work.

Since the operating system is what a user sees when they look at their screen and it's what they usually interact with, most of them will familiarize themselves with the operating system, or at least part of it. The operating system can be changed fairly easily by simply downloading another operating system. It takes some time and vigilance as the installation program runs through it's steps but it will usually provide reasonably good instructions to the user.

Most other applications are easier and take less time to install but their installation programs will work more or less like those for operating systems. And the user's files, the ones they create, are easy to change. While I'm typing this document in a program called "KeyNote", I can save it, close the program, recall the document, add to it, make changes....once familiar with the generating program, KeyNote, the rest is easy.

Governments are Kantian minds.

The United States, specifically, was born in 1776 with a mind pre-equipped with specific ways it thinks about things. The CPU and BIOS, in this case, is the Constitution of the United States of America. The constitution (of any government) describes the structure and inner workings of the government. Ideally, it can't be changed. Changing a constitution creates a different government. The United States Constitution embodies certain ideals that are integral to the nature of the country.

Although it can't be changed, like the BIOS of a computer, a constitution can be tweaked by adding clauses called 'amendments". This process can be easy or hard. The Constitution of the State of Alabama is amended just about every time an election occurs. If a county wants to levy a tax for the purpose of, say, building a school, the whole state has to agree to it and vote for an amendment to the constitution. The result is that the Alabama Constitution is that there are 928 amendments (as of 2018). There have, in fact, been five Alabama Constitutions, the present having been ratified in 1901. Since then, there has been debate about rewriting the monster into a smaller, more manageable document.

Since it's signing in 1776, the United States Constitution has been amended only 27 times. The amendment process is intentionally difficult. Congress starts the process by proposing an amendment. That takes a two-thirds majority vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. If passed, the proposal is sent to the 50 States and must be ratified by three-fourths of the States (at least 38 of the 50 States).

Only one amendment has been undone. The 18th amendment prohibited the manufacture or sales of alcohol within the United States, and the 21st amendment repealed it.

The intention of the original authors of the Constitution was that government would have as little hand in the lives of citizens as possible. There was an understanding that people, even large groups of people (and, perhaps, especially so) were not perfect and that traits like greed and belligerence could easily undo a country and, so, there was a need for some regulation, but the language in the constitution strongly protected the rights of the individual States to fashion their own governments. It also gave the individual citizen ways of influencing the way government works. The doctrine of majority rule and minority right is embedded in the Constitution. Majorities rule by sheer number when elections happen. Minorities are granted specific rights (such as the famous "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness") and are given tools to allow them to persuade the majority to see things their way. For instance, United States citizens are given the right to assemble and make their views public.

Citizens, via activism, can even pressure elected officials to change policy. Local policy is generally easier to change than State policy, and State policy is more accessible than Federal policy, but the tools are there. But, like there are many computer users that only want to use a particular kind of software, say, a word processor, and show little interest in the inner workings of their computer, many citizens show little interest in the inner workings of their government.

I'm glad that someone understands the inner workings of the United States government but it bothers me that the people who do know are not usually the people who were born here. Emigrants have to take courses and be tested to show that they understand how the government works in order to be citizens. People born here just have to....well, be born here.

It strikes me that people are very willing to read the driver's manual of a new car but few want to take the time to educate themselves on things like their bodies, personal finance, and the workings of their government, things that have not a small effect on their lives.

I emphasize that this is how the United States is supposed to work because, over time, people with personal agendas that do not directly relate to the wellbeing of the country have found ways around the safeguards in the Constitution and have slowly taken influence away from the fourth branch.

Computers can be corrupted. Countries can also be corrupted. Political activists often talk about "corruption in government". This is what they're talking about.

For citizens to influence their government, they have to be active in politics and the most obvious power they have is the power of a vote. They can select the officials that run the country and they can ensure that those officials will be the ones with shared values.

In the 2016 presidential election, only 55.7% voting age American citizens voted, the smallest voter turnout in America's history. Of the 245.5 million Americans 18 years or older, 157.6 million reported that they were registered to vote, while only 137.5 million said that they voted in the census. Only about 136.8 million votes were actually tallied. (Desilver, Drew (2018) "U.S. trails most developed countries in voter turnout". FactTank: News in the Numbers, May 21, 2018. Pew Research Center. Accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries> 6/19/19)

So, why don't people vote? Let's look at the Sanders Institute report again.

The Sanders Institute, an organization committed to encouraging individuals, organizations, and the media to actively engage in the political process to create progressive solutions to economic, environmental, and social justice problems, asked this question. Based on several published studies, they published their results in the article "Why don't Americans vote?" on the Sanders Institute website (<https://www.sandersinstitute.com/blog/why-dont-americans-vote> accessed 6/19/19). Here are the answers they found.

* Because we have developed a strong two party system, Americans are, in effect, given only two options in a presidential election. Further, many Americans live in states that allow voters to vote in primaries only if they are registered party members. In the thirteen states and DC that have closed primaries, unaffiliated voters have no say in who the two people running for president will be.
* Thirty-four states require citizens to show identification to vote. Voter ID laws selectively filter out the poor, the elderly and minorities. A quarter of African Americans of voting age do not have a government issued identification as compared to eight percent of white citizens.
* Many states take voting rights from felons. In nine states, felons lose their rights to vote forever unless their rights are restored by a Governor's or court's action. Other states limit voting rights to felons only while incarcerated or until completion of their sentence.
* Residents in American Samoa, Guam, North Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands do not have electoral college votes, so they are barred from presidential elections. Washington D.C. has three electoral college votes but they have no Senators and only one Congressperson, who cannot vote during floor votes.
* Citizens of voting age in America are not automatically registered for voting. Some states make registration easier than others. Registration deadlines can be confusing and, again, vary from state to state.
* Many citizens must take time off work to vote since Voting Day in America is on a Tuesday. Convenience of voting differs greatly from state to state. Thirteen states having 64 million Americans do not offer the option of early voting or no-excuse absentee voting.
* The electoral college does not represent states proportionally to their populations. In the 2016 elections, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote with 65,853,516 votes compared to President Trump's 62,984,825 votes. In contrast, Trump received 306 electoral college votes to Secretary Clinton's 232 electoral college votes.

Because of these and other reasons, many Americans do not feel that their votes count and, therefore, do not go to the trouble of voting.

Is this an illusion? Have American voters actually lost the potential to make changes in American politics through voting?

Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (Gilens, Martin and Benjamin I. Page (2014) Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. Perspectives on Politics, Volume 12, Issue 3, September 2014, pp. 564-581. Also available at <http://amadorcountynews.org/2014-04/American%20Politics%20-%20Elites,%20Interest%20Groups,%20and%20Average%20Citizens.pdf> (accessed 6/24/19) analyzed a data set containing a massive amount of information about policy positions of the general public between 1981 and 2002. They compared the result to positions favored by affluent Americans and those of powerful interest groups. Their results indicated that economic elites and organized interest groups supporting business interest have substantial impact on government policy in the United States, whereas average citizens and mass based interest groups have little or no influence.

Apparently, politicians listen to those who support them....with money.

That gives some pretty strong support to the idea that, no, voters do not have much potential to make changes in American politics through voting.

So, again, why vote?

Voting represents a powerful tool to return political power to the fourth branch of American government - citizens. Here are some suggestions for a voting strategy to do that.

Vote from the ground up. Voters have little influence on national politics but they still have considerable impact on local elections, and local officials rise in the system to become state and federal officials.

Vote grassroots. Grassroots politicians do not take campaign funds from big ticket sources like big business or large interest groups. They look to the voters for support. Since candidates listen to the sources of their funds for direction in policy decisions, grassroots candidates will be looking to their supporters....voters.

Vote intelligently. That's what this book is about. Know what the issues are and set goals to vote for the candidates that support policy that will fix the broken American system. Educate yourself on issues like campaign reform and various models of voting. The electoral college is not the only form of voting and it is not specified in the Constitution. Research the candidates in every election and know not only what they say they stand for, but also what they have shown that they stand for in past policy decisions.

Vote as one element of political activism. Voting can be a powerful tool for citizens but it won't work alone. Voters need to be active in public debate. Although typical voters feel powerless and tend to be lethargic in their voting behavior, voters influence voters. Door-to-door campaigns, organized volunteer distribution of campaign information, citizen activism education, and other forms of activism inform voters.

Political corruption isn't going to budge by itself, but concerted action by citizens can move it.

Some strategies just aren't effective, so why employ them?

Only five presidents have never been elected to public office before becoming president but most of them had been appointed to public offices previously (Wikipedia, List of Presidents of the United States by previous experience. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Presidents_of_the_United_States_by_previous_experience> accessed 6/28/19.) In other words, most federal officers began as local politicians and voters have much more control in local elections.

Also, not all public officials take funds from big business of special interests. Some candidates are supported by citizen donors. That's what "grassroots" means. Remember, politicians listen to their supporters, therefore, grassroots politicians look to their constituents, the voters, for input about policy decisions.

Which brings up another point of effective voting....just voting won't do it. If an official is looking to you for input, then you should be giving them input. An effective voting strategy includes activism. For America to work the way it is supposed to work, citizens must be active in their community affairs. Activism involves attendance of town hall meetings, involvement with community think tanks, petition development and support, bird dogging (attending meetings with specific politicians, encouraging them to take actions they endorse), and demonstrations when things begin to malfunction in the government.

Three forms of political action are common - supporting candidates with money, signing petitions and calling your legislator. They're common because they're easy. They're also ineffective when done alone.

Okay, if you're willing to give lots of money, then a candidate will take you seriously, but we're talking about the regular voter here. Throwing money at candidates generally won't work.

How about petitions and calling candidates? When I joined Amnesty International, I began getting emails from organizations wanting me to sign petitions and call people in congress. It could have been another hobby!

Does that work? If we inundate legislators and other politicians with requests, petitions, and phone calls, will that get their attention?

My experience is that politicians hire people to answer their phone, give a vague, canned answer, and then forget that you called. Politicians don't have to read letters or look at petitions. For most, it's just a waste of their time.

The Pew Research Center (Hitlin, Paul (2016) "We the People": Five Years of Online Petitions. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2016/12/28/we-the-people-five-years-of-online-petitions> accessed [7/1/19](about:blank). ) looked at the results of We the People, the online petition system created by the Obama staff in 2011, for petitioning the White House. Of the 4,799 publicly available petitions, only 268 petitions have reached the signature threshold. The White House responded to these with 227 written responses, some dealing with multiple petitions addressing similar issues. Originally the number of signatures required to reach the White House was 5000. Later, the number increased to 100,000. 15% of the responses were statements that the White House could not commit on a certain case.

Over the five years of We the People's existence, response time by the White House has varied greatly. On the average, from the time a petition reaches the White House, the response time is 163 days. The longest response times were in 2013 when the average was 271 days. Response times have diminished since then to an average of 34 in 2016.

In the section entitled "Petitions have limited legislative impact", the Pew report indicated only three instances where a petition led to clear legislative outcomes.

More recently, there are indications that the We the People website just isn't working. A, Independent report (Hooton, Christopher (2017) "White House petition to save arts funding not registering signatures". Independent, Jan. 23, 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/president-donald-trump-arts-funding-nea-neh-cpb-prs-npr-petition-white-house-a7541631.html> accessed 7/1/19) indicates that glitches in the system and online URLs that point to error pages instead of particular petitions have crippled the system. These considerations plus the fact that the poor would have a hard time even accessing the We the People website calls the effectiveness of the system into question.

I've been writing about We the People, the federal system established by the Obama administration to make the executive branch more transparent and responsive to issues brought up by citizens. There are no laws that require all other officials to be equally responsive.

There is justification for these online petitions, though. The systems that support them and automatically send out emails to participants are a great way to recruit activists and keep them up to date on current issues. (Carpenter, Daniel (2017) "Yes, signing those petitions makes a difference - even if they don't change Trump's mind". The Washington Post. Feb. 3, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/03/yes-signing-those-petitions-makes-a-difference-even-if-they-dont-change-trumps-mind/?utm_term=.244a2c9bae8a> accessed 7/1/19). They just don't present an effective strategy of activism for individual citizens.

Why not think critically?

Well, it takes work. Certainly it requires time and effort to do the homework necessary to decide who to vote for.

Watching debates and election campaign speeches on television and reading the frequent campaign fliers that land in your mailbox are easy strategies but more campaign fliers can be sent out by campaigners who have more money. That tends to filter out grassroots campaigners and, need I say it, politicians can choose to lie. Just because a politician looks good or says the right things, that doesn't mean that you should vote for them.

So, now, why think critically?

Some people just don't read....they don't like to read, but the rest of us, if we buy a new computer, we will at least scan the manual to get a basic understanding of how the thing works. If we install software, we'll look over the user guide of help files. If we get a new hobby, we'll read up on it. A new car? Most new car owners will look through the owner's manual.

I am dismayed at how few people care to learn about how their body works. They will go to a doctor and just accept what they say, take the medication they give without giving a thought to why they take it or how it works. Hobbies are secondary. They aren't necessary for survival. But you have to live with your body. If your computer quits working, you go out and buy a new computer. If your body quits working, you die.

Your government affects every aspect of your life. As long as it works right, it's easy to ignore it, but if it stops working right, you will certainly become aware of it. In a country like the United States, where the citizen has the capacity to maintain a well functioning government, it just doesn't make sense for the people to let the government malfunction.

So, why think critically?

In the United States, the responsibility of maintaining an effective government is placed squarely on the citizens. If they don't attend to the job given them by the designers of that government, things will begin to fall apart (thank you, W. B. Yeats).

Good decisions depend on critical thinking.

Start a computer up and then set it aside. It's executive branch, the CPU, will work all by itself. It's judicial and legislative branches, the Arithmetic and Logic Unit and peripherals, will go right on doing their things. And a few years later, you will have a computer that doesn't work.

Accidents will happen in the computer memory. Just by chance, bits will flip, 1s will become 0 and 0s will become 1s. Your memory will become corrupted. Viruses will come in from outside. And, soon, no computer.

The same kind of things happen when a government is allowed to run without maintenance.

So, that's it for political science. The rest of the book is about critical thinking. Next up...politicians get more bang for their buck if they target your emotions. Circumvent the assault.

Required reading

Bureau of International Information Programs (2016) Elections USA: Elections. In Brief Series. Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. IIP Publications. Can be downloaded in a variety of formats at <https://publications.america.gov/publication/elections-usa-in-brief-series> accessed 7/12/19 .

This is the official government document about how elections work.

Bureau of International Information Programs (2018) Outline of US Government. Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. IIP Publications. Can be downloaded in a variety of formats at <https://publications.america.gov/publication/outline-of-the-u-s-government-outline-series> accessed 7/12/19.

As the title says, this is a good overview of the American government.

Philadelphia Convention (original 1787, last amended 1992) Constitution of the United States.

This is the core of the United States government. It's available for download all over the Internet. Just do a search for "Constitution of the United States" or "US Constitution".

Take aways

Regardless of where you live, you have a relationship with your country and it behooves you to know what that relationship is, what powers you have as a citizen and what your responsibilities are

In the United States, the citizens are the fourth branch of the government. They "set up the parameters" of the system. If they are not active, the system doesn't work right. Although, over the years, the system has become somewhat broken, it can be repaired if the people come together, vote rationally, and exercise their constitutional powers.

What's wrong with rhetoric?

You're bombarded with rhetoric every day, in the forms of advertising, argumentation, political discourse….

Is it good or bad?

You can be divided into three (or four) parts. Educators know this. They use a system called Bloom's Taxonomy when they are deciding what they are going to teach. At the same time, they are targeting your three parts for teaching. Orators, people who use rhetoric also target your three parts. They are the cognitive domain - your knowledge, the psychomotor domain - your skills, and your affective domain - your emotions. That fourth domain that some people add is the spiritual domain. I see that as your ability to get outside yourself to see how things really are. Empathy is there and your ability to navigate around personal biases is also there. This fourth domain is important to critical thinking, but we'll be looking at that in a later chapter.

So, what is rhetoric?

That's easy. Rhetoric is persuasive language, whether written, spoken, or gestured. And in itself, rhetoric isn't a problem. This book is rhetoric. I'm trying to persuade you that voters should use critical thinking when they vote, in fact, that critical thinking would solve a lot of political problems.

Rhetoric is a problem, though, when it's sneaky.

In the 50s and 60s several psychologists performed experiments that would not pass an ethics board today. Were they bad people, or even bad psychologists? No, they just had some difficult questions to answer and they didn't have many of the constraints that researchers have today. A big question was, "Why did Germans behave the way they did during World War II." Was there something particularly evil or abnormal about the people who ran Nazi concentration camps?

In 1963, research psychologist Stanley Milgram published the results of a disturbing experiment (Milgram, Stanley (1963) "Behavioral Study of Obedience" *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psycholog*y 67 (4): 372-8) . In it, three participants at a time entered a two room setup. There was a researcher, a teacher, and a learner. On the surface, this was a study about memory and learning. The teacher and learner were in different rooms. The teacher couldn't see the learner but could hear them.

The teacher had a console and was to present word associations briefly to the learner. If the learner remembered the word pairs, the experiment continued, if they did not, they received an electric shock. As things progressed the word associations got harder and the shocks became stronger until the learner was screaming, then whimpering, then silence. The researcher urged the teacher forward with stock prompts such as "It is absolutely essential that you continue."

What the teacher didn't know was that both the researcher and the learner were confederates. There were no shocks. All the pain was the teacher's and, although the experience was traumatic, most of the subjects stated that they were glad that they participated. They learned difficult but important lessons.

What did Dr. Milgram learn? In the first round of experiments (there were several), 26 out of 40 (65% of the subjects) delivered the final, fatal shock. Were these people psychopathic monsters? No, they were regular, New Haven citizens (no college or high school students allowed) who had agreed to take part of the experiment for $4.00 (remember, this was the 60s).The experiments were repeated in following years in different settings and with different groups (Miller, Arthur G. (1986). The obedience experiments: A case study of controversy in social science. New York: Praeger.)

Dr. Milgram's conclusion was that, once a person accepted that they were merely a tool of an authority figure, they no longer felt that they were responsible for their actions. It is a chilling reminder that, of the 24 defendants in the first Nuremberg Trials, only one, Albert Speer, took personal responsibility for his actions.

The Robbers Cave experiment also shed some light on a very dark corner of the human psyche.

In 1954, Muzafer and Carolyn Wood Sheriff brought twenty-two eleven and twelve year old boys to Oklahoma's Robber's Cave State Park for a three week long outing. The boys were divided into two groups - the Eagles and the Rattlers. (Sheriff, M. O., J. Harvey, B.J. White, W. Hood and C.E. Sheriff (1961) Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robber's Cave Experiment. Norman, OK: The University Book Exchange). They did not know each other prior to the experiment and they had similar backgrounds. Within a short time, they were in fierce competition and hostilities broke out. Simply identifying as different groups made them enemies. In the third stage of the experiment, the Sheriff's tried to find a way to bring the two groups back together. The only way they found was to give them a common enemy, even a non-existent common enemy. This experiment has been repeated several times, for instance by Lutfy Diab in Beirut, where the groups were called the Blue Ghosts and the Red Genies. Both groups consisted of a mix of Christians and Muslims. Hostilities developed, not along religious lines but between Blues and Reds. (Berreby, David (2006) Us and Them. Hutchinson. p 178).

The purpose of these experiments was to explain some of the more problematic human behaviors and to learn how to prevent them. But there is a dark side to the results. Do people in power use the results to manipulate citizens?

Barry Glassner believes so. In 2000, Basic Books published the sociology professor's bestseller, The Culture of Fear, to support his contention that many of the concerns and fears of Americans are unfounded and that many are the products of political projects. In 2018, he produced an expanded edition to cover the Trump era. He cites "the use of poignant anecdotes in place of scientific evidence, the christening of isolated incidents as trends, and depictions of entire categories of people as innately dangerous."

I am reminded of an edition of a hunting magazine I picked up in the 80s that presented a debate about whether hunting predators was justifiable or not. The pro predator hunting arguments were based on emotional appeals of the "predators eat our cattle" and "what if predators attack our children" kind, where the anti predator hunting party produced copious amounts of research data. Since then, the debate has continued with little change in content, so it seems that no one was convinced. People, it seems, believe what they want to believe.

In 2011, Krista De Castellan and Craig McGarty analyzed political rhetoric by former U.S. President George W. Bush and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 49 terrorism related speeches from 2001 to 2003. (De Castellan and McGarty. 2011. "Two Leaders, Two Wars: A Psychological Analysis of Fear and Anger Content in Political Rhetoric About Terrorism". Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 21: 180-200) They found that emotional content in the speeches escalated just prior to the war in Iraq. The content of President Bush's speeches was also compared to presidential approval ratings and citizens' fear of terrorism. They found that as approval ratings dropped, fear rhetoric increased, indicating that the rhetoric might have been an attempt to bolster approval ratings. Interestingly, fear responses by the public did not increase. Evidently, the rhetoric was not very effective.

But are the politicians lying, or do they actually believe what they're saying? That, I haven't found a solid answer to.

And is fear rhetoric necessarily bad? Carbon monoxide poisoning sends more than 20,000 people to the hospital and kills more than 400 in the United States every year (National Center For Environmental Health (December 30, 2015) Carbon Monoxide Poisoning - Frequently Asked Questions <https://www.cdc.gov/co/faqs.htm> accessed 11/2/19). Are public service announcements warning citizens about the dangers of indoor use of gasoline powered generators unjustified?

Again, critical thought goes a long way in weeding out the unjustified hyperbole from the legitimate facts.

How to evaluate rhetoric

In the 1980s, there was a rumor that the executives of Proctor and Gamble were satanists. The man-in-the-moon logo was interpreted as a figure of "the Beast". Being a faithful church goer, I believed...I wanted to believe...what all the preachers were saying and was duly disgruntled and was considering joining the boycott.

The Wikipedia article, "Proctor and Gamble" (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procter_%26_Gamble>, accessed 1/3/2020) discusses the controversy. One thing it leaves out is that the CEO of the company was reported to have verified the rumors on the Phil Donahue Show. Something didn't feel right about the whole thing so I visited the huge Ralph Brown Draughon Library at Auburn University and dug through two months of TV Guides, a month before and after the interview was supposed to have taken place. It wasn't there. I looked a month further. No mention of Proctor and Gamble. Three months to either side of the date, there was no mention of Proctor and Gamble.

What was wrong here? I was. I swallowed the rhetoric hook, line, and sinker.

So, how do you evaluate rhetoric? There are actually three things you have to question: the message, the source(s), and the receiver (yourself). There are a lot of questions you should ask, so to keep things clear, I'll just list them. The list isn't all inclusive. You might think of other issues that need to be addressed. And I will be talking about many of these points in more detail in later chapters.

Evaluating the message

Is the message clear and logically organized? Is it fairly free of contradictions and ambiguities? Can you tell what it is actually saying?

What kind of rhetorical strategy is being used. Does the message attempt to inform, persuade, argue, attack, confuse…?

How successful is the message?

Is the message part of a larger body of information - an article in a journal, a lecture in a series, etc.? What are the aims of the larger work?

How much of the content is relevant to the subject? Often, a speaker or writer will throw in irrelevant material to muddy the waters...distract the listener or reader from logical fallacies or unsubstantiated claims.

Does the content add anything to your understanding of the topic?

How does the message relate to other things you've heard or read about the topic?

Is the information current? Does the presenter reference recently published sources or is most of their material from old, out-dated studies?

Is the content evidence based or opinion?

Evaluating the source

Is the source academic, professional, or popular?

Does the speaker/writer adequately explain their position? Are they difficult to understand - because they are a poor presenter, because the subject is inherently difficult, intentionally?

Does the speaker or writer have a reputation as an authority in the subject being addressed? Have they done active study in the area or published works on the subject? How do they know what they're talking about?

Who funded the article/study/speech? How is the funding source benefited by the rhetoric, if at all? Does the funding source seem to have any interest, overt or hidden, in the results of the rhetoric? Is the funding source "grassroots", political, corporate? Are they politically or ideologically neutral?

Sources have sources, too. If they have bibliographies or footnotes, check them out. What is their go-to for information? Are there other good sources that you know about that they have missed? Is there an outstanding difference between the references they use and the ones they don't use?

Can you sense a strong bias in the content?

Does the source present multiple views in addition to their own?

Does the source present enough evidence to support their position?

Is the language used primarily fact based or emotional?

Evaluating the receiver

Can you tell who the intended audience of the message is? Are you part of it? Do you feel targeted? Does the message "feel" friendly, antagonistic, provocative?

Be careful. You have biases, too. Be sure that you aren't accepting something simply because it "sounds right" to you.

If you know a bias that you have, a deeply cherished belief, suspect any message that speaks to that bias.

I'll be devoting a later chapter to cognitive biases, non-logical thought processes that are wired into all of us simply because we are humans with human brains. They set us up to believe all kinds of things, many of those are things we should not believe.

Putting it all together

These are questions you should ask when presented with new information. None of them indicate that you should dismiss the information outright, but they should raise flags.

Ideally, rhetoric should be informative. You should be given information that can be substantiated without a lot of effort and there may be a conclusion that follows logically from the information. Philosophical issues and new topics may warrant discussion that hinges on very sparse information. Those kinds of discussions should invoke further inquiry.

Fallacies are not always unwarranted. Argumentum ad hominem is a logical fallacy in which, instead of logically assessing the content of a message, an adversary attacks the presenter. A speaker could be the most horrible person on Earth. That doesn't mean that what they say is necessarily invalid. It also doesn't mean that what they say isn't suspect. Logical fallacies should not be used in logical arguments, but they can "raise flags" and warn you that you should really look hard at the content of the message before accepting it.

Know the difference between proof and evidence. Proof is the purview of deductive logic. Proof leads inexorably from known facts to inescapable conclusions. Evidence is used in inductive logic and, as it piles up, the probability of a conclusion's truth increases, but it never becomes certainty.. In rhetoric, evidence is given when proof is absent. In the absence of facts, for or against, fallacy can count as evidence - just don't let it sway you to an unshakable position.

I believe - I disbelieve - I withhold judgement. Never forget that you have the third option.

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Required reading

Newall, Paul (2005) Rhetoric. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20051118202303/http://www.galilean-library.org/int21.html> (accessed 10/15/19.

This is a readable, brief exposure to the basics of classical rhetoric.

Jansen, J. (2011) Bending Opinions: Essays on persuasion in the public domain. Leiden University Press. Leiden.

How does rhetoric work in the real world and how does it impinge on your daily life? I found this anthology of papers on modern rhetoric fascinating.

Take aways

Know how to evaluate rhetoric, and always think for yourself.

Resources

A large part of your decision making should be based on your own experiences and your informed knowledge of the past. After all, today is a continuation of the past.

But you need up to date information and it's not easy to find trustworthy information. You can assume that others have their own agendas and those are not always going to be to the benefit of others. How do you select resources?

Well, you should look to others, in fact, you have to. You can't make rational decisions in a vacuum. First, actively search for information sources that seem to be trustworthy. If you find that they aren't, drop them immediately. Cultivate resources.

Critically assess your resources just like you do people or reports (see the last section for tips). In addition, look for sources that are well balanced. A partisan source will go out of the way to make party positions look good. A position should look good on its own merits. It shouldn't take a lot of work to make it attractive. As in court, if someone is offering evidence against their own best interest, their evidence is probably very good.

Good sources offer evidence, not opinion.

I'm going to mention some of my go-tos but, in the spirit of this work, don't take my word for it. Check them out for yourself, or find the resources that seem reliable to you but do yourself a favor. Don't collect the ones that only tell you what you want to read. Good resources challenge you to think.

FollowTheMoney (<https://www.followthemoney.org/>)

The Campaign Finance Institute maintains this website, collecting a breathtaking amount of information and research concerning money flow in the political machine of the United States. As indicated in the article by Page and Gillens, if you want to know how candidates will vote, you need to know who is supporting them.

Follow the Money also provided a lot of general information and news about politics and citizenship in the U. S.

FactCheck.org

(<https://www.factcheck.org>)

Fact Check is produced by the Annenberg Public Policy Center. It's purpose is to get the facts right and to distribute them to us. Among other things, they keep track of what is really going on in the political world. Do you have a fact you want to check, here's a good place to do it.

Snopes

(<https://www.snopes.com>)

Here's another place that I've found to be a reliable source for debunking, social debugging, and general fact checking. It's probably the most common thing that pops into people's minds when somebody says, "I'd better check that out."

Ballotpedia

(<https://ballotpedia.org/Main_Page>)

This is certainly my first go-to during an election. It's the online encyclopedia of voting, with news, education, and most important to me, everything there is to know about any candidate, anywhere, at any level of the political machine in the United States. It seems almost devoid of opinion or focus in the articles on politicians. Reading them I can almost feel the non-bias radiating out of the computer. It's just the facts.

Articles about first time local candidates may be a little sparse, but if a politician has a history, Ballotpedia has it: biography, voting records, positions, news articles…

The Congressional Record

(<https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/browse-by-date>)

Many federal politicians and candidates have been legislators. If you want to know what their past positions have been, this is the place to look. The site has a lot more than the Congressional records and you'll want to look around, but this is where you'll get the background information for voting purposes.

Wikipedia

(<https://www.wikipedia.org>)

There has been plenty of controversy in the past about Wikipedia's reliability and there is no doubt that some of the articles show personal bias, but they still deserve a look (with jaded eyes) and the bibliographies are priceless. Also, it's surprising how many politicians, big business personalities, organizations, lobbies, etc. are covered by the Wikipedia.

News

Personally, I don't trust the news, but in the absence of other information you can find a lot, especially about local candidates and their ties to the community, businesses, and issues. I will usually scan the news more during local elections than at any other time.

Bibliography and required reading

This chapter **is** it's required readings. You should become familiar with the resources listed so check them out.

Takeaways

Collect good resources and be familiar with them before you need them. Be a political prepper.

Fallacies

Fallacies are logical arguments that do not support their conclusions. The problem is that a well crafted fallacy looks valid. It's like a sleight-of-hand trick with words.

Advertising campaigns, preachers, anybody trying to persuade others...and, yes, politicians who are trying to get elected, use fallacious arguments a lot(!).

And to be honest, a fallacious argument may even be a reasonable rhetorical strategy, in the absence of a formally valid logical argument. A fallacy is an argument that is not technically valid. There are good arguments that don't have that kind of technical precision.

For instance, if someone referenced an article by Stephen Hawking that said that a black hole will evaporate in time, I would pay some attention. It's a fallacious argument because whoever is making an argument has nothing to do with the validity of that argument, but Stephen Hawking is an expert (perhaps *the* expert) on black holes. He has a vast body of very learned knowledge on the subject.

All the pretty fallacies

For this book, I am trying mightily to be nonpartisan, but it's hard. There are, currently, so many juicy examples of political misbehavior! And this is not a primer on logic (but see required reading).

There are many (many!) different kinds of fallacies to look out for. For a painfully long list, see the Wikipedia article "List of Fallacies" (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies>), but for a gentler introduction, may I quote two of the most beloved baseball players and commentators of history - Dizzy Dean and Yogi Berra. They very consciously played up an unedicated, country-boy style and unabashedly massacred the English language. Some of the most enduring quotes in the public psyche are theirs - "It ain't over until it's over." "It's deja vu all over again." (both Berra).

Dizzy Dean quotes:

"I ain't what I used to be, but who the hell is?"

"It puzzles me how they know what corners are good for filling stations. Just how did they know gas and oil was under there?"

Dizzy Dean - The Official Website (<https://www.dizzydean.com/about/quotes>)

Yogi Berra quotes:

"I always thought that record would stand until it was broken."

"I never blame myself when I'm not hitting. I blame the bat and, if it keeps up, I change bats. After all, if I know it isn't my fault that I'm not hitting, how can I get mad at myself?"

"I never said most of the things that I said."

"It ain't the heat. It's the humility."

"Nobody goes there any more because it's too crowded."

"You should always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't come to yours."

"You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you are going because you might not get there."

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

<https://www.baseball-almanac.com/quotes/quoberra.shtml>

While most of these are not fallacies, they carry the spirit of a fallacy. Let's look at a few.

"I ain't what I used to be, but who the hell is?"

Equivocation is when you use a word or phrase in two different senses. It might make you do a double take or you might miss it entirely. Here, Mr. Dean's first phrase indicates that he's not quite as good at some things as he used to be. The last phrase just means that everyone changed over time. As an argument, it's an excuse to "let things slide."

"I never blame myself when I'm not hitting. I blame the bat and, if it keeps up, I change bats. After all, if I know it isn't my fault that I'm not hitting, how can I get mad at myself?"

This is a simple shift of blame. It's amazing how often this one turns up in political debate. It's easy to make it work, though,big people don't check the politician's past.

Subtility?

These examples are jokes meant to be funny, not subtle and it doesn't take much to see through them but it takes surprisingly little subtlety to win with a weak fallacy.

In the 1950s, Richard Nixon, a candidate for vice-president in upcoming elections was in danger of losing the ticket due to allegations of misuse of funding. On September 23, 1952, he made this televised speech.

“One other thing I probably should tell you because if we don't they'll probably be saying this about me too, we did get something—a gift—after the election. A man down in Texas heard Pat on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog. And, believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was?

It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate that he'd sent all the way from Texas. Black and white spotted. And our little girl—Tricia, the 6-year-old—named it Checkers. And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.”

This is a blatant red herring fallacy. A red herring is a diversionary tactic. It just switches channels and hopes that the listener doesn't notice. It's closely related to another favorite of politicians, the straw man fallacy. A straw man argument proceeds by ignoring the issue presented and arguing a point that has not been made by an opponent. If Nixon's critics had addressed the dog as an issue, the fallacy would have been an appeal to the emotions.

Subtle? No. But it seems that a fallacy doesn't have to be subtle to succeed. Nixon's popularity ratings increased dramatically after the Checkers speech and he won the election for vice-president with his running mate Eisenhower.

Subtility!

I was recently in a debate about a proposal to allow homeless people to use city public spaces for camping until services were upgraded to provide real living spaces and enough services to accommodate them. Most of the arguments by groups against the proposal were pretty transparent. For instance, people argued that the homeless population polluted the streams in the area. Anyone hiking around those streams could not have missed the heavy scent of raw sewage. Homeless people could not have completed. It mostly smelled like rotten red herrings.

One more subtle argument was that, if we opened up the public spaces for homeless people, we would have to open them for recreational camping. That's called a slippery slope argument. A more extreme case was brought up by a state senator in Tennessee in response to the suggestion that public bathrooms should be allowed to accommodate transgenders. He earned that, if they caved to the federal pressure to provide utilities for transgender people, they would eventually have to provide cat boxes for feline therians (therians are humans that identify as nonhumans.)

A slippery slope argument proceeds by arguing that, if a particular, perhaps inoffensive action is taken, it will lead to more extreme, problematic propositions. The problem with the fallacy is that the companion proposition, that the more extreme outcome is inevitable, has not been verified.

In the case of camping restrictions, the purpose was to provide a safer alternative than those available for the large homeless population in Denver. Recreation was not the purpose and city regulations could have easily taken that into consideration. As for the restroom issue, the Therian population had never shown any interest in restroom accommodations, not were they likely to.

Both begged a "cross that bridge if we come to it" approach. Immediate needs were being addressed. In fact, just about any proposition of law, if it is at all novel or progressive, can be the genesis of a slippery slope argument since any novelty can generate more novelty.

You don't really need to know what to call them, fallacies just don't make sense. Be critical consumers of political debate. Especially be wary of speeches that include things you want to hear.

I can't resist. The Trump administration provides a great time for fallacy watching. Recently, President Trump surmised that Mexico is the cause of new spikes of the Covid 19 virus epidemic in the US. (<https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/502553-trump-admin-looking-to-link-us-spike-in-coronavirus-cases-to-mexico> accessed 6/13/20) Of course, the US having a much greater incidence of infection, the opposite is more likely the case. Any public address by the President affords many examples.

Required reading

Copi, Irving M. and Carl Cohen (1990) Introduction to Logic (8th edition) "Chapter 3: Fallacies" pp 91-127. Macmillan Publishing Company, NY.

Wikipedia. "List of Fallacies" <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies> (accessed 5/23/20)

Takeaways

Candidates are often in debate. When evaluating their speech, you have to be vigilant for fallacious arguments, intensional and not. They have speechwriters that are well versed in the art of rhetoric and they are not necessarily your friends.

A fallacy doesn't have to be subtle to sway hearers.

You can guard against logical fallacies 100% of the time by understanding them and by checking your intuitive beliefs with solid logic. Cognitive biases are much more insidious.

A few monsters in our belfries

A 2007 report by Brendan Nyhan of Duke University and Jason Reifler of Georgia State University describe several studies, one of which exposed subjects that had been tested for their political ideologies and their fear of death (they were also interested in the subjects' reactions to the 9/11 terrorists attacks) to mock newspaper arguments correcting President Bush's support of America's war in Iraq by explaining that there was no evidence that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. (Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler (2010) "When corrections fail: The persistence of political misconceptions" Political Behavior, 2010, 32:303-330. Springer) They found that people who tested high on liberal ideology reacted favorably to the article and accepted the correction. People who tested high on right wing ideology also reacted favorably and persisted in their beliefs that there were, in fact, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the Iraq War. This and other similar experiments illustrate one of the very common monsters that reside in our brains - confirmation bias. It is our tendencies to accept any evidence, pro or con, as support for our strongly held beliefs. In other words, we hear and read what we want to hear and read, not what is actually being said or printed.

Justin J. Wolfers (Are Voters Rational? Evidence From Gubernatorial Elections. 1 (2006) Stanford GSB Working Paper no. 1730. Also available at http://seen.com/abstract=305740) found that, in oil producing states, voters tend to reelect governors when oil prices are rising and vote them out when oil prices are dropping although oil prices are not usually something governors can control.

This indicates that the election outcomes are based on attribution errors on the part of the voters. Attribution errors work like this: If things are going well for me, it is because I have done things well and I deserve it. If things are going poorly for me, it is because I have had a streak of bad luck or other people are being unfair to me. If things are going well for someone else, it is because fortune has smiled on them and they've had some good breaks. If things are going badly for them, it's because they have been lazy and haven't taken care of business, so they deserve it.

Even the layout of ballots affects your choices. Primacy and recency effects mean that first and last items in a list tend to stand out more and get more attention and these effects are strengthened in multiple column ballots. Benny Geys and Bruno Heyndels ("Influence of "cognitive sophistication" on ballot layout effects" Acta Politics, 2003, 38, (295-312). Pelgrave Macmillan Ltd.) looked at preferential votes for 897 candidates in the 1995 regional elections in Brussels. They also looked at the education levels of the voters, assuming them to be a fair measure of critical reasoning skills (as the study termed "cognitive sophistication").

They found that more sophisticated voters are less guided by the purely mechanical ballot layout effects.

Cognitive biases exist on many levels. At the very lowest level of neuronal firing and neurohormones, there are nerve pathways that are deeply etched in our brains. Attributional bias is more complicated, but is still a fairly simple reaction to our environments. A bias that combines various simpler biases is cognitive dissonance, but it's simple to understand. We believe things that reduce our mental discomfort.

A lemon is a purchased product that turns out to be loaded with factory defects and poor design issues. The term is most commonly used in respect to a car.

How many people have you known that loved their lemon? The rationale is simple: I make good decisions, I bought this car, therefore, it must be a good car.

Does this dynamic operate in voting?

In a study reported by Sendhil Mulhainathan and Ebonya Washington in 2006 (Mulhainathan, Sendhil and Ebonya Washington (2006) "Sticking with your vote: Cognitive dissonance and voting. Working paper 11910, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA. http://www.nber.org/papers/w11910), the researchers found that it does indeed.

It's difficult in this kind of study to tease out the different factors that might affect a person's attitude toward a president or congress person but Mulhainathan and Washington put a lot of work into isolating the effect that simply voting for a person has on their later preference for that voting. Let me clarify that.

I'm not talking about voting for a person because they are the best candidate for the job and so it is reasonable to prefer them later. I'm talking about the simple act of voting for a person making a voter feel favorably about that person later.

The way the researchers isolated the effect of voting was by checking the attitudes of first time voters and second time voters toward legislators. They also checked other factors to see how well they predicted attitudes toward the candidates. Party affiliation was certainly a factor, but so was the status of whether they had voted before. And a third significant predictor, a very interesting one, was an interaction between party affiliation and prior voting.

An interaction between two factors Is more than just the sum of the two factors together. This study indicates that the mere act of voting solidified voter preferences - it polarized people.

A lot more

There are many other ways that we are programmed to make decisions without thinking. Open Wikipedia in your web browser and find the article entitled, "List of cognitive biases." Just scan through the list. How many apply to people you know? How many apply to you?

What are these things that live in our brains?

"...biases often are not design flaws, but design features," states the excellent entry in the Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology (edited by David M. Buss), "The Evolution of Cognitive Biases" (Haselton, Martie C., Daniel Nettle, and Paul W. Andrews, (2005) 'The Evolution of Cognitive Biases". The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology, Chapter 25, pp 724-846. John Wiley and Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.)

In martial arts and many systems of strategy, certain effective patterns of behavior are repeated over and over until they become second nature. In martial arts, they're called "katas". The goal of katas is to provide an ingrained set of muscle memories that can be brought into play in situations where there is little or no time to plan a strategy.

Cognitive biases may be like katas, hardwired apps in our brains that provide shortcut alternatives to thinking.

Haselton, Nettle, and Andrews, the authors of "The Evolution of Cognitive Biases" (cited above) are evolutionary psychologists. They look for the bases of common human behaviors in effective survival strategies of our distant ancestors. In other words, many of our behaviors evolved with our bodies as things that improved our chances of survival as a species. They have found reason to believe that much of cognitive biases are holdovers from behaviors our ancestors adopted to survive. When faced with a sabertooth tiger, a hunter gatherer had little time to evaluate the situation and plan a course of action. First gut reaction: that looks dangerous; second gut reaction: act!

In the case of wilderness survival, if something looks dangerous, or even different, the safest tact is to assume that it is dangerous. If we have inherited these tendencies by millennia of evolution, you can likely see how, today, we can unthinkingly be led by conservatism and stereotypes, and therefore by bigotries, to distrust other people groups.

And, mind you, stereotypes are still useful. If you have lived in a city all your life, you may not have had much exposure to snakes. They're very creepy looking to you and have a reputation for being dangerous. Better safe than sorry. It doesn't matter that most snakes are not poisonous, and even the ones that are, are usually not aggressive, your best survival strategy is to assume the worst and get away.

But, you will probably respond, inheritance codes for the production of specific proteins. How does that translate into specific behaviors? And that is certainly a reasonable reservation.

To extend the ideas proposed by Haselton, Nettle, and Andrews, DNA, what we inherit from our ancestors, codes for the production of proteins and proteins lead the development of structures. In the human embryo, the nervous system (including the brain) is one such structure that forms from a fold of surface membrane, that developed into a tube, that fills in with all the amazing structures that make up our most complex organ.

In the 1700s, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed the idea that humans are born with a "blank slate" mind and that what a person would become was fully dependent on what they learned along the way. If you've ever heard of the nature vs. nurture debate, this is the "nurture" part. Immanuel Kant quickly disagreed. How can a person learn if he doesn't already have the knowledge of how to learn or an appreciation of the need to learn. We must be born with the knowledge of how to learn. That's the "nature" part.

When we put nature and nurture together, we come up with this. We inherit the mechanisms in our brains that allow us to make pop decisions, but they have to be loaded with information. They are like special memory caches that inform hardwired programs like cognitive biases, possibly Carl Jung's archetypes, learning algorithms… We get the information from our culture - families, friends, respected members of our communities. Where the system breaks down is that our culture is not always right.

"They are not our kind of people" conflicts heavily with Ashby's law of requisite variety: in order to survive, a system must have at least as much diversity as its environment. A diversity of worldviews increases the kinds of approach available to solve any particular problem. In an environment as rich in diversity as our modern society, we need as much diversity as we can get. Whereas, stereotypes served our prehistoric ancestors well in their much simpler societies, they can be disastrous in our complex, modern, global society.

Mental frames

We don't interact directly with the world around us. The sensations we receive have to be put together and assembled into a coherent image of the world. It's an approximate understanding of reality but it's our understanding of reality and it's what we actually work with. The closer our version of reality approximates what is actually "out there", the better decisions we will make and the better we will get along in the world.

The sum of our "knowledge" of the world gives us our expectations of reality. If we have come to believe that all drivers are inherently good people and would not intentionally harm anyone, we might trust that we could, say, run out into heavy traffic to save a turtle that is trying to cross the road.

Our expectations of reality make up a mental frame...assumptions we make about how things work. A lot of research has been done involving "framing". A classical study was performed by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (Tversky, A. and D. Kahneman (1981) "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice". Science 211(4481): 453-458.)

Subjects in the study were asked to "imagine that the U.S. is preparing for an outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume the exact scientific estimate of the consequences of the programs are as follows."

The subjects were divided into two groups. One was presented with the following two alternatives.

Program A: 200 people will be saved.

Program B: there is a ⅓ chance that 600 people will be saved, and a ⅔ chance that no one will be saved.

The other group was presented with these alternatives.

Program A: 400 people will die.

Program B: There is a probability of ⅓ that nobody will die, and a ⅔ probability that all of the 600 will die.

Notice that both Program As are the same, as are both Program B's. But of the first group, 72% preferred Program A, and of the second group, 78% preferred Program B.

The only difference was how the programs were presented. The subjects' expectations were manipulated by the researchers.

In the required readings, I have included a work on framing by Erving Goffman for two reasons. He is a classic author on framing, and just about anything by him is a great read in psychology.

A common statement in psychology (and advertising, politics, and illusionism) is "a person sees what they expect to see" and that is a powerful tool for manipulating large groups of people.

How they affect voting

The "purpose" of cognitive biases, then, is to provide quick strategies for emergency situations. Unfortunately, they are always there working behind the scenes and they affect your decision making even when there is no emergency.

Like many behaviors in modern society, voting is a vitally important activity. It affects the quality of life and the survival of nations. And it provides time for voters to plan how they will approach it. Unfortunately, subconscious processes like cognitive biases play a part in the decision making, often a big part.

How do we guard against cognitive biases?

The first answer is simply to know that they're there. Nobody wants to think of themselves as irrational so, if they realize that they have an irrational tendency, they will guard against it.

Unfortunately, cognitive biases operate in an area of our mind that is below our scrutiny, so, regardless of how vigilant we are, we will slip sometimes.

But, as I said above, cognitive biases are programmable. We do start our lives distrusting strangers, but we learn to distrust particular kinds of strangers.

Cognitive biases are meant to provide quick, approximate solutions in times of crisis, but all times are not times of crisis. We can take the opportunities afforded us to sit down and think out our "principles", especially our most cherished ones. Where do they come from? Do they have any rational basis? Have they really served us well in the past.

And if a principle is found to be suspect, each time we are tempted to follow it, we can modify our response. Repeating that process will reprogram that particular cognitive bias.

And remember, a street fighter will beat a martial artist at the same level because they can "think on their feet". Sharpen your reaction time so there are fewer situations that do not allow you time to evaluate your responses. That involves not panicking when a crisis arises.

Regardless, recognize situations where you clearly have time to think...and think.

Voting is certainly a situation where you have plenty of time to think out your options, and with so much depending on the outcome of an election, can we really afford to rely solely on our intuitions?

Take away

Cognitive biases are automatic, non-rational ways of thinking that can provide quick solutions when there is little time for creativity. Unfortunately, they can lead to inappropriate decisions that feel right. Be vigilant because we all have them (everyone).

Required reading

Goffman, Erving (1974) Frame Analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1974.

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