Thought as a Determinant of Political Opinion

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Keywords: political psychology; belief formation; attitude formation

Acknowledgements: This work was funded by a grant from the program on Humility and Conviction in Public Life at the University of Connecticut and The John Templeton Foundation.
Abstract

Recent political events around the world, including the apparently sudden rise of populism and decline of democratic zeal, have surprised many of us and offered a window onto how people form beliefs and attitudes about the wider world. Cognitive scientists have tended to view belief and attitude formation from one of three perspectives: as a process of deliberative reasoning, as a gut reaction modulated by feelings, or as a cultural phenomenon grounded in partisan relationships. This special issue on the cognitive science of political thought brings a variety of voices to bear on the issue. The upshot is that each perspective captures part of the dynamics of opinion change, but the underlying processes operate in an integrated way. Individuals’ affective reactions are conditioned by the social world, and therefore reflect their community norms. They often precede processes of reasoning, but not always. In turn, reasoning is generally motivated in the service of transmitting beliefs acquired from citizens’ communities of belief. Cognition is largely a filter for attending to and sharing community norms.
Thought as a Determinant of Political Opinion

When it comes to political information, there are two groups of people. One group understands that they are almost completely ignorant of almost every detail of almost every law and policy under which they live. The other group is delusional about how much they know. There is no third group.

—Lupia (2016, p. 4)

1. Introduction

What drives political opinion? In the study of cognition, theoretical frameworks that try to answer this question can be classified into three broad categories: those that appeal to properties of human affect—how individuals feel (see Marcus, 2000); those that appeal to properties of human reason—how individuals think (see Lupia, McCubbins, & Popkin, 2000); and those that appeal to cultural factors—how individuals outsource their opinions to others in their community (see Gilens & Murakawa, 2002; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Sloman & Fernbach, 2017; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). The papers in this special issue suggest that these three factors drive individual opinion in an integrated way. Affect, reason, individual, and group representations continually interact to produce the attitudes and beliefs that drive political discourse and action.

2. Affect versus reason

Historically, affect and reason have been viewed as competitors, in Plato’s iconic view, as horses pulling a rider in opposite directions. Reason is cold and persuades thinkers through logical argument. The logic may not always be rational (Stanovich & West, 2000), but it involves the basic stuff of cognition: representations in the form of symbols and associated processes that transform those symbols to arrive at reasoned conclusions (Newell & Simon, 1972). In politics, reason could take the form that economists expect—calculation of interests, figuring out the likelihood of the consequences of available actions, and choosing the action that delivers the highest expected utility—and some classic work in political science has adopted this view (Downs, 1957). But we now know that the process of reasoning does not entail this kind of expected utility calculation (Vlaev et al., 2011). Some calculations might be bypassed by heuristics because of limited resources (Simon, 1972) or because those heuristics are useful shortcuts most of the time (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Biases might come from how we deploy attention (e.g., in favor of losses over gains; Yechiam & Hochman, 2013) or the strategies we use to minimize effort (Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993). Moreover, we can reason in other ways: deontologically about what is right, or about what constitutes virtuous behavior. Still, all of these activities count as reason in that they involve symbol processing; they are all activities that a sufficiently sophisticated machine could do.

In contrast, emotion is considered “hot” (Abelson, 1963). It is not about computation—symbolic information processing that might or might not be describable without reference to a biological stratum; it is about valence and arousal that obtain as a direct result of human biology (Ledoux, 2000; Russell, 2003). Human nervous systems respond to people, events, and policies with joy, affiliation, fear, anger, outrage, or resentment, and our opinions and choices are partly
determined by the valence of our reactions (Crockett, 2017). A politician acts in a way that could do harm (to children or the environment say), and the ensuing outrage makes people vote against the candidate or share a venomous post on social media.

Nobody argues that opinion is based solely on affective reaction, though some models treat affect as a critical explanatory variable (e.g., Lodge & Taber, 2013). In this volume, Dorison et al. show that political partisans systematically overestimate the strength of the negative affect they would suffer if they were exposed to statements made by political opponents and thus avoid exposing themselves to such statements. In this case, biased cognitions about affect are driving choice (see also Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017).

Some theorists do argue that opinion can be the direct result of a reasoning process (Baron, 2014). Indeed, two of the papers in this special issue argue that position. Barasz et al. argue that people infer political opponents’ values by giving too much weight to extreme features of the policies they endorse. This is a form of attentional bias in the reasoning process that they use to explain a tendency to see others as more extreme than they are and the polarization that results. Baron (this volume) argues that how one thinks is the key to good political judgment and hence good citizenship. Thinking should be active and open minded.

The modal view in cognitive science is that both affect and reason play a role in judgment via separate pathways. Greene et al. (2001) say this explicitly. They posit two systems for moral judgment, systems that can be translated directly to political judgment (Greene, 2014). One system is consequentialist, making decisions through cold utilitarian calculation. The other is affective and driven by deontological principle. Here the critical assumption is that affect is a cue to deontological principle. When an ingrained sacred value that has some deontological justification is violated, our moral response is driven by our reaction of outrage. Haidt’s (2007) theory of political behavior focuses on the affective component, spelling out the various moral foundations that trigger affective reactions. But in the end he too admits a role for reason and makes a similar dual system claim. He argues that reason kicks in to justify decisions already made in response to affect, and that such reasoning can influence reactions the next time a similar judgment is called for.

This kind of dual system view should not be confused with the distinction between intuition and deliberation (Evans, 2003; Sloman, 1996; Evans, 2003; see Darlow & Sloman, 2011, for discussion). Neither intuition nor deliberation refer to affect; both refer to cognition, but to qualitatively different kinds of mental processes. This distinction is important in the political domain, where most people most of the time lack the detailed causal knowledge necessary to make reliable predictions from deliberation alone and so must rely on intuition (Chater, 2018).

But regardless of how reason is conceived, the idea of separate pathways for reason and emotion seems increasingly tenuous given how hard it is to distinguish them conceptually along with mounting evidence that the two kinds of processes are deeply interdependent. People use their own affective responses as judgment-relevant cues in a variety of circumstances (Greifeneder, Bless, & Pham, 2011) including political decision making (Abelson et al., 1982; Isbell & Wyer, 1999). This strategy can be perfectly reasonable, as when deliberation about risk causes emotions that prompt reconsideration of future plans. The bad feeling in one’s stomach can be highly
informative. Moreover, judgment-relevant affect can arise when people reason intuitively. For instance, rapid liking judgments of statements capturing a variety of complex logical forms can track the statements’ logical validity (Morsanyi & Handley, 2011; Nakamura & Kawaguchi, 2016). Reliance on affect need not lead to irrational decisions.

Some emotional responses do lead us astray, regardless of whether their source is deliberation or intuition. In generalized anxiety disorder, negative affect caused by extensive deliberation is disproportionate to true situational danger. In contrast, the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder show that intuition can also generate miscalibrated affect (Goldin et al., 2013). If affect can provide informative cues in both intuitive and deliberative non-pathological reasoning, then the notion that people make decisions based on either emotion or reason is problematic, as authors from disparate research traditions increasingly argue (Huntsinger, Isbell, & Clore, 2014; Phelps, Lempert & Sokol-Hessner, 2014; Volz & Hertwig, 2016). In sum, emotion and reason do not constitute competing explanations for judgment, political or otherwise. They are better thought of as collaborative.

3. Individual versus community

One might expect a special issue devoted to cognitive science to focus on how individuals think, for that is what cognitive science is traditionally about. It is hard to imagine theorizing about the origin of political opinion without some appeal to the individual. After all, an opinion is a propositional attitude, a position regarding some claim, and this requires that the claim be represented mentally. But this representation can be awfully thin. And it usually is. Outside their narrow areas of expertise, people know remarkably little (Dunning, 2011; Sloman & Fernbach, 2017; Zaller, 1992). They tend to overestimate their knowledge of all manner of things including familiar artifacts and natural phenomena (Lawson, 2006; Rozenblit & Keil, 2002), human psychology (Zeveney & Marsh, 2016), political policies (Fernbach et al., 2013; Vitriol & Marsh, 2018), and political facts (Ortoleva & Snowberg, 2015). They also overestimate their capacity to elaborate concept meanings (Kominsky & Keil, 2014) and claim to have knowledge of fabricated events and concepts (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003).

So how do people accomplish so much? To explain that and many other phenomena, some cognitive scientists are coming around to the view that knowledge is distributed across a community, and that thought and action should be seen as collaborative, group endeavors (Hutchins, 2014; Keil, 2010; Mercier, 2016; Shea et al., 2014; Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). In fact, participation in this community of knowledge is so ingrained that people do not always realize that they do it. People live with the illusion that they are rational agents who reason, feel, and make decisions as individuals. This illusion is not by itself problematic because humans operate within a division of cognitive labor: Each individual brings a fairly narrow expertise to bear on issues, and communities combine these narrow areas of expertise to create a much broader and richer database of skills and knowledge. Individual cognition reflects the structure of this larger system in various ways. One example is that young children are broadly sensitive to who will have knowledge in different domains (Keil et al., 2008), and the sensitivity becomes finely tuned in adulthood (Bromme & Thomm, 2016).
The social nature of knowledge could play out in society in different ways. It could favor veridical shared knowledge; after all, groups that tend to form false collective beliefs about their environment should be less likely to survive over evolutionary time. But evidence from the political domain suggests that things aren’t so simple. Partisan cues—effectively, proxies for group endorsement—predict individual support for a variety of policies (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Bullock, 2011; Cohen, 2003; Satherley et al., 2018; Smith, Ratliff, & Nosek, 2012).

Perhaps the strongest argument that people outsource their political positions to their communities is that, anecdotally, deliberate persuasive efforts almost never produce change. Indeed, one contribution that you will not see in this special issue—or anywhere in the academic literature as far as we know—is a demonstration of how to reverse a group’s entrenched political opinion through argument. Opinion can be modified, as we will see, but in every case this involves reducing fervor, not flipping people’s position. It just does not seem possible to change people’s view of political (value-based as opposed to factual) claims by force of argument. Of course, people do change their minds by virtue of “conversion experiences” (a close encounter with a gun-wielding maniac may change someone’s position on gun control). But normally minds change because communities as a whole adopt a new position, not because people are persuaded one by one, as we have seen recently in the U.S. regarding same-sex marriage, the value of tariffs on trade to punish foreign entities, and marijuana legalization.

Partisanship even shapes which claims about facts on the ground are taken to be true (Frenda et al., 2013; Jacobson, 2010; but see Bullock et al., 2015). This suggests that people are not necessarily concerned with truth; we are often more concerned with being perceived as good community citizens who take on the central, sacred beliefs of those around them (Kahan et al., 2017). Indeed, with a few exceptions, concern for truth is a recent historical development. In particular, appreciation of the value of science and evidence—and with it the conception of knowledge as a possession of the individual (Welbourne, 1986)—only began to permeate European society during the Enlightenment. The rise of populism around the world today seems to reflect a worrying move against these evidential norms. The challenge for the future is to retain the norms even as the individualist conception of knowledge is replaced by a more plausible epistemology (Goldberg, 2010; Hardwig, 1985).

Lewandowsky et al. (this volume) illustrate the difficulty of this challenge. They develop a model that shows how social transmission of knowledge between experts and the general public can explain the trajectory of scientific and public opinion regarding climate change. They represent the scientific community as rational Bayesian agents and show that even a little divergence of views within the scientific community can create ambivalence in the general public. We doubt the reader needs convincing that such divergence is a fact of science. Moreover, other models show that divergence can arise under modest assumptions like scientists representing multiple causes of an effect (Jern, Chang, & Kemp, 2014) or differentially weighting their colleagues’ evidence according to similarity of background beliefs (O’Connor & Weatherall, 2018). It can even arise among Bayesian agents sharing infinite evidence (Nielsen & Stewart, in press). In short, strongly divergent beliefs need not be the result of one side’s error;

1 We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
polarization can occur even when people update their beliefs according to reason, as political scientists have also noted (Bullock, 2009; Gerber & Green, 1999).

The identity-protective cognition thesis (e.g., Kahan et al., 2017) takes a more radical view of belief formation. It follows in a line of theorizing that does not treat people as rational reasoning agents. Kahan and his colleagues argue that citizens’ political positions follow from rather than precede their political affiliations. The work on partisan cues noted above is consistent with this view, as is the evidence of motivated assessments of empirical evidence (Crawford et al., 2013; Kahan, 2013; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011; MacCoun & Paletz, 2009; Scurich & Shniderman, 2014; Washburn & Skitka, 2017), a tendency that can be found across the political divide (Ditto et al., 2018). In this vein, Van Boven et al. (this volume) show that people from an ideological camp choose statistics opportunistically. They found that people consider hit rates (e.g., the probability that a terrorist is a Muslim) more compelling than inverse conditional probabilities (e.g., the probability that a Muslim is a terrorist) if doing so supports their case but show the converse preference when that supports their position.

However, others have shown that if you provide policy information, people will be moved by that too (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2013). Indeed, a reaction to Kahan’s “cultural consensus view” has arisen within cognitive psychology. For instance, Cook, Lewandowsky, and Ecker (2017) show that climate change attitudes are affected by how evidence-based arguments are presented. Similarly, Ranney and Clark (2016) believe education is what matters. They have increased participants’ confidence in anthropogenic climate change by showing a short video explaining the mechanism behind climate change. Such theorists argue that individual understanding matters, that the key to persuasion is to make issues simple enough that the person on the street can understand them.

This position stands in stark contrast to Kahan’s cultural consensus view and to Sloman and Fernbach’s (2017) appeal to the “community of knowledge,” both of which assume that people inherit their views from their group rather than through their own understanding. When polled, queried, or asked to vote, people channel the position expressed by their community. Doing so can yield rational and appropriate outcomes (McAvo, 2015), especially when acquiring the detailed information required for individual reasoning would be difficult and time consuming, as in most public matters (see Mondak, 1993, for evidence that the use of partisan cues in candidate selection is inversely proportional to the likelihood of public knowledge about the candidate).

Three of the papers in this volume shed light directly on these divergent theoretical positions. Chen and Urminsky show that people differ in how central political orientation is to them—the extent to which they believe party affiliation is causally connected other aspects of their lives and attitudes—and that this measure of centrality predicts how they vote. Discrepant findings about the degree to which people appeal to their political parties could be due to the use of populations that differ in this respect. And those who don’t appeal to their political party still might appeal to others. They may outsource their opinions to their to family (cf. Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Freund, 1994; Sleeth-Keppler, Perkowitz, & Speiser, 2017), to experts (Hornsey et al., 2016), or to the legal community (Amit et al., in preparation).
Of course, community does not always override individual reasoning. Pennycook and Rand (this volume) show that performance on the Cognitive Reflection Test (Frederick, 2005)—a measure of the extent to which people question intuitive responses and then reason out solutions—is positively related to who can distinguish fake from real news headlines even when respondents are ideologically motivated to believe the underlying claims. Some people do reason on their own spontaneously, at least some of the time. How is such evidence to be squared with the findings of cross-partisan motivated reasoning?

The answer is that spontaneous reasoning by individuals is rare. Consider the paper by Mellers et al. (this volume). They show that having people predict policy-based outcomes and then observe how the predictions fared reduces polarization. As the authors point out, their result is reminiscent of Fernbach et al. (2013), who found that asking people to explain in detail how a policy would lead to consequences burst people’s illusion that they understood the policy and in turn reduced polarization regarding the policy. This provides an alternative explanation for Ranney and Clark’s (2016) data: Because their respondents were queried about their mechanistic knowledge of global warming before receiving detailed causal information, they were effectively confronted with their own illusions of explanatory depth. Both Mellers et al.’s and Fernbach et al.’s interventions forced participants to consider the policy on its own terms, as opposed to their community’s view about it. Merely instructing people to do this can reduce both reliance on group cues (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014) and motivated reasoning during data assessment (Van Boven et al., this volume).

Forecasting requires close attention to what a policy will change in the world and what effects those changes will have. Causal explanation requires close attention to a counterfactual: what the world would be like if the policy were enacted and what the consequences of those changes would be. Both tasks require thinking about the world as an objective entity rather than a collection of valenced interactions. But that is not how most people think most of the time. When thinking or conversing about policy, most people tend to focus on their own relation to it: what those in their community think about it, how it would affect them personally, and how a caricature of it relates to their values and preferences. People rarely think carefully about the difficult mechanistic details of policy, and with good reason. Mechanistic details are extraordinarily complex and generally beyond the ability of any single individual to work through in a reasonable time, a fact long acknowledged by political scientists (Gilens & Murakawa, 2002; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991).

In other words, most people habitually outsource their political thinking to others without being fully aware that they are doing so. They can be induced to think for themselves, but this requires appreciating the limitations of their own knowledge base with an ensuing reduction in confidence leading to less firm (and thus better calibrated) conclusions.

4. Toward a unified view

Human cognitive and affective systems are designed to serve as weak filters on community beliefs, attitudes, and values. Communities raise people to align them with their shared basic values and ways of understanding the world. As a result, people are generally channels for their
community’s norms. On rare occasion, people do switch teams. How and when this happens admittedly remains mysterious, but the fact that it happens is evidence that cognitive systems are more than just direct channels of community influence; they do have some ability to consider evidence and alternative views and come to independent conclusions. In the political realm in America, as in many countries, our community is dominated by our political ideology. Our cognitive systems are constructed to take advantage of this ideological community, by allowing it to make many critical decisions for us. But we do in turn contribute to it. As this special issue reveals, our communities are filtered through our cognitive systems in multiple ways; in the remainder of this essay we highlight three: stereotypes, trust, and narrative.

4.1. Community representations: Stereotypes

The study of cognition is the study of information processing. To be processed, information must be represented. In the political realm, representing other people—individuals as well as social groups—is one critical form of information processing. Fiske’s chapter describes the dimensions that society uses to construct stereotypes of others. She argues that two dimensions are used to differentiate social groups around the world: warmth (how trustworthy and friendly members are) and competence (how capable and assertive they are). She uses these dimensions to explain modern-day resentment and polarization. While these stereotypes may have aspects with some factual basis (Jussim, Crawford, & Rubinstein, 2015), they are fed and maintained through cultural narratives (Kashima, 2000). They characterize how individuals represent others, but they are owned by communities; they reflect a social judgment. Individuals may be able to avoid the effects of stereotypes on their decisions and actions, but people can’t ignore stereotypes if they want to communicate with others in their community. Stereotypes are part of common ground, the representations that people share (Klein, Clark, & Lyons, 2010; Lyons & Kashima, 2003). That is why stereotypes change so slowly, because an entire community must participate in the change.

Although stereotypes perpetuate deep social problems in the most malignant cases, they reflect the general cognitive strategy of dealing with complexity through shortcuts (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). In that sense, cognition appeals to community knowledge for a sound reason. The world is too complex for an individual to understand, so we distribute the problem of understanding across a community. This division of cognitive labor allows humans to accomplish amazing things, like building skyscrapers, and more mundane things, like writing scientific papers. In each case, there are many specialties involved from conception to final product, and each specialty is necessary for success. Judgments about what kinds of things others know become essential in this system (Bromme & Thomm, 2016; Keil et al., 2008), even though they too constitute a kind of stereotype.

4.2. Filtering through trust

So the appeal individuals make to the community has a rational source even if it sometimes leads to irrational (indeed, catastrophic) outcomes. We can construe this rational basis in Bayesian terms here too: One cognitive activity is to employ community norms to generate priors to take advantage of what we know about who we should trust (see Harris, Hahn, Madsen, & Hsu, 2016). This can be achieved through word of mouth, by examining credentials, etc.. As Baron
wisely points out in his contribution to this volume, the best political decision makers and forecasters employ actively open-minded thinking, and one of its chief uses is to reveal which sources to trust. Much of our knowledge is housed by others, so what we believe is largely a matter of who we trust. If I want to know how to reduce unemployment, I have to rely on others who know much more about it than I. Who I trust will determine what I end up believing.

Effective reasoning about who to trust is therefore critical, and this is reflected in our sensitivity to and vigilance about the credibility of informants (Sperber et al., 2010). This is conceptually distinct from the stereotypes noted above; I may use a stereotype to determine that an individual is likely to know about some domain but then withhold trust given indications of dishonesty or lack of expertise.

A virtue of Chen and Urminsky’s contribution is to demonstrate another rational element in how we decide whether to appeal to our own cognition or outsource attitudes and beliefs to our political party. The fact that people are more likely to outsource if their political party shapes their identity is entirely reasonable on the assumption that your identity should determine how you vote.

And yet, the fact that cognition is designed to make use of community knowledge steers people in critical ways away from the Enlightenment ideal of purely rational agents governed by logic. When our cultural narratives create inaccurate stereotypes to support the status quo or to incite conflict (e.g., by caricaturing the enemy, cf. Lippman, 1922), our shared representations can contribute to partisan division. Moreover, the arguments that laypeople make are often not designed to uncover truth, but to persuade others (Mercier & Sperber, 2011). Sloman and Rabb (2016) show that it is even worse than this: People gain a sense of understanding from the mere fact that others claim to understand, even when no information is shared. This can lead to entire communities composed of individuals who think they understand some narrative about a player or action because those around them think they understand even though nobody actually understands. Because different communities rely on different narratives, this is a recipe for cultural warfare.

We also allow our ideological biases to influence our assessment of expertise. Marks et al. (this volume) report that subjects were more likely to choose advisors who share their political view on a task clearly unrelated to politics, the classification of geometric shapes. When even our selection of experts is driven by our ideological community, we may miss out on the best advice. This finding is consistent with other studies where judgments of individuals are influenced by their stated ideological communities even though that information should be irrelevant, i.e., in judgments of facial beauty or academic merit (Nicholson et al., 2016; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Our preference for advice from ideological friends over enemies is influenced by our perception of others’ motivations (Rabinovich, Morton, & Birney, 2012). The intentions of people on our team are pure; those of the out-group are not. At least since the classic work of Sherif et al. (1961), social psychologists have been telling us that those perceptions are biased. In this volume, Arieli et al. give an example of this kind of community-motivated causal attribution. They find that actions performed by political leaders of the judge’s ingroup are perceived as intended to benefit the country, not themselves, whereas actions performed by political leaders of
the outgroup are perceived to benefit themselves more than the country (see also Anduiza, Gallego, & Muñoz, 2013).

4.3 Community representations: Narratives

Arieli et al. (this volume) point out that perceptions like this do not arise spontaneously but are drawn from cultural narratives. We associate leaders with stories. Our own leader inherits a story developed by our party that describes the leader’s political origins in terms of inspiration to do good, followed by a series of obstacles that they were able to overcome through warmth and competence in order to arrive at the current point in history. The other team’s leader also inherits a story developed by our own party, but this time it describes the political origins as an opportunity to be selfish, followed by a series of wicked actions that ingratiated the leader with their cohort of selfish and small-minded operatives. A good narrative will provide a set of values and motivation for the leader, a set of example incidents and actions to support the desired stereotype of the leader and community, a causal schema to predict future actions by the leader, as well as consequences of those actions (see Schank & Ableson, 1977, for a similar analysis of story components).

Sloman and Fernbach (2017) follow a strong legacy of psychologists like Bruner (1991) and Pennington and Hastie (1991) in claiming that people tend not to rely on argument when reasoning. Instead we rely on narrative. People are storytellers. Political dynamics revolve around the stories we tell, who accepts them and who rejects them. At the time of writing, almost everything an American values, believes, and does can be predicted by knowing whether they adhere to a narrative that could be titled “Donald Trump is a businessman” or whether they reject that narrative and instead buy into the narrative “Donald Trump is a con man.” These narratives might represent what individuals think, and they might be shared by individuals, but they are not created by individuals. They are social constructs. They live or die depending on the degree of consensus and fashion within the community that one cares about. And the fact that they express broad generalizations with more than a whiff of praise or scorn makes them especially unyielding to counterevidence; after all, a person can be both a businessman and a con man.

The power of narrative to drive action is illustrated by Kruglanski et al.’s contribution to this volume. They identify one of the most powerful of human desires, the quest for personal significance. People want their lives to matter and they want respect. But the desire for personal significance does not drive people directly; its effect is mediated by cognitive processes. Kruglanski et al. unpack the roles of attention, knowledge, and reason in allowing this desire to crowd out all others in cases of violent extremism. But what makes an action personally significant? Narrative. An action is significant if it helps to bring resolution to an obstacle faced by a protagonist in the actor’s guiding story. The actions of extremists get their meaning from myth and legend.

But narratives aren’t just individuals’ personal constructions; they are retained and justified communally (see Bietti, Tilston, & Bangertner, 2018; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2018; Oren, Nets-Zehngut, & Bar-Tal, 2015; Wertsch, 2008). Very few individuals can spell out either narrative about Trump in great detail. We depend on others to retain for us stories about his youth and growth. We each have a sense of what the narrative looks like, but the vast majority of
individuals can only retain a superficial gloss. We know there are blogs, articles, and books about it, and the possibility of accessing those texts serves to make us believe we know more than we do (Fisher, Goddu, & Keil, 2015; Ward, 2013). What we do retain is a set of beliefs about what drives a leader and what kind of actions the leader would take. Sloman and Fernbach (2017) refer to these as “causal invariants.” Just as we navigate in space by picking out critical properties of the optical array that afford objectives like moving in a straight line (Gibson, 1979), we tend to pick out the critical properties of political objects (leaders, events, policies) that we think capture their important consequences. Sometimes these abstractions are accurate. Unfortunately, we are not as good at it as we think we are, in part because we rely on other people, and others are often just as overwhelmed by the complexities of political events and characters as we are.

5. Conclusion

We have argued that individual cognition serves to filter community beliefs, and that outsourcing beliefs to one’s community can be rational. As we have seen, it is a weak filter because people outsource sometimes but not others, depending on a range of factors, and in circumstances both appropriate and inappropriate. The open and urgent questions are when people outsource and to whom. We have suggested several research themes that may yield answers. These answers will inform the normative question of when it is rational to outsource and when this tendency that so effectively scaffolds collective human endeavors leads us astray.

This special issue was conceived in response to a period of extreme polarization in the U.S. and around the world. So many are wondering how those on the other side of the political divide can in good conscience assume the positions that they do. Are those positions mere affective reactions that can be dismissed? Are they reasoned conclusions that their holders can justify? Or are people simple relay stations for the beliefs, attitudes, and values that have taken hold in their communities, perhaps those promulgated by their elite thought leaders?

The picture that emerges from this collection is that none of these tells the whole truth—each captures some of the dynamics of opinion change. Individuals do have affective reactions that influence their processes of reasoning and vice versa, but those reactions and processes are conditioned by the social world, and therefore reflect their community norms. And people’s ability to reason is highly constrained, usually in the service of transmitting beliefs acquired from their communities. Those beliefs comprise both opinion and justification. Cognition is largely a filter designed to attend to and share the conclusions from our community of knowledge in order to satisfy our strong desire to be part of that community.

Our knowledge and reasoning competence are highly constrained, and we do depend on others, especially like-minded others. But we are agents, not passive recipients of information. So opinion change is possible. Still, given the complex, bidirectional exchange between individual and community belief, it seems doubtful that opinion change occurs one mind at a time. In other words, change is cultural. Individual cognition can only push ideas at the fringes.
References


