descendants. Once you understand that, the ease with which individuals, even informed individuals, flip their positions to fit the group's needs makes a lot more sense.

Reasoning in groups

In 1951, Solomon Asch, a professor at Swarthmore College, set out to study exactly how much of our reasoning we were willing to outsource to others. He showed subjects a card with a line and then asked them to match it to the line of corresponding length on another card. The test was easy. Under control conditions, fewer than 1 percent of the answers were wrong.[13]

The twist, however, was that the subjects weren't alone. There were also five to seven other participants who were actually working for Asch. And every so often, they would all give the same wrong answer. These were called the "critical trials." The results were remarkable: on critical trials, the participants gave the wrong answer 37 percent of the time. Given the choice between what their eyes were telling them and what the group was telling them, they went with the group. "I felt conspicuous, going out on a limb, and subjecting myself to criticism that my perceptions, faculties were not as acute as they might be," said one of the subjects in a post-experiment interview.

Asch's work, which showed the way a group can influence the opinions of an individual, has been the basis for a revolution in understanding not just how humans think, but how partisans think. Because what is a political party, after all, but a group?

In 2003, Geoffrey Cohen, then an assistant professor of psychology at Yale, gave students in an introductory psychology

course a survey asking them, among many other questions, to rate how liberal or conservative they were and how strongly they felt about welfare. Then, later in the term, he asked the students who had rated themselves as the most ideological and the most passionate about welfare to come in and participate in a study testing their "memory of everyday current events." The participating students, who didn't know how or why they'd been chosen, were given two newspaper articles. The first was a dummy, which served no purpose other than to "reinforce the plausibility of the cover story." The second article described a proposed welfare policy.[14]

In one version of the article, the policy was extremely generous, offering:

> almost $800 per month to a family with one child, an extra $200 for every additional child, full medical insurance, $2,000 in food stamps, extra subsidies for housing and day care, a job training program, and 2 years of paid tuition at a community college. While it limited benefits to 8 years, it guaranteed a job after benefits ended, and it reinstated aid if the family had another child.

The other version of the article outlined a more spartan policy that "provided only $250 per month and $50 for each additional child. It offered only partial medical insurance, and imposed a lifetime limit of 1.5 years without the possibility of reinstating aid. In contrast to the generous policy, the stringent one provided no food stamps, housing, day care, job training, paid work, or college tuition."

The articles varied in another way, too: their group cues. In the "Democrats favor" variant, the article said that 95 percent of House Democrats favored the policy, while only 10 percent of

House Republicans did. It also included quotes from prominent Democrats saying that the law would "lighten the financial burden on the poor" and accusing Republicans of "victim blaming." In the "Republicans favor" version, the percentages were reversed, and there were quotes from prominent Republicans explaining that the program "provides sufficient coverage . . . without undermining a basic work ethic and sense of personal responsibility."

Participants were then asked to rate their favorability toward the program on a scale of one to seven. These were, remember, students with particularly intense ideologies and particularly strong feelings about welfare policy. But it didn't matter. "For both liberal and conservative participants, the effect of reference group information overrode that of policy content. If their party endorsed it, liberals supported even a harsh welfare program, and conservatives supported even a lavish one."

This kind of thinking is, according to psychologists, unsurprising. Each of us can have firsthand knowledge of just a small number of topics: our jobs, our studies, our personal experiences. But as citizens—and as elected officials—we are routinely asked to make judgments on issues as diverse and as complex as the Iranian nuclear program, the environmental impact of an international oil pipeline, and the likely outcomes of branding China a currency manipulator.

One of the roles that political parties play is helping us navigate these decisions. In theory, we join parties because they share our values and our goals—values and goals that may have been passed on to us by the most important groups in our lives, such as our families and our communities—and we trust that their policy judgments will match the ones we would come up with if we had unlimited time to study the issues. But parties, though based on a set of principles, aren't disinterested teachers in search of truth. They're organized groups looking to increase

their power. Or, as the psychologists would put it, their reasoning may be motivated by something other than accuracy.

None of this, of course, describes you, dear reader. You're the kind of person who buys books like, well, this one. People who don't pay much attention to politics or know much about policy might use parties as shortcuts and be vulnerable to their deceptions. But knowledge is power, and you have the knowledge. The question is simply how to get everyone else that knowledge, too. Right?

This ladders up to a broader theory for fixing American politics. I can't tell you how many times I've been cornered by someone arguing that the answer to our problems is lifelong civic education or media literacy classes. This can take more extreme forms, too. In 2016, Georgetown University political theorist Jason Brennan released a book entitled *Against Democracy*, in which he argued for an "epistocracy," a system where the votes of the politically informed counted more than the votes of the politically naive.[15] "I call this the 'competence principle,'" he said in an interview with Vox. "The idea is that anyone or any deliberative body that exercises power over anyone else has an obligation to use that power in good faith, and has the obligation to use that power competently. If they're not going to use it in good faith, and they're not going to use it competently, that's a claim against them having any kind of authority or any kind of legitimacy."[16]

We might call this the "more information" hypothesis. In its less aggressive manifestation, it sits hopefully at the base of almost every speech, every op-ed, every article, and every panel discussion. It courses through the Constitution and the Federalist papers, through the philosophies of Thomas Dewey and the basic theory of high school government classes. It's the belief that many of our most bitter political battles, and most of our worst political thinking, are mere misunderstandings. The cause

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