

of these misunderstandings? Too little information—be it about climate change, taxes, Iraq, the budget deficit, or immigration. If only the citizenry were more informed, the thinking goes, then there wouldn't be all this fighting.

It's a seductive model. It suggests our fellow countrymen aren't wrong so much as they're misguided, ignorant, or—most appealingly—deceived by scoundrels from the other party. It holds that our debates are tractable and that the answers to our toughest problems aren't very controversial at all. The theory is particularly prevalent in Washington, where partisans devote enormous amounts of energy to persuading each other that there is a right answer to the difficult questions in American politics—and that they have it.

The only problem is it's wrong.

How politics makes smart people stupid

In April and May 2013, Yale Law professor Dan Kahan—working with coauthors Ellen Peters, Erica Cantrell Dawson, and Paul Slovic—set out to test a question that consistently puzzles scientists: Why isn't good data more effective in resolving political debates? For instance, why doesn't the overwhelming evidence that climate change is a real threat persuade more skeptics? The leading theory, Kahan and his coauthors wrote, is the “science comprehension thesis,” which says the problem is that the public doesn't know enough about science to judge the debate.¹⁷ It's a version of the “more information” hypothesis: a smarter, better-educated citizenry wouldn't have all these problems reading the science and accepting its clear conclusion on climate change.

But Kahan and his team had an alternative hypothesis. Perhaps people aren't held back by a lack of knowledge. After all, they don't typically doubt the findings of oceanographers or the existence of other galaxies. Perhaps there are some kinds of debates where people don't want to find the right answer so much as they want to win the argument. Perhaps humans reason for purposes other than finding the truth—purposes like increasing their standing in their community or ensuring they don't find themselves exiled by the leaders of their tribe. If this hypothesis proved true, then a smarter, better-educated citizenry wouldn't put an end to these disagreements. It would just mean the participants are better equipped to argue for their own side.

Kahan and his team came up with a clever way to test which theory was right. They took one thousand Americans, surveyed their political views, and then gave them a standard test used for assessing math skills. Then they presented them with a brainteaser. In its initial form, the brainteaser was a tricky math problem about how well a skin cream worked; it was designed to deceive you on first glance. If you didn't carefully run the numbers, or didn't have the statistical aptitude needed to run the numbers, you'd get it wrong. As expected, the better subjects were at math, the better they were at the brainteaser. This was true for both liberals and conservatives. Score one for the science comprehension thesis.

But Kahan and his coauthors also drafted a politicized version of the problem, which used the same numbers as the skin-cream question, but instead of being about skin creams, the narrative setup focused on a proposal to ban people from carrying concealed handguns in public. The question now compared crime data in the cities that banned handguns against crime data in the cities that didn't.

Presented with this problem a funny thing happened: how good subjects were at math stopped predicting how well they did

on the test. Now it was ideology that drove the answers. Liberals were extremely good at solving the problem when doing so proved that gun-control legislation reduced crime. But when presented with the version of the problem that suggested gun control had failed, their math skills stopped mattering. They tended to get the problem wrong no matter how good they were at math. Conservatives exhibited the same pattern—just in reverse.

Being better at math didn't just fail to help partisans converge on the right answer. It actually drove them further apart. Among those with weak math skills, subjects were 25 percentage points likelier to get the answer right when it bolstered their ideology. But partisans with strong math skills were 45 percentage points likelier to get the answer right when it fit their ideology. The smarter the person is, the dumber politics can make them.^{*18}

I want to dwell on this for a minute, because it's an insane finding: being better at math made partisans *less likely* to solve the problem correctly when solving the problem correctly meant betraying their political instincts. People weren't reasoning to get the right answer; they were reasoning to get the answer that they wanted to be right.

The skin-cream experiment wasn't the first time Kahan had shown that partisanship has a way of short-circuiting intelligence. In another study, he tested people's scientific literacy alongside their ideology and then asked about the risks posed by climate

* This effect isn't limited to math, by the way. In their 1991 study "Everyday Reasoning and the Roots of Intelligence," David Perkins, Michael Farady, and Barbara Bushy brought students of different ages and intelligence levels into a lab and asked them their opinion on a complex social issue. Then they asked them to list all the arguments, on both sides of the issue, they could think of. IQ was the single largest predictor of how many arguments people listed, but it correlated only to how many *supporting* arguments they listed. "People invest their IQ in buttressing their own case rather than in exploring the entire issue more fully and evenhandedly," the researchers concluded.

change. If the problem was truly that people needed to know more about science to fully appreciate the dangers of a warming climate, then their concern should've risen alongside their knowledge. But here, too, the opposite was true: among people who were already skeptical of climate change, scientific literacy made them more skeptical of climate change.¹⁹

This will resonate with anyone who's ever read the work of a serious climate change denier. It's filled with facts and figures, graphs and charts, studies and citations. Much of the data is wrong or irrelevant. But it feels convincing. It's a terrific performance of scientific inquiry. And climate-change skeptics who immerse themselves in researching counterarguments end up far more confident that global warming is a hoax than people who haven't spent much time studying the issue. This is true for all kinds of things, of course. Ever argued with a 9/11 truther? I have, and they are quite informed about the various melting points of steel. More information can help us find the right answers. But if our search is motivated by aims other than accuracy, more information can mislead us—or, more precisely, help us mislead ourselves. There's a difference between searching for the best evidence and searching for the best evidence that proves us right. And in the age of the internet, such evidence, and such experts, are never very far away.

In another experiment, Kahan and his coauthors gave out sample biographies of highly accomplished scientists alongside a summary of the results of their research. Then they asked whether the scientist was indeed an expert on the issue. It turned out that on highly politicized issues, people's actual definition of "expert" is "a credentialed person who agrees with me." For instance, when the researcher's results underscored the dangers of climate change, people who worry about climate change were 72 percentage points more likely to agree that the researcher was

a bona fide expert. When the same researcher with the same credentials was attached to results that cast doubt on the dangers of global warming, people who tended to dismiss climate change were 54 percentage points more likely to see the researcher as an expert.²⁰

What's striking here is that the effects are strongest among the voters who pay the closest attention to the issues. In a 2006 paper, "It Feels Like We're Thinking," the political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels looked at an American National Election Study, a poll supported by the National Science Foundation, from 1996. One of the questions asked whether "the size of the yearly budget deficit increased, decreased, or stayed about the same during Clinton's time as President." The correct answer is that it decreased dramatically. Here, again, more information led to more self-deception. Achen and Bartels categorized the respondents according to how politically informed they were. Among the least-informed respondents, Democrats and Republicans picked the wrong answer in roughly equal numbers. But among better-informed voters the story was different. Republicans who were in the fifth percentile gave the right answer more often than those in the ninety-fifth percentile.²¹

Bartels found a similar effect in a 1988 survey, in which "a majority of respondents who described themselves as strong Democrats said that inflation had 'gotten worse' over the eight years of the Reagan administration; in fact, it had fallen from 13.5 percent in 1980 to 4.1 percent in 1988."²² If you were a lightly informed Republican in the Clinton years or Democrat in the Reagan years, you knew you didn't like the president, and you knew the economy was pretty good. But if you were deep in the partisan literature of the Reagan era, you knew people *thought* the economy was good, but were they paying attention to the budget deficit? Did they realize the tax cuts were going straight

to the rich? So, too, in the Clinton era. Elite Republicans could tell you quite a lot about the trade deficit with China or the credit bubble keeping the economy aloft.

At any given moment there are a lot of facts out there and a lot of smart people offering them to you in different configurations. "Even among unusually well-informed and politically engaged people, the political preferences and judgments that look and feel like the bases of partisanship and voting behavior are, in reality, often *consequences* of party and group loyalties," write Achen and Bartels in their book *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. "In fact, the more information the voter has, often the better able she is to bolster her identities with rational-sounding reasons."²³

Kahan is quick to note that, most of the time, people are perfectly capable of being convinced by the best evidence. There's a lot of disagreement about climate change and gun control, for instance, but almost none over whether antibiotics work, or whether the H1N1 flu is a problem, or whether heavy drinking impairs people's ability to drive. Rather, our reasoning becomes rationalizing when we're dealing with questions where the answers could threaten our group—or at least our social standing in our group. And in those cases, Kahan says, we're being perfectly rational when we fool ourselves.

Imagine what would happen to, say, Sean Hannity if he decided tomorrow that climate change was the central threat facing the planet. Initially, his viewers would think he was joking. But soon, they'd begin calling in furiously. Some would organize a boycott of his program. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of professional climate skeptics would begin angrily refuting Hannity's new crusade. Many of Hannity's friends in the conservative media world would back away from him, and some would seek advantage by denouncing him. Politicians he respects would be furious at his

betrayal of the cause. He would lose friendships, viewers, and money. He could ultimately lose his job. And along the way he would cause himself immense personal pain as he systematically alienated his closest political and professional allies. The world would have to update its understanding of who Sean Hannity is and what he believes, and so, too, would Sean Hannity. Changing your identity is a psychologically and socially brutal process.

Kahan doesn't find it strange that we react to threatening information by mobilizing our intellectual artillery to destroy it. He thinks it's strange that we would expect rational people to do anything else. "Nothing any ordinary member of the public personally believes about the existence, causes, or likely consequences of global warming will affect the risk that climate change poses to her, or to anyone or anything she cares about," Kahan writes. "However, if she forms the wrong position on climate change relative to the one [held by] people with whom she has a close affinity—and on whose high regard and support she depends on in myriad ways in her daily life—she could suffer extremely unpleasant consequences, from shunning to the loss of employment." The reality, he concludes, is that "the cost to her of making a mistake on the science is zero," but "the cost of being out of synch with her peers potentially catastrophic," making it "individually rational" to put group dynamics first when thinking about issues like climate change.²⁴

Kahan calls this theory "identity-protective cognition": "As a way of avoiding dissonance and estrangement from valued groups, individuals subconsciously resist factual information that threatens their defining values." Elsewhere, he puts it even more pithily: "What we believe about the facts," he writes, "tells us who we are." And the most important psychological imperative most of us have in a given day is protecting our idea of who we are and our relationships with the people we trust and love.

Anyone who has ever found themselves in an angry argument with their political or social circle will know how threatening it feels. For a lot of people, being "right" just isn't worth picking a bitter fight with the people they care about. That's particularly true in a place like Washington, where social circles and professional lives are often organized around people's politics, and the boundaries of what those tribes believe are getting sharper. In an interview I did with David Brooks in 2019, the genially conservative *New York Times* columnist reflected on the social agony criticizing Trump had caused him. "I had been part of the conservative movement my whole life," he told me. "*The Weekly Standard*. *The Wall Street Journal*. *National Review*. *Washington Times*. Suddenly, I wasn't the kind of conservative all the other conservatives were, and so my social circles drifted away." Brooks was living alone at the time, and the consequences, for his life, were painful. "My weekends were just howling silences," he says.²⁵

You can think of Washington as a machine for making identity-protective cognition easier. Each party has its allied think tanks, go-to experts, favored magazines, friendly blogs, sympathetic pundits, determined activists, and ideological moneymen. Both the professionals and the committed volunteers who make up the party machinery are members of social circles, Twitter worlds, Facebook groups, workplaces, and many other ecosystems that would make life very unpleasant for them if they strayed too far from the faith. And these institutions end up employing a lot of very smart, very sincere people whose formidable intelligence makes certain that they typically stay in line. To do anything else would upend their day-to-day lives. What's worse is that it never feels cynical, it never reads as rationalization. It always, always feels like our honest search for the truth has led us to the answer that confirms our priors. The problem, of course, is that