Title: Resistance to Position Change, Motivated Reasoning, and Polarization

Abstract

People seem more divided than ever before over social and political issues, entrenched in their existing beliefs and unwilling to change them. Empirical research on cognitive mechanisms driving this resistance to belief change has focused on a limited set of well-known, charged, contentious issues and has failed to account for deliberation over reasons and arguments in belief formation prior to experimental sessions. With a large, heterogeneous sample ($N = 3,001$), we attempt to overcome these existing problems and investigate the causes and consequences of resistance to belief change for five diverse and less contentious socio-political issues. After participants chose initially to support or oppose a given socio-political position, they were provided with reasons favoring their chosen position (affirming reasons), reasons favoring the other, unchosen position (conflicting reasons), or all reasons for both positions (reasons for both sides). Our results indicate that participants are more likely to stick with their initial decisions than to change them no matter which reasons are considered, and that this resistance to belief change is partly due to a motivated, biased evaluation of the reasons to support their initial beliefs (prior-belief bias). More specifically, they rated affirming reasons more favorably than conflicting reasons—even after accounting for prior knowledge about the issue, the novelty of the reasons presented, and the reported strategy used to make the initial decision. In many cases, participants who did not change their positions tended to become more confident in the superiority of their positions after considering many reasons for both sides.

Keywords: reasoning, political, bias, motivation, polarization

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