

Chapter 31: Changes in Political Beliefs

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This chapter reviews empirical and theoretical work addressing change in political beliefs among individuals and collectives. From false belief correction strategies to ideologically motivated cognition barriers to change, this chapter summarizes research on misinformation spread, identity politics, and political polarization.

1. Beliefs

Beliefs are broadly defined as statements individuals hold to be true (Schwitzgebel, 2010; Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975). An example of a belief is the endorsement of the statement "Global warming is threatening human civilization." Beliefs vary in the strength or confidence with which they are held, on a continuum that can be probabilistically quantified as subjective probability estimates (Wyer & Albarracín, 2005). For instance, a person might endorse the statement "Global warming is threatening human civilization" to different degrees along a continuous distribution. Taken together, a set of beliefs constitutes a belief system. Belief systems are defined as integrated mental representations in which the component elements logically fit together (Converse, 2006).

Beliefs are more complex than knowledge given the conviction with which they are held (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Jervis, 2006), and the self-referential element they embed (Connors & Halligan, 2014). Beliefs are also different from attitudes in that they lack the evaluative (e.g., good/bad) component of a target, focusing instead on the accuracy component of a statement (i.e., true/false) (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

The *belief-dependent realism theory* explains how beliefs are likely formed (Shermer, 2011). The mind, bombarded with sensory information, searches for patterns and infuses them with meaning. These meaningful patterns are our beliefs, which, once formed, are reinforced by selective incorporation of confirmatory evidence (Shermer, 2011). Similarly, the *theory of directional motivated reasoning* posits that individuals preferentially incorporate information supporting their preexisting beliefs and reject

information refuting these beliefs (Kunda 1990, Lodge & Taber, 2013; Nickerson, 1998; Redlawsk, 2002; Strickland, Taber & Lodge, 2011).

In line with these theories of belief, scientists have also proposed that, by default, our cognitive system assumes the statements it encounters are true, in order to comprehend them. Identifying a statement as false, however, requires additional processing, which is why people are susceptible to believing false information (Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990).

2. False beliefs

Believing false information, also known as misinformation, is not a new phenomenon. From Roman emperors (Rich, 2010) to Nazi leaders (Herf, 2005), misinformation has been used as a tool for achieving and maintaining power (Ecker et al., 2022). More recently in human history, however, misinformation has become more pervasive as technological advancements have facilitated unprecedented exposure to false information (Vosoughi, Roy, Aral, 2018). Nearly half of Americans get their news from Facebook (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), a social media platform known for providing access to a vast volume of misinformation (Shu et al., 2017). Such exposure to false information has been shown to lead people to confidently hold false beliefs (Kuklinski et al, 2000). For example, a third of Americans believe global warming is a conspiracy (*The Economist*, 2021) and a third of American parents believe vaccines cause autism (National Consumers League, 2014).

Endorsing false information can have individual and societal consequences (Lewandowsky et al, 2012), as people's beliefs impact their behaviors (Ajzen, 1991; Hochbaum, 1958). For instance, people's beliefs about climate change impact climate action (Vainio & Paloniemi, 2011), judges' beliefs impact rulings (Zorn & Bowie, 2010), and sheriffs' beliefs impact law enforcement (Farris & Holman, 2017). Moreover, belief in conspiracy theories predicts voting behaviour (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), religious beliefs have been found to predict crime rates (Shariff & Rhemtulla, 2012), and beliefs about intelligence have been found to predict learning success (Mangels et al., 2006). Overall, believing false information has been linked to decreased vaccination rates (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a), increased climate change denial (Lewandowsky, Gignac, & Oberauer, 2015), and increased intergroup prejudice (Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020). False beliefs have also been associated with violent individual and collective behavior. For example, false information spread on social media platforms such as Facebook, has been associated with the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar (Milmo, 2021; Mozur, 2018) and false information spread on WhatsApp has been linked to mob lynchings in India (Dixit & Mac, 2018).

Given these alarming behavioral signatures of misinformation endorsement, a body of research has emerged, focusing on uncovering processes by which false beliefs can be changed, especially in vulnerable communities (Ecker et al., 2022).

3. Belief change

Consistent with the properties of other mental constructs such as memory (Loftus, 1975, 1977, 1979) or emotion (Tice & Baumeister, 1993), a fundamental tenet of beliefs is their dynamic nature, beliefs being constantly subject to change (Bendixen, 2002). But what triggers beliefs to change?

In a departure from the purely rational agent model of belief update, built around the assumption that beliefs are updated as a function of new information in a Bayesian fashion (Gerber & Green, 1999), newer models of belief change have been proposed to more accurately explain observed patterns of updating (Mullainathan & Thaler, 2000; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). For instance, new accounts of belief change emerged to explain why providing people with evidence regarding the risk of smoking, unhealthy eating, or drunk driving does not lead to corresponding changes in beliefs (Weinstein & Klein, 1995; Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Similarly, scientific evidence of climate change or the benefits of vaccines (Schmid & Betsch, 2019; Hansson 2017) does not universally lead to changes in the corresponding beliefs. What's more, exposure to arguments against certain beliefs has can sometimes backfire, increasing rather than decreasing these beliefs' strength (McGuire, 1964; Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021). The mechanism behind this inoculation process has been suggested to involve the initial attack preparing people to get better at refuting subsequent attacks, even when these attacks feature different arguments.

The hypothesized mechanism responsible for the inconsistencies between evidence and belief updating involves *motivated reasoning* (Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009; Hornsey & Fielding, 2017; Lewandowsky & Oberauer, 2016). Belief formation and belief change have been found to be highly influenced by motivational factors (Kunda, 1990) such as accuracy (Kruglanski, 1980) and consistency (Festinger, 1957; McGuire, 1960), but also self-positivity (Baumeister, 1997), world justice (Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976), uncertainty reduction (Roney & Sorrentino, 1995), and cognitive effort minimization (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). Consistent with this body of work, the factors leading to belief change have been classified into three categories of top-down processing: logical reasoning, motivation, and cognitive biases (Connors & Halligan, 2014).

Building on this work, research has identified mechanisms of belief change that can be leveraged in interventions aimed at diminishing the spread of misinformation. For instance, increasing statement familiarity has been found to increase believability, a phenomenon known as the illusory truth effect (Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppin 1977; Jacoby, Kelley, Brown, & Jasechko; 1989). This process was shown to occur even when people know the statement is false (Fazio, Brashier, Payne, & Marsh, 2015). Additional strategies that proved effective at changing beliefs include using fictional narratives (Wheeler et al., 1999; Green & Brock, 2000), increasing familiarity (Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppin 1977; Dechêne, Stahl, Hansen, & Wänke, 2010), manipulating mnemonic

accessibility (Vlasceanu & Coman, 2018; Vlasceanu, Morais, Duker, & Coman, 2020), manipulating the ease of constructing an explanation (Pennington & Hastie, 1986, 1988, 1992), associating beliefs with emotionally arousing images (Vlasceanu, Goebel, & Coman, 2020), emphasizing normativity cues (Vlasceanu & Coman, 2021), nudging accuracy goals (Pennycook et al., 2020), triggering prediction errors (Vlasceanu, Morais, & Coman, 2021), encouraging conversational interactions (Vlasceanu & Coman, 2022), and fact checking (Porter & Wood, 2022).

Over time, additional theories of belief change have emerged. While some theories of belief change assume beliefs are stable and built on priors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971), others assume that beliefs are spontaneous estimates of certainty computed according to knowledge or criteria that happen to be available when the beliefs are solicited (Bem, 1972; Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppin, 1977). The latter account of beliefs is consistent with theories of judgement and decision making suggesting that when making a decision or a judgment, people do not use all the relevant knowledge they have available; instead, they use the knowledge that is easily accessible (Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Chaiken, 1987). Consistent with this account, one way of changing beliefs is to activate inconsistent beliefs simultaneously (McGuire, 1960). This phenomenon is known as the Socratic effect and occurs as people attempt to reduce inconsistency among their beliefs, but only when the inconsistency is salient (Rosen & Wyer, 1972; McGuire, 1960).

4. Belief resistance

Despite beliefs' dynamic nature, certain beliefs can be remarkably persistent (Lewandowsky et al, 2012). Research found that evidence can be easily dismissed if it reduces coherence among existing beliefs (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), if it increases cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), or if it counters one's political allegiance (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Zaller, 1992). When political beliefs are disconfirmed, people experience cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), an uncomfortable cognitive state they are motivated to escape. Rather than changing their worldview beliefs, which would threaten their social identity, alternatives to diminishing cognitive dissonance in this situation are to ignore the disconfirmatory evidence or to reduce accuracy goals (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018).

The persistence of a belief can become problematic when the belief is false, especially since false information has the potential to cancel out accurate information (van der Linden, Leiserowitz, Rosenthal, & Maibach, 2017). For instance, the now widespread belief that vaccines cause autism has persisted for decades, even though the journal that published the article making this connection later retracted it, citing scientific misconduct (Colgrove & Bayer, 2005). Nevertheless, this belief deterred many parents from vaccinating their children, which led to an increase in preventable

hospitalizations, deaths, and medical expense (Ratzan, 2010). Research has also found that retractions can be surprisingly ineffective at changing false beliefs, even when people remember and believe the retraction (Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Apai, 2011; Ecker, Lewandowsky, Swire, & Chang, 2011; Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Tang, 2010; Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Oberauer, & Morales, 2005).

Even when retractions are successful at changing beliefs, the changes in beliefs may not translate into corresponding changes in behaviors, which is particularly true in political contexts. For example, even though beliefs in statements made by Donald Trump were successfully changed as a function of new evidence, these changes in beliefs did not translate into changes in favorability ratings (Nyhan, Porter, Reifler, & Wood, 2019) or intentions to vote for Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). Similar effects were found on the other side of the political divide, with supporters of Bernie Sanders (Swire-Thompson, Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Berinsky, 2020).

5. Political beliefs

Social identity theory posits that social group membership is an important aspect of one's sense of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). People's beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors are influenced by those of close others, or ingroup members (Kahan, 2010; Bettencourt & Hume, 1999; Heaven, 1999; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). A pervasive group divider creating ingroups (and by extension outgroups) is political party identification (i.e., partisanship).

Partisanship can lead people to adopt the party's values (Weisberg & Greene, 2003) and beliefs (Macy, Deri, Ruch, & Tong, 2019) through heuristics (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014) and identity-protective reasoning (Kahan, 2015). Identification with a political party can shape people's perception of facts and bias their judgments (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018), which has been suggested to be threatening to the democratic process (Petts & Brooks, 2006).

Although partisanship correlates with ideology, one's worldview belief system (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018), when political party and personal ideology are in direct conflict, political party has been shown to be more influential. For example, policy support has been found to align with ideological beliefs; however, when party endorsement information is available, ideological beliefs are overridden, policy support now aligning with the preferred political party (Cohen, 2003). Beyond policy support, partisanship has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of political beliefs (Gerber, Huber, & Washington, 2010), behaviors (Bartels, 2000), and actions (Brandt, Sibley, & Osborne, 2019), regardless of policy platform (Fiorina, 2002).

The *identity-based model of belief* explains how partisan identities alter information processing, leading to an alignment of beliefs with political parties (Van

Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Aligning with neuroeconomic models of decision-making (Rangel, Camerer, & Montague, 2008), the identity-based model of belief posits that beliefs are weighed according to the value of the benefits endorsing these beliefs can have, such as solidifying group membership. Therefore, affiliating with a political party is an example of a social identity that can motivate cognition (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) and lead to polarization, which has been argued to be a threat to democracy (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018; Sunstein, 2009).

In the United States, political polarization has been on the rise (Prior, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2019) as partisan antipathy has been increasing (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018), leading to the formation of echo chambers (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). From topics involving the climate crisis to gun control, the liberal left and conservative right are fiercely endorsing opposing views (Kahan, 2015). For example, whereas 76% of Republicans thought that President Trump tells the truth “all or most of the time” (Arenge, Lapinski, & Tallevi, 2018; Quinnipiac, 2018), only 5% of Democrats held that view.

6. Political belief change

Despite significant resistance, changing deeply entrenched beliefs is not impossible. For instance, research has found that correcting fake news can be successful even on ideological topics such as sex trafficking, Russian infiltration, birth certificates, and pedophilia (Porter, Wood, & Kirby, 2018). And correcting false beliefs has been shown to be effective at decreasing political polarization (Lees & Cikara, 2020).

Theoretically, when it comes to political beliefs, updating has been proposed to be subject to either a desirability bias (Sharot & Garrett, 2016) or a confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). The desirability bias suggests that people preferentially update their beliefs to incorporate desirable, compared to undesirable, information. This bias has been demonstrated in contexts ranging from health beliefs (Sharot et al., 2012) to climate change beliefs (Sunstein, Bobadilla-Suarez, Lazzaro, & Sharot, 2016). The confirmation bias posits that people preferentially update their beliefs to incorporate confirmatory, rather than disconfirmatory, information. In a study conducted during the 2016 US presidential election testing the two biases against each other, data supported the desirability bias and not the confirmation bias in belief updating (Tappin, Van Der Leer, & McKay, 2017).

Research has found that there is a limit to motivated reasoning. For example, people who score higher in analytic thinking (as indexed by the Cognitive Reflection Test; Frederick, 2005) have been found to be less likely to believe fake news, regardless of whether the false information endorsed or opposed their political ideology (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Moreover, in the face of extensive disconfirming information, as voters reach a tipping point (estimated by one study at 28% disconfirming information), they begin to engage in rational updating (Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010). One strategy for eliciting rational belief updating, even on ideologically charged topics, involves triggering large prediction errors regarding belief-related evidence (Vlasceanu et al., 2021). Vlasceanu and colleagues (2021) asked participants to evaluate the accuracy of a set of statements. Then, participants either made predictions about evidence associated with the statements and received feedback, or were just presented with the evidence. Finally, participants reevaluated the initial statements. The results showed that triggering large prediction errors leads to more rational belief update than not engaging in prediction, an effect that held for both Democrats and Republicans across all belief types (Democratic, Republican, neutral) (Vlasceanu et al., 2021).

Finally, in a randomized field experiment, conservative Fox News viewers' political beliefs were changed after being monetarily incentivized to watch CNN for a month (Broockman & Kalla, 2022). And voters' support for both Republican and Democratic figures (i.e., Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders) was reduced when it was revealed that they shared considerably (i.e., four times) more false than true information (Swire-Thompson et al., 2020).

7. Political belief change across the ideological spectrum

The political psychology field has been actively debating whether there are differences between liberals and conservatives in how they change their beliefs. On one hand, the *rigidity of the right hypothesis* (Tetlock, 1984; Tetlock, Bernzweig, & Gallant, 1985; Altemeyer, 1998; Jost et al., 2003) posits that conservatives are more resistant to change compared to liberals, leading to a partisan asymmetry (Jost, 2017). In favor of this hypothesis, data show conservatives are more likely than liberals to reject scientific evidence (Lewandowsky & Oberauer, 2016), more likely than liberals to believe conspiracy theories (Jost, van der Linden, Panagopoulos, & Hardin, 2018; Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2015; van der Linden, Panagopoulos, Azevedo, & Jost, 2020), and less likely than liberals to incorporate evidence that counters their worldview beliefs (Ecker & Ang, 2018) or share cross-ideological content on social media (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018).

On the other hand, the *ideological extremity hypothesis* (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003) suggests that both extremes of the ideological spectrum engage in identity-protective cognition and thus fail to update their beliefs rationally as a function of evidence (Kahan, 2013; Kahan, Peters, Dawson, & Slovic, 2017). In support of this hypothesis, data show that both ideological extremes misinterpret scientific findings that counter their preexisting beliefs (Washburn & Skitka, 2017), engage in outgroup derogation (van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015), display an increased

tendency to believe conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015), and avoid exposure to each other's opinions (Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017) compared to political moderates.

A third possibility that has recently received empirical support is that both the rigidity of the right and the ideological extremity hypotheses are simultaneously correct (Harris & Van Bavel, 2021). A recent study investigating the relationship between conspiracy mentality and political orientation across 26 countries and with data from over 100,000 participants found that conspiracy mentality is greater among the political right but also among both the left and right extremes (Imhoff et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Beliefs are a central aspect of human psychology and society. They can encourage or obstruct social movements and social changes (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; Kahan et al., 2017), influence voting decisions (Fleury & Lewis-Beck, 1993), and instigate violent collective behavior (Dixit & Mac, 2018; Milmo, 2021; Mozur, 2018). Accordingly, when individuals hold false beliefs, democracies can be threatened (Petts & Brooks, 2006), which is why researchers have focused on investigating processes by which false beliefs can be changed. While several strategies have been found effective at changing beliefs (Vlasceanu, 2021), deeply entrenched worldview beliefs that bear on people's identities, such as political beliefs, have been shown to be resistant to change even in the face of evidence (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). This instantiation of motivated cognition is pervasive in the political domain, partisanship exerting a stronger influence on one's beliefs than ideology (Cohen, 2003), being one of the strongest predictors of political beliefs (Gerber, Huber, & Washington, 2010), behaviors (Bartels, 2000), and actions (Brandt, Sibley, & Osborne, 2019) regardless of policy platform (Fiorina, 2002). Nonetheless, despite political beliefs' persistence and partisan reinforcement, correcting false ideological beliefs is not impossible (Porter et al., 2018; Redlawsk et al., 2010; Sunstein et al., 2016). Strategies ranging from triggering large prediction errors (Vlasceanu et al., 2021) to incentivizing exposure to opposing views (Broockman & Kalla, 2022; Guilbeault, Becker, & Centola, 2018) have demonstrated that political beliefs are amenable to targeted change. This change, however, is likely to follow a rigidity of the right principle (Jost et al., 2003; Tetlock, 1984), by which conservatives are more resistant to change compared to liberals, and/or a rigidity of the extremes principle (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Kahan et al., 2017), by which both liberal and conservative extremes are more resistant to change compared to moderates.

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