

# Why People Are Irrational About Politics

—  
Choice, Commerce, and Conflict

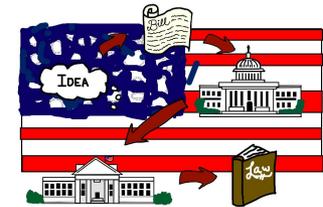
## Contents:

Review Public Choice Theory  
Political Disagreement  
Rational Irrationality

# Review: Public Choice Theory

## Public Choice Theory: What is it?

**Public Choice Theory:**  
The application of **economic methods** to the study of **political processes**.



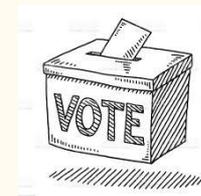
## Anthony Downs

American Economist  
1930 - 2021



## The Economic Analysis of Government

- Voters and politicians pursue their own **goals**, under conditions of **uncertainty**
- **Information** is a costly resource.
- Giving rise to three critical elements of political life:
  - (1) **Persuasion**,
  - (2) **Ideology**,
  - (3) **Rational Ignorance**



## Persuasion

### Persuasion

Because of imperfect information, it is irrational for **politicians** to treat all citizens equally.

Some citizens are more effective at persuading others to support their policies.



for both themselves and the government.

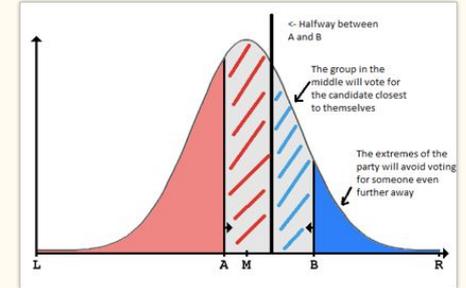
Essentially, inequality of political influence is a necessary result of imperfect information, given an unequal distribution of wealth and income in society. When knowledge is imperfect, effective political action requires the use of economic resources to meet the cost of information. Therefore, those who command such resources are able to swing more than their proportional weight politically. This outcome is not the result of ir-

# Ideology (and the Median Voter Theorem)

## Ideology

**The Median Voter Theorem:**  
a majority rule voting system will select the outcome most preferred by the median voter.

Parties will select ideologies that are close to the “center” (at least when certain conditions obtain).



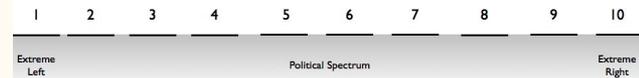
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## The Election Game



Candidate A



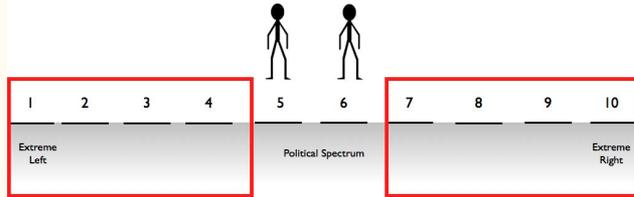
Candidates must choose to position themselves at one of the ten ideological locations. Voters are evenly distributed along the ideological spectrum, i.e. 10% at each location.



Candidate B

## The Median Voter Theorem

Candidates position themselves in the middle of the spectrum



Locations 1-4 and 7-10 are eliminated via the iterated deletion of dominated strategies

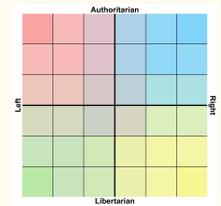
## The Median Voter Theorem

**Assumption 1:**  
Voters are aligned along a single ideological dimension.

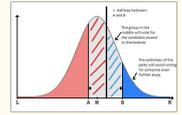
**Assumption 2:**  
Voters are uniformly distributed along that single ideological dimension.

**Assumption 3:**  
Voters have two options: they can vote for candidate A or candidate B. They *cannot* abstain from voting.

Surely that's an oversimplification! (Or is it?)



The result still follows if voters are concentrated toward the center of the political spectrum.



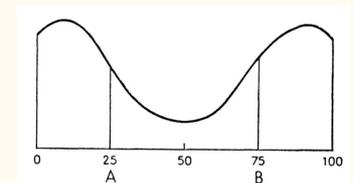
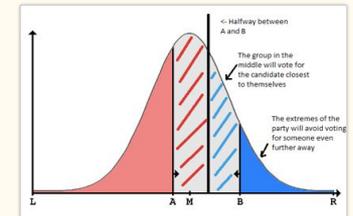
If voters *can* abstain, the result needn't follow. It depends on how polarized the voters are.



## Ideology

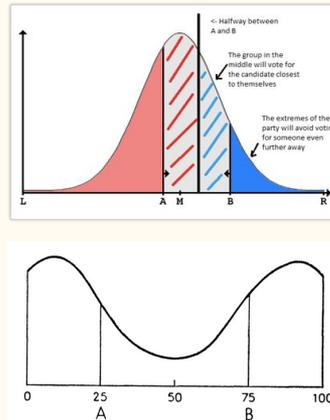
**The Median Voter Theorem:**  
a majority rule voting system will select the outcome most preferred by the median voter.

**Polarization:**  
If the electorate is polarized, the theorem doesn't hold.



## Ideology

which party is in power. **But when the electorate is polarized, as in Figure 2, a change in parties causes a radical alteration in policy.** And, regardless of which party is in office, half the electorate always feels that the other half is imposing policies upon it that are strongly repugnant to it. In this situation, if one party keeps getting re-elected, the disgruntled supporters of the other party will probably revolt; whereas if the two parties alternate in office, social chaos occurs, because government policy keeps changing from one extreme to the other. Thus **democracy does not lead to effective, stable government when the electorate is polarized.**



## Rational Ignorance

## Rational Ignorance

- The time and effort required to make an informed choice is **high**.
- The likelihood that your vote will make a difference is very **low**.
- It is rarely rational for a voter to invest the time and effort required to make an informed choice.



## Conclusion

Clearly, rational behavior in a democracy is not what most normative theorists assume it to be. Political theorists in particular have often created models of how the citizens of a democracy ought to behave without taking into account the economics of political action. **Conse-**

**conomics of political action. Consequently, much of the evidence frequently cited to prove that democratic politics are dominated by irrational (non-logical) forces in fact demonstrates that citizens respond rationally (efficiently) to the exigencies of life in an imperfectly informed world.<sup>22</sup> Apathy among citizens toward elections, ignorance of the issues, the tendency of parties in a two-party system to resemble each other, and the anticonsumer bias of government action can all be explained logically as efficient reactions to imperfect information in a large democracy. Any normative theory**

# Why People Are Irrational about Politics

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Michael Huemer

American Philosopher



**Discussion Question:**  
What is political disagreement like?

## Features Of Political Disagreements

Three Main Features of Political Disagreement:

- (1) They are **widespread**,
- (2) They are **strong**,
- (3) They are **persistent**.



## Features Of Political Disagreements

Three Main Features of Political Disagreement:

- (1) They are **widespread**,
- (2) They are **strong**,
- (3) They are **persistent**.

*Isn't this unusual?!*



## Four Hypotheses

Huemer considers **four explanations** for why political disagreements have these features.

He rejects the first three, and accepts the fourth.



## Four Hypotheses

- (A) **The Miscalculation Theory**
- (B) **The Ignorance Theory**
- (C) **The Divergent-Values Theory**
- (D) **The Irrationality Theory**



## Four Hypotheses

- (A) **The Miscalculation Theory**
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*Group Activity:*

In your group, (i) explain the theory, (ii) find Huemer's reasons for rejecting, (iii) evaluate his reasons.



# The Miscalculation Theory



# The Ignorance Theory



# The Divergent-Values Theory



# The Irrationality Theory

Why is it Rational to be Ignorant?

# THE 100 MILLION PROJECT

Why is it Rational to be Ignorant?

“Contrast what happens when you buy a product on the market. If you take the time to read the Consumer Reports to determine which kind of car to buy, you then get that car. But if you take the time to research politicians’ records to find out which politician to vote for, you do not thereby get that politician. You still get the politician that the majority of the other people voted for (unless the other voters are exactly tied, a negligible possibility). From the standpoint of self-interest, it is normally irrational to collect political information.”

**You bear *all* of the costs without (necessarily) receiving the benefits.**

Rational Irrationality

**The Theory of Rational Irrationality**

People often choose (rationally) to adopt **irrational beliefs**.

Why?

Because the **costs** of holding *rational* beliefs exceed their benefits.

## Rational Irrationality

### The Theory of Rational Irrationality

People often choose (rationally) to adopt **irrational beliefs**.

**Instrumental rationality** (or “means-end rationality”) consists in choosing the correct means to attain one’s actual goals, given one’s actual beliefs. This is the kind of rationality that economists generally assume in explaining human behavior.

**Epistemic rationality** consists, roughly, in forming beliefs in truth-conducive ways—accepting beliefs that are well-supported by evidence, avoiding logical fallacies, avoiding contradictions, revising one’s beliefs in the light of new evidence against them, and so on. This is the kind of rationality that books on logic and critical thinking aim to instill.

## Rational Irrationality

### The Theory of Rational Irrationality

It is **instrumentally rational** to be **epistemically irrational**.

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## Rational Irrationality

(1) **People have *non-epistemic belief preferences* (“biases”)**

There are things people want to believe for reasons that are independent of their truth, or how well-supported they are by the evidence.

(2) **People can exercise some control over their beliefs.**

## Rational Irrationality

(1) **People have *non-epistemic belief preferences* (“biases”)**

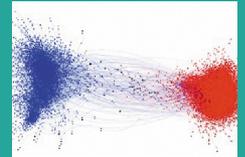
There are things people want to believe for reasons that are independent of their truth, or how well-supported they are by the evidence.

- a. Self-interested bias
- b. Beliefs as self-image construction
- c. Beliefs as tools of social bonding
- d. Coherence bias

## Rational Irrationality

- (1) **People have *non-epistemic belief preferences* (“biases”)**  
There are things people want to believe for reasons that are independent of their truth, or how well-supported they are by the evidence.
- (2) **People can exercise some control over their beliefs.**
  - a. Biased weighting of evidence
  - b. Selective attention and energy
  - c. Selection of evidence sources
  - d. Subjective, speculative, and anecdotal arguments

## Epistemic Bubbles & Echo Chambers



## Four Hypotheses

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## C. Thi Nguyen

American Philosopher



I'm C. Thi Nguyen. I used to be a food writer, now I'm a philosophy professor at University of Utah. I write about trust, art, games, and communities. I'm interested in the ways that our social structures and technologies shape how we think and what we value.

My first book is *Games: Agency as Art*. It's about how games are the art form that work in the medium of agency. A game designer doesn't just create a world — they create who we are in that world. Games shape temporary agencies for artistic purposes.

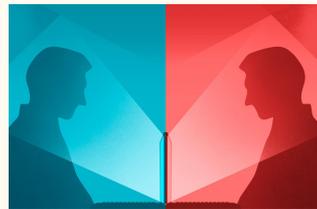


# Epistemic Bubbles



## Epistemic Bubbles

An **Epistemic Bubble** is an informational network from which relevant voices have been excluded by omission.

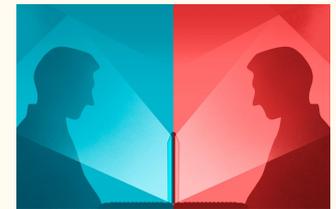


## Epistemic Bubbles

An **Epistemic Bubble** is an informational network from which relevant voices have been excluded by omission.

### How Does This Happen?

- Getting news from social media feeds
- only visiting a narrow range of sites
- algorithms personalize our search results



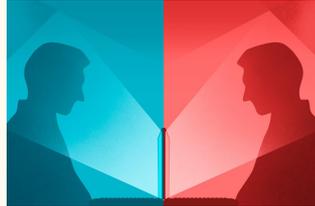
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**Do you have an obligation to diversify your news sources?**

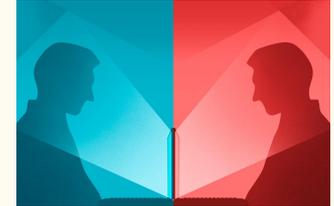


## Epistemic Bubbles

An **Epistemic Bubble** is an informational network from which relevant voices have been excluded by omission.

“Luckily, though, epistemic bubbles are easily shattered. We can pop an epistemic bubble simply by exposing its members to the information and arguments that they’ve missed.”

[The Ignorance Theory]



## Echo Chambers



## Echo Chambers

An **Echo Chamber** is a social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited.



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An **Echo Chamber** is a social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited.

“Those caught in an echo chamber are giving far too much weight to the evidence they encounter first, just because it’s first. Rationally, they should reconsider their beliefs without that arbitrary preference.”

[The Irrationality Theory]



## Echo Chambers

An **Echo Chamber** is a social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited.

Epistemic bubbles omit contrary views.

Echo chambers actively make their members distrust outsiders.

People in echo chambers might have access to lots of information—they just don’t believe any of it unless it comes from insiders.



## Echo Chambers: Examples?

Infowars promotes the emergence of echo chambers by:

- Attacking the mainstream media
- Undermining the integrity of those who express other views: they are not just wrong, but “malicious, manipulative,” etc.
- Employing conspiracy theories: “powerful elites out there are trying to mislead you.”

**Consequence:** you anticipate people will disagree with you, and you are primed to distrust them when they do.



## Echo Chambers: Examples?



## Echo Chambers: Examples?

Can you think of other communities that work to actively discredit outsiders/people who disagree?



## What Can Be Done?

### What Can Be Done?

According to Huemer, ...

*First:* Understanding the nature of political irrationality is itself a big step towards combating it. Congrats!

*Second:* We should identify cases in which we are particularly likely to be biased, and in those cases hesitate to affirm the beliefs that we would be biased towards.

*Third:* We should take account of the irrationality of others, and adjust our confidence in reported information accordingly.

*Fourth:* Avoid insults, identify empirical questions, be fair-minded, and build trust.



### What Can Be Done?

According to Nguyen, ...

#### **What Won't Work:**

- *Exposure to information:* the person may already have it; and they are primed not to believe it if it's coming from an outsider.

- *"Just use your own head":* We need to rely on experts; and, if you are in an echo chamber, using your own head will lead you to discredit lots of good arguments.

Consider the case of **Derek Black**.



## What Can Be Done?



## What Can Be Done?

### What Can We Learn From Derek Black?

What made Derek change his mind and exit the white nationalist echo chamber?

- New community
- Friendly interactions with people he had been taught to mistrust

Result of leaving the chamber: **Trusting** new people.  
He could then engage their arguments and ideas constructively.

**But what if no one wants to invite me to dinner?**



## What Can Be Done?

According to Nguyen, ...

### *The social-epistemic reboot*

“In order to undo the effects of an echo chamber, the member should temporarily **suspend all her beliefs**---in particular whom and what she trusts---**and start over again from scratch.**”

**The Hope:** This strategy busts you out of your echo chamber by making you rebuild your networks of trust from scratch.



# What Do You Think?