

Motivated Reasoning and Allegiance Bias, Explained

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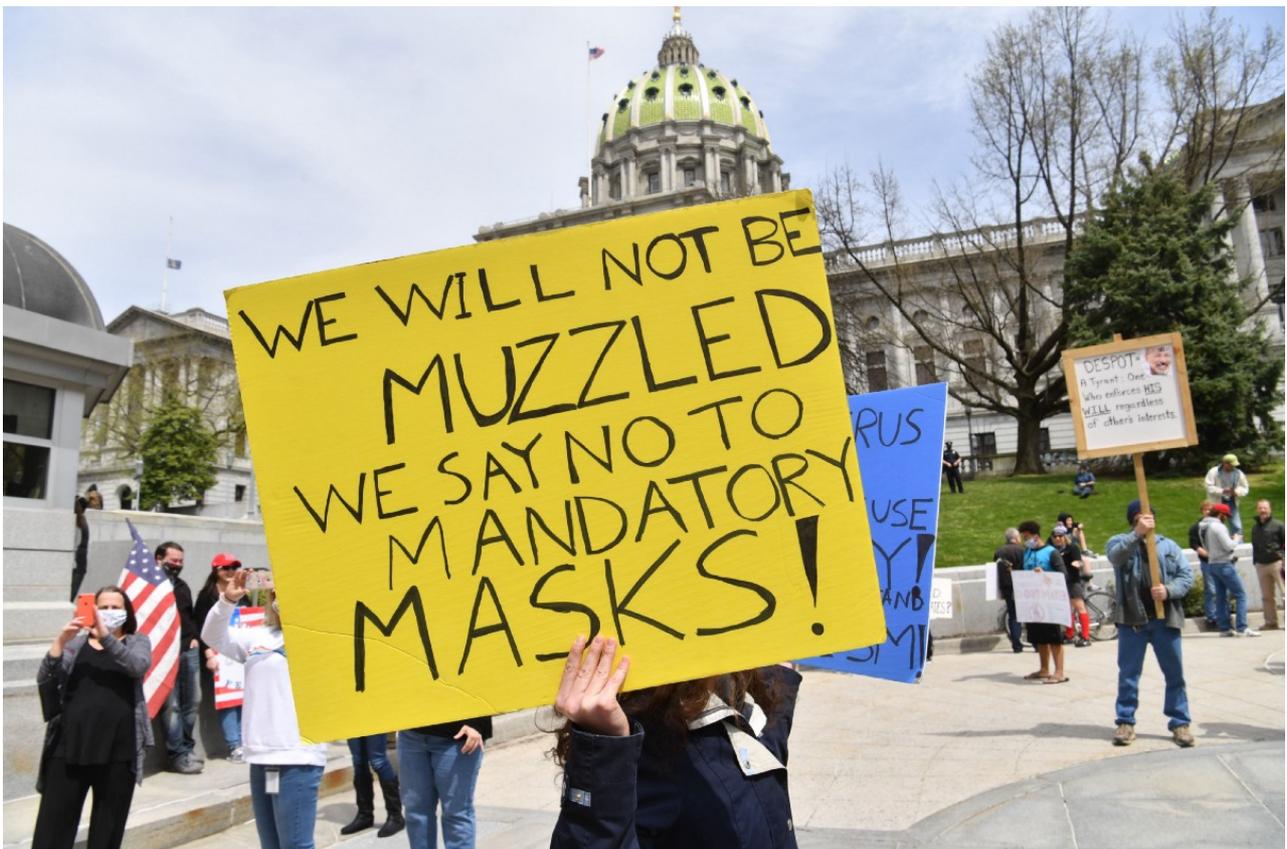
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For more information on the novel coronavirus and Covid-19, visit [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov).

Why the Brain Chooses Politics Over Science

Who could blow off the world's most respected scientists and turn to politicians for advice on surviving the coronavirus? Humans, that's who.



People take part in a “reopen” Pennsylvania demonstration on April 20, 2020 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Photo: Nicholas Kamm/Getty Images

If supermarket clashes over wearing masks and White House attempts to discredit Dr. Anthony Fauci aren't enough to convince you that the coronavirus crisis has gone political in America, a new study breaks it down.

From March through May, researchers at NYU, Yale, and MIT used geotracking data from 15 million smartphones per day to see who was following epidemiologists' guidelines for social distancing.

What they observed: While all counties in the U.S. experienced a drop in movement and visiting nonessential services, the counties that had voted for Donald Trump in 2016 exhibited 14% less physical distancing than counties that voted for Hillary Clinton. In turn, reduced physical distancing in pro-Trump counties was associated with subsequently higher Covid-19 infection and fatality growth rates.

How could anyone choose politics over medical experts to make life-and-death health decisions? Science (if you're into that kind of thing) can explain.

It starts with the way humans are wired to trust, bond, and defend our groups.

Research has revealed a lot over the past 30 years about the workings of parts of the brain that drive those processes. Some of the newest studies have focused on the hormone oxytocin. Produced by the hypothalamus on the center-base of the brain, oxytocin is stored in the portion of a pituitary gland the size and shape of a garbanzo bean. The posterior lobe releases oxytocin into the bloodstream at different times, like when we're falling over-the-moon in love.

We've known for a while now that oxytocin promotes bonding, but neuroeconomist Paul Zak, PhD, was among the first to report that it also plays a role in trust. He's a bit of a TED celeb for a 2011 talk in which he described his 2004 research.

Zak and his colleagues gave teams of strangers in different rooms opportunities to give each other money back and forth via computer. After each transaction, researchers drew blood from participants to measure their oxytocin levels. What they found: When participants trusted and felt trusted, the oxytocin levels in their bloodstreams jumped. Many of the participants even gave money to their partners in the final transaction, when they knew giving wouldn't net them anything in return.

Trust just feels good.

But trust can be risky if we give it to the wrong person. And our unique inner physiology shapes how we deal with that fact of life, impacting personality traits like how capable we are of empathizing with others and how cautious or comfortable we are with risk. That in turn influences how quickly we bond and who we bond with.

| The truth is, new information is going to mess up somebody's world.

The pack survives

Think about the groups you've chosen for yourself: Those might include your workout buddies, the food co-op or church you joined, the cause you march for, and the political party you've supported since you were old enough to vote. Your "packs" not only provide companionship that nurtures your well-being, but they also champion what you value and define who you are.

Here's where people's partisan responses to the coronavirus — some of which seem so puzzling — start to make sense. Our group identity is so strong that it can override our ability to weigh information objectively. And before you let yourself off the hook, you need to realize that this lack of objectivity goes both ways, depending on the issue.

Jay Van Bavel, PhD, a social neuroscientist with New York University, examines that phenomenon in "The Dangers of the Partisan Brain," a TEDx [talk](#) of his own. "Every single culture on earth forms coalitions and groups and identifies with groups," he says. "And this was very successful for outcompeting other groups and outcompeting other species. But... even though it's functional on the savannah, it is a disaster when it's applied to politics."

The concern: Democracies count on citizens' ability to make informed decisions. But Van Bavel cites a 2013 [study](#) in which both liberals and conservatives with strong math skills could solve a math problem about gun control when it supported what they believed. But when the answer contradicted their political identities, participants on both sides of the aisle struggled and failed to solve it.

Social scientists call that [motivated reasoning](#). Without even realizing it, we seek information that supports what we already believe and blow off pretty much anything that refutes it, convincing ourselves that what we believe is firmly rooted in evidence, and that what the other side believes is obviously wrong.

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And when new information comes along threatening what we already believe in, we feel intense anxiety — cognitive dissonance — until we explain it away. Think of basketball fans completely positive their team's player hadn't committed a foul, and that the ref who called it clearly favored the other side. They might have been correct. More likely, their [allegiance bias](#) shaped what they saw.

Just as the fans in the bleachers groused together over the ref's incompetence, someone else might post on Facebook that their president's inauguration crowd size was the largest in history, and photojournalists purposely reported it wrong. Their friends will jump in to agree, and the world will feel right for them again.

There's even a part of the brain, the orbitofrontal cortex, that appears to [calculate](#) what we want most in computing the value of competing goals (like being accurate or protecting our identities) when we hear something new.

That's where our brains tend to stack the odds against scientists and their pesky new findings. The truth is, new information is going to mess up somebody's world. That includes not just groups who share a worldview but also leaders in positions to discredit the messengers, wittingly or unwittingly, and maintain their perspectives, identities, and power.

Exhibit A: the Catholic Church's legal trial of physicist and astronomer Galileo Galilei in 1633. His crime: stating that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the universe. Found guilty of heresy, he was sentenced to house arrest for the rest of his life (nine years, as it turned out).

Fast-forward to 2020

Early on in the pandemic, Van Bavel and a group of colleagues published an article on ways political leaders could use social and behavioral research to get people to adopt behaviors necessary to contain the new virus. They recommended emphasizing our shared fate and sense of purpose by addressing the public as "us" and discussing behaviors needed for public safety, like wearing masks, as actions for the common good.

Because people aren't likely to change who they trust, Van Bavel and his colleagues suggested that the message come from religious and community leaders across the ideological spectrum.

And while aspects of that approach seem to have worked in places like New Zealand, it was clear by May that America's president had gone in a different direction. "Donald Trump has pretty much done the exact opposite of everything we would recommend in terms of effective leadership and effective science communication," Van Bavel said via email in July.

Then, Trump publicly wore a mask at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on July 11, which Van Bavel says could be a positive sign. "If he continues to wear the mask consistently and encourages his supporters to do the same, that would be a step in the right direction and might ultimately save lives," Van Bavel said.

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This is us

How to live with the frustration of knowing that humans process information through partisan lenses, even in a public health crisis? Some of those answers probably lie over on other parts of campus, like the religion and philosophy departments.

But it doesn't hurt to remember that we're all wired to ignore facts we don't want to believe and seek information that confirms what we and our groups stand for. The process happens involuntarily; we don't even realize we're doing it.

And unlike previous generations, contemporary humans are contending with online algorithms that feed us even *more* of what we're already looking at, notes Randy Borum, a forensic psychologist and former consultant to the U.S. Secret Service who teaches at the University of South Florida.

The only way to mitigate it, he says: actively seeking information that contradicts what we already believe. "It requires a conscious response to counter an unconscious process," he says. "So, if you were captivated by 'cult-gate' after spending two hours down that rabbit hole, you might consider searching for 'cult-gate hoax' or 'cult-gate fake news' to try to get another perspective."

Meanwhile, can social scientists offer any hope that you might convince a few more people in your life to wear masks? Sure. Start with active listening (given the times, by FaceTime or Zoom) to show your respect, understand your friend or family member on a deeper level, and hear points you might have missed.

Affirm who they are, acknowledge what they believe, and look for common ground — like how much you both love people in your lives who are especially vulnerable.

If you're really motivated, study up on deep canvassing, a process of asking sensitive questions, listening with sincere interest and asking more questions that reveal how the person reached their conclusion. Sometimes, it can nudge them to reflect on their decisions.

You're not likely to ever get them to love Dr. Anthony Fauci. But if you love each other, you've got a shot at seeing them face to face again — beliefs, blind spots, and masks included.