

UNDERSTANDING OUR POLITICAL NATURE

HOW TO PUT KNOWLEDGE AND REASON AT THE HEART OF POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Manuscript completed in June 2019

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EU Science Hub

<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc>

JRC117161
EUR 29783 EN

PDF ISBN 978-92-76-08623-9 ISSN 1831-9424 doi:10.2760/88395 KJ-NB-29783-EN-N

Print ISBN 978-92-76-08622-2 ISSN 1018-5593 doi:10.2760/47721 KJ-NB-29783-EN-C

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019

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Specific thanks are extended to Julian Keimer in his capacity as a trainee and Laurent Bontoux for his contribution to the workshops.

How to cite this report: Mair D., Smillie L., La Placa G., Schwendinger F., Raykovska M., Pasztor Z., van Bavel R., *Understanding our political nature: How to put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision-making. Executive summary*, EUR 29783 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-76-08623-9, doi:10.2760/88395, JRC117161



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Behavioural sciences, social sciences and humanities can bring us new insights into our political behaviour, such as how and why emotions, values, identity and reason affect how we think, talk and take decisions on political issues.



Misperception and disinformation

Our thinking skills are challenged by today's information environment and make us vulnerable to disinformation. We need to think more about how we think.

Humans do not always think rationally. This is not necessarily problematic. What is problematic is to neglect it and base politics on the assumptions that they do. Motivated reasoning, the tendency to arrive at conclusions about evidence that match people's pre-existing beliefs; if an argument threatens their political ideology, they will fight it vigorously; but if it

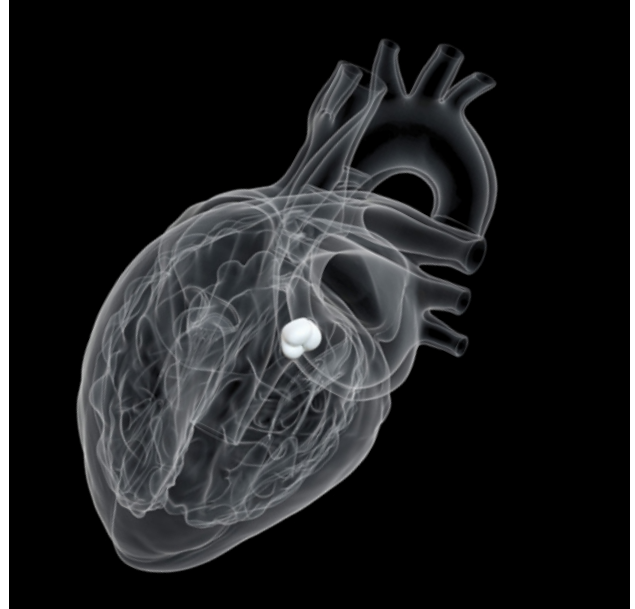
How a better understanding of human behaviour can put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision-making.

supports their worldview, they may accept it without much objection. Misperceptions are different from ignorance - misinformed people do not think of themselves as ignorant - they hold facts which they believe to be true. False news was diffused 'significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth'; it was particularly true of political news. Experimental evidence suggests debunking works, meaning that corrections do lead to more accurate assessments of the facts although it generally does not change people's views, however disinformation seeks to polarise views by infiltrating online communities and amplifying divisive narratives that are already circulating. Greater efforts by politicians to disentangle facts from values and spend more time debating the latter would help to lower the temperature around the facts and perhaps firewall the factual debate from motivated reasoning.

Collective intelligence

Science can help us re-design the way policymakers work together to take better decisions and prevent policy mistakes.

Thinking collectively can overcome individual bias and significantly improve the quality of outcome but only if collaborative processes are carefully designed. Only if all critical information, unique knowledge and expertise is shared across the group can the potential of the wisdom of the crowd be realised. Groups can also produce poor decisions through groupthink, when members privilege group harmony over the independence of thought and effective decision-making. Group polarisation is the inclination to make more extreme (either riskier or more conservative) decisions than initial preferences would seem to suggest. Creating an environment of psychological safety is essential for the sharing of critical information, ideas, questions and dissenting opinions. Research suggests that longer-term strategies also need to change. Hiring and staffing procedures, project-team composition, team-performance measurement and monitoring as well as professional development need to be addressed.



Emotions

We can't separate emotion from reason. Better information about citizens' emotions and greater emotional literacy could improve policymaking.

Emotions are just as essential to decision-making as logical reasoning. They are as likely to enhance rationality as to subvert it e.g. angry people are less likely to seek information and more likely to adopt a closed mind while anxiety is less mobilising than anger and may lead to a deeper processing of information. Sensing citizens' concerns, fears, hopes and suffering more effectively could provide important new information to guide policy choices. Learning to acknowledge, integrate and use emotions, rather than trying to suppress them could be a central feature of training for policymakers.

Values and identities

Values and identities drive political behaviour but are not properly understood or debated.

Political decisions are strongly influenced by group identity, values, worldviews, ideologies and personality traits. While people are usually members of multiple overlapping groups, political or partisan groups play a significant part in shaping identity. Political polarisation is on the rise. A new form of polarisation has emerged, with the far right opposing both centre-left and centre-right over issues related to immigration, multiculturalism, European integration and attitudes towards European values. Values strongly influence not only our political behaviour



but also our perceptions about facts. A deep understanding of specific values engaged by each political issue seems to be an indispensable part of policymaking throughout the policy cycle.

Framing, metaphor and narrative

Facts don't speak for themselves. Framing, metaphors and narratives need to be used responsibly if evidence is to be heard and understood.



The human brain is primed to seek out patterns to construct meaning. This search for meaning gives power to the narrator who most effectively describes the world and its problems. Mastering the use of metaphor, framing and storytelling is essential as it can determine understanding. There is no such thing as a neutral frame; something is included at the expense of something else being excluded. Understanding is frame dependent and the ways in which scientific results or policy problems are presented can substantially influence beliefs about the matter at hand. It is not the side with the most or best facts that wins an argument, but the one that provides the most plausible scenario that feels intuitively reliable, communicated by a perceived credible source. Consequently, even if the facts upon which a story is based are proved to be false, a story's coherence and fidelity can maintain the narrative. Given that frames, narratives and metaphors are bound by both cultural context and social structures, engagement with citizens can help in designing 'productive narratives' to address public misperceptions or different understandings of policy issues.

Trust and openness

The erosion of trust in experts and in government can only be addressed by greater honesty and public deliberation about interests and values.

Scientists as a group are among the most trusted in society. However, the authority of scientific evidence to help resolve political debates is being challenged. Trustworthiness depends on expertise, honesty and shared interests and values, these are needed to be credible and people expect more honesty from experts than others. The ideal of value-free science is that it should be disinterested, impartial, objective, rational, morally neutral, and/or asocial. The difficulty of achieving the value-free ideal does not mean that science cannot be trusted or that the scientific method is at fault. It simply means that there is a need to be more transparent about the role of



values in science, since scientists must usually make some value judgments and values are inevitably a part of the processes of scientific knowledge production. Opening evidence to public scrutiny is crucial to maintain scientific authority. Deliberative democracy and citizen engagement can be effective responses to the loss of trust in democratic institutions. Policymakers have the opportunity to capture more accurately the values, as well as interests and expectations of citizens. Properly moderated deliberation has proven to be an effective tool to combat polarisation. Offering simple causal explanations may be an approach to spark citizens' curiosity in science, encouraging trust in expertise as well as being a more effective and accurate way to convey evidence

Evidence-informed policymaking

The principle that policy should be informed by evidence is under attack. Politicians, scientists and civil society need to defend this cornerstone of liberal democracy.

Framing of a policy problem and the accompanying decisions on what evidence to commission or take into account is sometimes seen as a technical issue. It is in fact political, hence the competition among political actors to impose their framing on a problem.

It is important to recognise that the framing of policy problems determines the selection of what research is needed, what evidence counts and what should be ignored. The commitment to evidence-informed policy cannot be taken for granted. Partisan leadership in highly polarised political environments undermines the capacity of governments to use evidence effectively; partisanship weakens cooperation, while interest groups compete to interpret the evidence. Populists and authoritarians may perceive independent evidence as a challenge to their interpretation of 'the public interest', underlining the need to recognise evidence-informed policy as a core value along with democracy. To make policy making innovative, inclusive and evidence-informed, a new model of conceiving and delivering policies could help; one that starts with a more open and democratic initial framing of policy problems. Making a public call for evidence at the beginning of the process and allowing only evidence open to public scrutiny to be taken into account would enhance trust in the evidence used in the policy process. A well-designed evidence-informed policy system would include knowledge brokers and boundary organisations, sitting between scientists and policymakers. The principle of informing policy through evidence could be recognised as a key accompaniment to the principles of democracy and the rule of law.



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Publications Office
of the European Union

ISBN 978-92-76-08623-9
doi:10.2760/88395