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The Upshot

FORECASTS

How Confirmation Bias Can Lead to a Spinning of Wheels

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A very simple experiment suggests that you, the reader of The Upshot, are not in fact the highly rational information processor you might think you are.

The problem is that you seek out information that confirms your existing views, a mistake that psychologists call confirmation bias.

And your confirmation bias may be the reason that our political debates remain intractable. After all, as you accumulate more evidence confirming your views, you're less likely to question them, and less likely to change your mind. As members of competing political tribes collect more evidence in favor of their favored views, their opinions harden, and each tribe becomes more convinced of its correctness.

How do I know that Upshot readers suffer from confirmation bias?

We'll have to start with some background to our experiment. The Upshot's election forecasting model, which we've nicknamed Leo, is based on simulating thousands of Election Day possibilities. Leo adds up how often either party wins control of the Senate. On our most recent run, Republicans were the winner in 71 percent of the simulations, and that's the forecast we reported to our readers.

But Leo's not just a black box, and we've let you in on the process. Click through to Leo's home page, and if you click on the spinners, Leo will generate yet another simulation. Click again, and it will show you a whole new scenario.

This is where confirmation bias comes in. If you're convinced that the Republicans are going to win but your first two spins suggest a Democratic victory, you may feel deflated; perhaps you'll spin again, in the hopes that you'll finally get to see what a Republican victory looks like.

Leo watches all of this. Don't worry, he doesn't know who is spinning — he doesn't keep track of any personal information at all — but he does keep track of the outcomes of any given session of spinning. And he sees that 85 percent of the time that your first two spins show a Democratic victory, you'll keep spinning, perhaps hoping to see a Republican victory.

The same logic says that those who see the Democrats as likely to win are more likely to spin again after seeing the Republicans win in their first two spins, and once again, 85 percent of you do so.

But this urge to keep spinning in the search for confirmatory evidence is absent if you've already seen both a Democratic and a Republican victory. And so in these cases, you're less likely to bother spinning again, and indeed, Upshot readers are around ten percent less likely to do so. By now, Leo has seen thousands of people simulate tens of thousands of elections, so these differences are not just because of chance.

We can also learn about the beliefs of Upshot readers from this. The fact that there are about as many people who spin again after viewing consecutive Democratic victories as after seeing consecutive Republican victories suggests that there are about as many of you searching for evidence

the Republicans can win as those searching for evidence that Democrats can.

Of course, as a believer in confirmation bias, I want to provide you with more evidence to confirm that this problem is widespread. We see the same patterns repeat themselves when we focus instead on those of you trying to decide whether to simulate the election for a fourth time.

Indeed, the pattern continues when I analyze whether you decided to continue simulating the election for a fifth, sixth, seventh or eighth time — if you have yet to see a particular outcome, you are more likely to keep looking until it shows up.

Rather than continuing to pound away on Leo's spinners until he confesses that your preferred outcome is possible, my advice is that it would be more rational to listen to him instead, as he's telling you that the outcome you seek is unlikely.

How has confirmation bias shaped your expectations for what you think is likely to occur on Election Day? There are thousands of paths that will lead either the Democrats or Republicans to take control of the Senate. If you spend more time thinking about the paths leading your favorite party to victory, you'll probably come to overestimate its chances.

Your mistakes are all too human. To be a better forecaster you need to be cold, calculating and immune to such natural feelings. That is, you'll need to be a lot less human, and a lot more like Leo.

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