

Questions for week 5, articles on the effects of motivated reasoning in political science

Answer ONE of the following questions. Come to class prepared to discuss ALL of them. Essays should be limited to one page single spaced and should have perhaps one-third of the essay describing the issue and the rest analyzing it. It is preferable to go into detail on a small part of the issue, giving examples or illustrations, than to remain at a general level. The devil is always in the details.

1. Kuklinski et al compare misinformation with lack of information. Is motivated reasoning a good explanation for the widespread acceptance as “facts” that are objectively incorrect? Considering that motivated reasoning is a basic characteristic of human cognition, what is the solution?
2. Redlawsk introduces the notion of “voters as rational Bayesian updaters” – a concept that is pretty common in many literatures. Is that the most reasonable point of reference for this literature? What would be the “rational” way to respond to surprising new information?
3. Redlawsk also introduces the distinction between “on-line” and “memory” processing. On-line processing is sometimes referred to as a “running tally” model – you might have a general impression of some target (say, Democrats, Republicans, or a particular candidate), and new information causes you to revise your running tally of how much you like or dislike that group. But this model usually is set up with the expectation that bad news about Democrats will cause everyone to like them just a little bit less. The motivated reasoning literature, Redlawsk and Nyhan and Reifler in particular, suggests that this may not be true.
4. Tabor and Lodge find that motivated skepticism is more common among the politically sophisticated. Uh-oh! What are the implications of that? Are these findings congruent with Gaines et al? What are the politically sophisticated doing that those less interested in politics, or with less information at their fingertips, are not doing?
5. Peffley and Hurwitz show that whites support the death penalty more if they hear that it affects blacks differentially, whereas blacks support is less if they hear those same facts. Is this motivated reasoning or just self-interest? This is not a trick question! What psychological processes do they say are going on here?
6. Nyhan and Reifler suggest that a false attack, followed by a correction, can be pretty powerful. Actually they don’t say exactly that, but it’s an implication of their findings. Discuss.
7. Having read these things over the past two weeks, why is it common to assert that more information would make voters more rational? Or is that not really a common assertion? Is the evidence presented here, and your understanding of how important argumentative defensiveness is to most people you know, including yourselves, enough to make you think the more-information-is-better argument needs some additional skepticism?