

# The beginning of confirmation bias: how our schools affect our politics

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If you've ever tuned into a segment on Fox News, MSNBC or CNN you've been a witness to confirmation bias. The beloved hosts of these shows have one job, and one job only : to confirm the political opinions their viewers have held for a very long time, maybe even since childhood. While Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews, and Bill O'Reilly claim to be middlemen of news information, they purposefully portray this information in such a way as to support their viewers political opinions, and provide their viewers with a sense of intellectual security.

Confirmation bias is the tendency of people to seek out information that supports or confirms their already held opinions and worldviews. Due to this bias people will dismiss evidence that is contrary to their claims, interpret ambiguous evidence as supporting their position, and selectively gather information to use as ammunition in political dogfights. Confirmation bias is one of the many cognitive biases that allow people to become absolutely certain of their own worldviews. People generally want to be right about things, because it allows them to feel secure with their standing in the world. When people can't explain or understand new information, it makes them feel uncomfortable, as if they do not have an accurate grasp on reality. Thus, when people are confronted with new information, they will try to fit it into their already existing worldviews or dismiss it completely ; rather than considering that their worldview may be incorrect entirely.

This type of cognitive bias is an enormous obstacle on the path towards a more progressive society. Confirmation is most apparent in politics, where worldviews have amazing significance on the choices politicians make.

Republicans generally will not consider raising taxes on the rich, no matter <https://assignbuster.com/the-beginning-of-confirmation-bias-how-our-schools-affect-our-politics/>

how much it may benefit the poorer classes. Democrats generally will not consider antithetical ideas about gun control laws, no matter what effect they truly have on mass shootings. This ideological deadlock prevents any true social progress from occurring and empirical evidence becomes utterly, worthless.

Confirmation bias, unfortunately, has its roots in the school system. For instance, in middle school classrooms, bias is readily apparent when students first learn to write the dreaded five paragraph essay. This type of essay assignment usually follows the reading of a short novel, and is touted as a skill students will need for the rest of their lives. Because the organization of a five paragraph essay is complex to middle school students at first, teachers instruct their students to adhere to a very strict writing process. First, students must pick a thesis statement that answers the posed essay question.

Next, they must seek out specific information (quotes from the novel primarily) to support their position in the thesis. From this point they must add an introduction, analysis, and concluding information. Teachers have good reason to ensure that students adhere to this writing process when first beginning to write essays ; it helps students comprehend the structure of a five paragraph essay, and learn how to use information to back up a claim. However, this process of writing is the definition of confirmation bias. Students are taught to select a claim based on zero evidence, and seek out only that evidence which will support their original position, regardless of if they find any contradictory evidence from other quotes in the novel.

Likewise, this same phenomenon can be found in class debates and debate teams.

In these settings, students are forced on to one side of a controversial argument. Their job is to accumulate only that evidence which will support the claim they were forced to accept. Students then learn to articulate their views with supporting evidence, in order to out-persuade the other side. Here lies the problem. Debates are simply a contest of persuasion, and not only that, but one side must win whether or not they actually agree with anything they're arguing for. Students are taught to argue vehemently for their position and to disregard the other stance at all costs.

After the debate, students leave with the same conclusions they came with, and become more and more close minded. The most serious problem is that these students will still use these biased techniques as they move on to high school, college, and into the 'real' world. This is nothing less than a tragedy. Schools and universities are supposed to be the institutions through which we create productive and outstanding citizens to be apart of society. However, our schools are failing students by teaching them the tools of argument and persuasion, without teaching them how to think analytically about complex situations.

Thus, we are left with fantastic debaters on both sides of every argument, unable to accept that the other side may have value in their arguments as well. This inability to understand other worldviews only strengthens the iron certainty that people grant their own convictions, and weakens the tools we have to find progress in politics, and society in general.

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