

# The Illusion of Political Disagreement

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## Abstract

A striking feature of politics is how prone it is to disagreement. Political opponents will even give different answers to factual questions that have partisan implications, suggesting that opposing parties cannot agree on facts any more than they can on values. This impression is widespread and supported by survey data. I will argue, however, that the extent and depth of political disagreement is largely overstated. Many political disagreements are merely illusory. This claim has several important upshots. I will explore the implications of this idea for theories about voter misinformation, motivated reasoning, public reason liberalism, deliberative democracy, and a number of other issues.

Don't boo. Vote.

– Barack Obama

## 1. Introduction

Is Barack Obama the founder of ISIS? Was he born in the United States? Does the United Kingdom send £350 million to the European Union each week? Would the world be safer if everyone owned a gun? Is global warming going to be catastrophic if we don't take immediate action?

These questions provoke strong disagreement. So do plenty of others. Political opponents cannot agree on matters concerning the economy, foreign affairs, education, energy, health care, the environment, privatization, and immigration. In the United States, nearly half of all Republicans and Democrats say they "almost never" agree with the other party's positions (Doherty et al. 2016). When it comes to politics, there seems to be no end to the number of issues over which people disagree.

Political disagreement is often a good thing for a healthy democracy. We expect values and preferences to differ in a pluralistic society, and reasonable citizens understand that people of good will can disagree about moral and political issues. For this reason, theorizing about liberal democracy has focused largely on moral and political disagreements, while taking for granted that citizens tend to agree on the facts. But this assumption no longer seems valid. Today, partisan disagreements often go beyond political values and even include disputes about obvious matters of fact.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, for example, Democrats and Republicans disagree about whether the GDP has gone up or down, whether unemployment rates are better or worse, whether social welfare programs help or hurt the economy, how many immigrants entered the United States illegally, and many other issues. Consider the issue of climate change. The extent and causes of climate change is a scientific issue that should be settled

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<sup>1</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong (2018) and Bartels (2002). Ironically, Republicans and Democrats *agree* that partisan disagreements extend to basic factual issues (Laloggia 2018).

independently of one's political beliefs. Yet politics seems to drive our scientific beliefs instead of science driving policy.

This is a big problem for democratic politics. If partisanship is shaping our perceptions of reality, then democratic decision-making becomes incredibly difficult. Without agreement on the facts, voters will be unable to hold representatives accountable, to productively deliberate with others, and to find political compromise.

But is political disagreement as extensive and deep as many have claimed? I want to argue that many apparent political disagreements are not genuine disagreements. I will draw on three sources of evidence to justify this claim.

First, I will argue that voters are increasingly polarized in terms of their *attitudes* towards each other, even though there has been comparatively little polarization on the *issues*. As Lilliana Mason (2018) puts it, politics is increasingly characterized by "uncivil agreement". Voters have grown more partisan, angry, and biased against their political opponents, but these reactions have almost nothing to do with one's opinions about the issues. We are simply behaving *as if we disagree*.

Second, I will argue that survey data tends to exaggerate the level of disagreement in politics. When surveyed about political issues, people often deliberately misreport their beliefs as a way to express their attitudes. This is called "expressive responding". People engage in this behaviour for at least two reasons: either partisans know the truth but prefer to "cheerlead" when there is nothing to gain from accuracy, or they are ignorant on the issue and they offer a congenial answer as their best guess. Either way, survey responses are not entirely sincere. Thus, we should not interpret these responses as evidence that partisans are unable to agree.

Third, I will argue that voters often claim to have policy convictions when, in fact, they do not have stable political beliefs at all. Here I follow the democratic 'realists' who argue that people vote largely on the basis of partisan loyalties, not sincere policy preferences (Achen and Bartels 2016). Although many citizens will describe themselves as "liberal" or "conservative", they actually lack stable beliefs fitting these ideological self-descriptions. What seems like deep political disagreement is actually superficial and inauthentic.

All this suggests that political disagreement is neither as deep nor as extensive as we may have thought. What follows from this fact?

There are several important upshots. For example, I will argue that insincere disagreement explains why debates often go so poorly, why people seem to hold blatantly contradictory beliefs, and why the appearance of widespread disagreement does not (and should not) undermine the typical voter's confidence in their own political views. I will also discuss some positive and negative implications of illusory political disagreement. On the positive side, I will argue that political surveys tend to overstate the level of political misinformation, that motivated reasoning is not distorting our perceptions of reality as often as many scholars have claimed, and that there is more agreement over the facts than surveys suggest. This is good news. On the negative side, however, it seems that voters are not supporting policies based on their actual content, that we cannot decrease polarization by reasoned debate, and that people are not genuinely interested in engaging with the other side.

## 2. Division Without Disagreement

According to a common view of politics, voters tend to choose the political party that best matches their own interests and issue positions. This is the “folk theory of democracy” (Achen and Bartels 2016). Imagine a voter who thinks that corporate and individual tax cuts will help create a booming economy, and that there is a critical need for an immigration policy that secures the border and limits migration. Such a person is likely to vote Republican, according to the folk theory, because the Republican Party will better represent this voter’s interests and values. The folk theory predicts that party affiliation is strongly linked to issue positions, since voters will choose to support whichever party best fits their political preferences.

The folk theory of democracy is intuitive, rational, and widely accepted. It is also mistaken. Individuals do not generally choose to support a political party on the grounds that it best represents their interests, preferences, or values. Quite the opposite. Partisans will edit their list of reasons for holding particular attitudes in order to defend the position that is faithful to their party. As Lilliana Mason (2018: 20-1) writes, “More often than not, citizens do not choose which party to support based on policy opinion; they alter their policy opinion according to which party they support”. The political divide is thus only tangentially related to policy preferences.

This is the central finding of Mason’s book, *Uncivil Agreement*. She argues that citizens do not base their voting decisions primarily on the proximity of the policy positions of parties to the voters’ own positions. Rather, their decisions are based on *social identity*. A ‘social identity’ involves

a subjective sense of belonging to a group that is internalized to varying degrees, resulting in individual differences in identity strength, a desire to positively distinguish the group from others, and the development of ingroup bias. (Mason et al. 2015: 3)

Social identity theory is a powerful foundation to study partisanship and political behavior. On this model, the strength of a person’s partisanship can derive from a number of influences that have nothing to do with political issues; in particular, partisan strength seems to be rooted in social group memberships, social networks, and cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> These influences may increase the strength of partisanship without any corresponding increase in the extremity of issue positions (Mason 2018 and Iyengar et al. 2012).<sup>3</sup>

This captures the current state of American politics. On the one hand, Democrats and Republicans are increasingly polarized in the sense that they dislike each other more than ever, ascribe negative traits to members of the other side, and even claim that they would be upset if their children married someone from the other party (Iyengar et al. 2012). On the other hand, there has been almost no increase in the extremity of issue positions in the mass public (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; and Fiorina and Abrams 2008).<sup>4</sup> To borrow some terminology from Iyengar and his colleagues (2012), there has been an increase in “affective polarization” without a corresponding increase in “issue-based polarization”. Affective polarization is characterized by increased partisan strength, partisan bias, political activism, and anger, while issue-based polarization occurs when citizens move from moderate issue positions to

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<sup>2</sup> See Campbell et al. (1960) and Mutz (2002) for a discussion. I will discuss this issue in more depth in section 4.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Extremity’ refers to a person’s movement from moderate positions on issues to more extreme positions, stating that they are more strongly committed to their chosen positions and allowing for less uncertainty in their responses (Mason 2013: 142).

<sup>4</sup> Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) contest this claim. See Fiorina et al. (2008) for a reply.

more extreme ones. Although there is increased polarization on the issues at the level of political elites (e.g., members of Congress), there is little evidence that citizens increasingly disagree on the issues.<sup>5</sup> Rather, they simply dislike, even loathe, each other more.

All this suggests that partisans have grown increasingly distant and hostile toward each other even though their policy disagreements are not profound. In fact, Democrats and Republicans do not differ that much on matters of public policy. Rather, they continue to hold relatively inconsistent policy attitudes, and have done so for decades.<sup>6</sup> For example, Mason measured Americans' preferences on six major issues – immigration, the Affordable Care Act, abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and the relative importance of reducing the deficit or unemployment – and found that identifying as a “liberal” or “conservative” only explained a small part of their issue positions. It seems that people are polarized by labels such as “liberal” and “conservative” (and what they imagine their opponents to be like) more than they are by actual disagreements over issues like taxes, abortion, and immigration. As a result, Americans have become angrier at their political opponents *while not disagreeing with them on most issues*.

Why, then, do liberals and conservatives hate each other so much? If these feelings are not rooted in policy disagreements, what are they based on?

A variety of complicated factors might explain why partisans are increasingly affectively polarized. For example, the proliferation of partisan news outlets and high-choice media environment is frequently blamed for the current polarized environment (Lelkes et al. 2017). But this explanation might get things backwards: those who are most polarized are also more motivated to watch partisan news; thus, partisan news may not be the cause of affective polarization.<sup>7</sup> It is also common to blame the Internet and social media for echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarization; but the relationship between Internet access and affective polarization has also been contested. Levi Boxell and colleagues (2017) found that affective polarization has increased the most among those who use the Internet and social media the least.

According to Mason, the primary driver of increased political animosity is “partisan-ideological sorting”. Over the past few decades, political parties have grown more socially homogeneous and cultural identities have demographically coalesced. For example, White evangelicals are overwhelmingly Republican today, and African Americans overwhelmingly identify as Democrats. In general, political identities are now increasingly aligned with other social divisions in America, such as race and religion (Abramowitz 2013). As a result, social identities are no longer cutting across partisan identities; the odds

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<sup>5</sup> According to data from the Pew Research Center (2014), the partisan gap has increased on some issues over the past few decades. For example, when asked whether “government regulation of business usually does more harm than good”, the partisan gap has more than doubled from 1994 to 2004. Similarly, when asked whether “stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy”, the partisan gap has more than tripled during the same twenty-year period. Thus, I will not deny that there is some evidence of a partisan gap on the issues. However, I doubt that these differences reflect changes in genuine beliefs (as I’ll argue in section 3). Rather, these changes reflect *changes in the social returns to cheerleading*. This fits nicely with the recent empirical work showing there has been a large increase in affective polarization. As the strength of partisanship increases, people become more motivated to engage in cheerleading behavior. This also explains why the partisan “gap” is most pronounced during campaign seasons, since elections may make more salient the need to support one’s party (Iyengar et al. 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Converse (1964); Achen and Bartels (2016); Kinder and Kalmoe (2017); Mason (2018).

<sup>7</sup> See Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) and Prior (2013). In contrast, Levendusky (2013) finds that exposure to partisan news makes those with extreme attitudes even more extreme.

of encountering people from the other party have therefore decreased. According to Mason, this is at the root of affective polarization. She has shown that people are increasingly viewing members of the other party as an “other,” relying on stereotypes, and are more prone to prejudice. As political parties grow more socially homogenous, their members are quicker to anger and tend toward intolerance (Mason 2018; Iyengar et al. 2019; Ahler and Sood 2018).

Whatever the exact causes of polarization might be, it is widely acknowledged that the strengthening of partisan identities has little to do with the issues and almost everything to do with group loyalty and group identity. Once we identify with a particular party, we are highly motivated to protect and advance our group’s status. This is identity politics at its worst. “Liberals” and “conservatives” tend to hate each other but this hatred has almost nothing to do with their opinions on the issues.<sup>8</sup> They dislike the other team *simply because they are the other team*.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, we have an electorate that is increasingly divided and raring to fight, yet there is a lack of any substantive policy reasons to do so. Although Democrats and Republicans conceive of themselves as disagreeing over substantive issues like tax policy, health care, and government regulation, the political conflict in America is not really about these things. It is rather about team identification and winning for its own sake. I will return to this issue in section 4.

### 3. Political Expressivism

As the previous section illustrates, people often behave as though they disagree even when there isn’t much disagreement. This is because partisanship can affect our attitudes towards others without necessarily affecting our beliefs about the relevant issues.

Partisanship can also lead people to *say things* that create the appearance of disagreement. In particular, people may deliberately misreport their political beliefs as a way to express their attitudes. This is called “expressive responding”. It has also been described as “cheerleading” (Bullock et al. 2015).

Sometimes it is obvious that partisans are just cheerleading. Consider what Trump supporters say when asked to compare photos of his 2017 inauguration crowd and Obama’s in 2009. In a survey of almost 700 American adults, participants were shown a crowd picture from each inauguration and asked a very simple question: “Which photo has more people?” Although only one answer is clearly correct, Trump supporters were *seven times more likely* (compared to Clinton voters and nonvoters) to say that the half-empty photo of Trump’s inauguration had more people. Trump supporters with college degrees were the most likely to answer incorrectly: 26% of them gave the clearly wrong answer.<sup>10</sup>

Do these people really *believe* there are more people in the obviously half-empty photo? It would be wrong to interpret their responses in this way. Instead, some Trump supporters clearly decided to

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<sup>8</sup> As Mason (2018: ch.5) points out, Democrats who also label themselves as liberals are more likely to dislike Republicans, even when those same Democrats express relatively moderate or even conservative issue positions.

<sup>9</sup> This is reminiscent of the conflict between the Rattlers and the Eagles in Henri Tajfel’s (1981) landmark study of group identity. These boys desperately wanted to defeat each other for no reason other than that they were in different groups.

<sup>10</sup> On average, 15% of Trump supporters selected the half-empty inauguration photo (compared to 2% of Clinton voters and 3% of nonvoters). But this number almost doubles when we look just at Trump supporters with college degrees, which is a common proxy for political engagement. The explanation for this increase is that “Trump supporters with more engagement in politics were more likely to have understood the controversy about the inauguration crowds, [so] they were more likely to choose the wrong photo as a way of supporting Trump in the debate” (Schaffner and Luks 2018: 140).

*express their support* for Trump rather than to answer the question factually. As Elizabeth Anderson (2019) puts it, “it is a way of showing those smug liberal academics [who were conducting the survey] that Trump voters will stand their ground in repudiating insults toward their group.” In short, they were not making a *factual* claim; their answer was *expressive*.

Expressive responding also explains why approximately one in seven Americans says that Obama is “the antichrist”. Do these people really believe this? Maybe they do. But a far more likely scenario is that such reports reflect partisan cheerleading rather than genuine belief.<sup>11</sup>

How often do people misreport their beliefs?

Probably a lot. A seminal finding of new research in political behaviour is that what seems like factual disagreement is *often* just partisan cheerleading. For example, John Bullock and colleagues (2015) find that partisans tend to give more accurate (and less partisan) responses to politically charged questions when offered monetary incentives to do so. As a result, the gap between Democrats and Republicans in response to factual questions sharply decreases. More specifically, small payments for correct answers reduced partisan divergence by at least 60%. They reduce by 80-100% when participants are paid both for correct responses and a smaller amount for admitting they do not know the correct response.<sup>12</sup>

The dramatic effects of a small incentive for accuracy—or a smaller incentive to admit that one doesn’t know the answer—suggests that survey responses often reflect “the expressive value of making statements that portray one’s party in a favourable light” (Bullock et al. 2015: 521). As Gary Langer, former chief pollster for ABC News, aptly remarks: “some people who strongly oppose a person or proposition will take virtually any opportunity to express that antipathy...not to express their ‘belief,’ in its conventional meaning, but rather to throw verbal stones.”

This finding is supported by multiple independent studies. Markus Prior and colleagues (2015) asked members of the public about objective economic conditions, such as whether the level of employment has gotten better or worse. They found that supporters of the current president’s party tended to report more positive economic conditions than its opponents, but this tendency was significantly reduced when survey-takers were financially motivated to answer factual questions accurately.<sup>13</sup>

In another experiment, participants were provided with statistical data from a hypothetical study on gun control about concealed carry laws (Khanna and Sood 2018). The data supported either the view that banning guns will decrease crime or that it would increase crime. Participants were then asked whether cities with a ban were more likely to experience an increase or decrease in crime than cities without a ban. To measure expressive responding, a random set of participants was offered a small financial nudge of \$0.10 for the correct answer. To ensure that incentives did not affect how people processed the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/02/americans-obama-anti-christ-conspiracy-theories>.

<sup>12</sup> The size of the reduction depends on the size of the incentives. When incentives were at their largest—\$1 for each correct answer and \$0.33 for each “don’t know” response—partisan differences vanished entirely (Bullock et al. 2015: 550-55). When a partisan gap remains, there are at least two explanations. The people responsible for this gap may sincerely disagree about which response is correct. Alternatively, they may agree about the correct answer but nevertheless value partisan cheerleading more than receiving a small reward for answering accurately.

<sup>13</sup> In another study, Huber & Yair (2018) hypothesize that cheerleading may arise from the desire to send a partisan message. Thus, when partisans are given the opportunity to send that message before answering factual questions, they may be less likely to cheerlead. They find exactly this pattern: reduced partisan differences. This further suggests that cheerleading lies behind some partisan differences.

information about concealed carry laws, participants were not told about the incentive until after they had seen the statistical data (and could not return to it).

The results showed partisan cheerleading. Without incentives, respondents tended to give incorrect but congenial answers *even when they had correct but uncongenial information*. When provided incentives, however, participants were far less willing to report inaccurate but ideologically congenial interpretations of data.<sup>14</sup> This further indicates that survey responses are not always sincere. Partisans will knowingly give incorrect answers to support their “team” simply because they lack the incentive to answer truthfully.

If these survey responses reflected actual beliefs, then paying partisans to answer correctly should not affect their responses. Yet it does. The observed gaps between Democrats and Republicans are substantially reduced with relatively small payments. This suggests that partisans “do not hold starkly different beliefs about many important facts” (Bullock et al. 2015: 522). Further, it indicates that partisans have the capacity to acknowledge inconvenient truths and are willing to report them when motivated to do so. Without adequate incentives, however, the motivation to give an answer that supports one’s political party may outweigh the motivation to give an accurate response. This can be for one of two reasons: either survey-takers have accurate but uncongenial information and they prefer to give congenial but inaccurate answers, or they are ignorant on the issue and they offer a congenial answer as their best guess.<sup>15</sup> Either way, survey responses are not revealing misinformation or political disagreement. They are simply a measure of the desire to cheerlead.

This finding is incredibly significant. Public opinion polls are consistently showing that partisans are unable to agree on the facts. For example, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that the deficit rose during the Clinton administration; Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say that inflation rose under Reagan (Bartels 2002). Similar patterns exist when they are asked factual questions about healthcare, foreign policy, and social services, among other issues.<sup>16</sup> In general, when people are surveyed about factual issues, they are more likely to report having beliefs that are favourable to their existing beliefs and attachments than beliefs that are unfavourable. These patterns are ordinarily taken as evidence that partisanship affects factual beliefs about politics.<sup>17</sup> Democrats and Republicans are allegedly seeing “separate realities” (Kull et al. 2004).

An alternative explanation is that such patterns merely reflect a desire to *praise* one party or criticize another.<sup>18</sup> Instead of assuming that the public is misinformed, we should assume that the public is

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Khanna and Sood (2018) also found that incentivizing people to answer accurately tended to increase their bias against the credibility of the source of new (but uncongenial) information.

<sup>15</sup> See Bullock et al. (2015) and Prior et al. (2015) for evidence of the first explanation, and Luskin et al. (2013) for evidence of the second explanation. These are not the only reasons to misreport one’s belief. Partisans may also misreport just to be consistent within the survey, ensuring that latter answers do not contradict earlier ones (Khanna and Sood 2018). They may also provide false answer for strategic reasons such as influencing public opinion (Prior et al. 2015).

<sup>16</sup> See Nyhan and Reifler (2010), Jacobson (2010), and Jerit and Barabas (2012) for these issues, respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Those who take survey responses at face value include: Campbell et al. (1960), Kull et al. (2004), Jerit and Barabas (2012), Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon (2008), and Jacobson (2010).

<sup>18</sup> Krupenkin et al. (2019) propose a theory of “reverse cheerleading”. This occurs when partisans misreport or exaggerate their beliefs or attitudes to signal disapproval of the opposing party (rather than approval of their own party). For example, many Democrats reported significant increases in stress, depression, and anxiety in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. election; but these reports were unsubstantiated by changes in mental-health-related Internet searches. This suggests that for many Democrats, expressing mental distress after the election was a form of reverse partisan cheerleading.

misinforming us. In doing so, they mask shared, bipartisan beliefs about factual matters. The gulf in factual beliefs between members of different parties is thus largely illusory.

This is likely not just an American phenomenon. Nearly half of the British public still claim to believe that the U.K. sends £350m to the E.U. each week, despite persistent attempts to debunk this myth.<sup>19</sup> A new study by the Policy Institute at King's College London found that 42% of people who had heard the claim still believe it is true, whilst only 36% thought it was false and 22% were unsure. According to this study, conservative voters and Brexit voters are particularly susceptible to the misinformation, with 54% and 61% of each buying the claim. If we take these figures at face value, we are led to conclude that nearly half of the British public continues to be *misinformed* about the issue because they continue to *believe* that this claim is true. This is precisely how Professor Bobby Duffy, director of the policy institute that carried out this research, interprets these results. In an interview with *The Independent*, he said "These misperceptions raise important questions about the basis of our decision-making... the fact that different groups *see the same realities so differently* shows how divided we are."

Are these people seeing the same reality differently? As I've suggested, we should be wary of taking answers to factual questions with partisan implications at face value, since they are often contaminated by the motivation to root for one's team. People believe one answer, but they give a different answer to support their party. It represents nothing more than partisan bad-mouthing and the joy of cheerleading.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Voters Without Beliefs

So far I have discussed two reasons why the extent and depth of political disagreement is largely illusory. First, increasing levels of polarization tend to reflect our *attitudes* towards our political opponents, but not our policy preferences or issue positions. Second, the partisan gap revealed by survey data largely reflects team cheerleading and cheap talk, not genuinely held political beliefs.

I now want to briefly consider a third—and perhaps more radical—reason to think that a lot of disagreement in politics is illusory. The idea, briefly put, is that *voters do not have stable political beliefs*. Indeed, many of their political "beliefs" *may not be beliefs at all*. This is because nearly all politics is identity politics. Citizens vote primarily on the basis of partisan loyalties that are grounded in their identities, not sincere policy preferences. This differs from the explanations offered in the previous two sections. In section 2, I argued that people largely *agree* on the issues even though they dislike each other. In section 3, I argued that partisan cheerleading masks shared beliefs (i.e. section 3). Now, I am

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/research-analysis/the-publics-brexit-misperceptions>.

<sup>20</sup> The observation that individuals routinely lie about their preferences is not new. In his 1997 book *Private Truths, Public Lies*, Timur Kuran puts forward the idea of "preference falsification". This is the act of communicating a preference that differs from one's true preference. Preference falsification is closely related to expressive responding, but they are not the same thing. First, preference falsification typically occurs because perceived social pressures cause one to convey a preference that is more socially acceptable than one's actual preference. This is not the case when people engage in expressive responding. Second, preference falsification tends to exaggerate the level of agreement in politics, whereas expressive responding tends to exaggerate the level of political disagreement. Third, preference falsification tends to have negative psychological effects because it goes against the basic human need to be honest about oneself. As Kuran puts it, "one distinguishing characteristic of preference falsification is that it brings discomfort to the falsifier" (1997: 5). Expressive responding, in contrast, does not stifle one's ability to be honest about oneself and it can have positive psychological effects.

exploring the idea that partisans often lack stable beliefs about political issues. They are what Mason calls “ideologues without issues”.

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels defend this view, which they call ‘political realism’. They describe the view as follows:

voters choose political parties, first and foremost, in order to align themselves with the appropriate coalition of social groups. Most citizens support a party not because they have carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own, but rather because ‘their kind’ of person belongs to that party.<sup>21</sup>

The true psychological basis for voting behavior, they claim, is not individual preferences but group identity. People do not first identify the issues they care about and then align themselves with the political party that best reflects these preferences. Rather, people first identify themselves with a group and then vote according to this group allegiance.<sup>22</sup>

For realists, politics resembles sports and voters are like sports fans. Consider the Toronto Raptors (a basketball team) and their fans. People from Toronto, like myself, become Raptors fans because we are from Toronto. We do not first form strong opinions about basketball, then examine the teams on offer, and finally select a team based on how well that team realizes our pre-existing preferences or values.<sup>23</sup> Rather, we cheer for the Raptors because that team is connected to our demographic identity. On the realist view, political affiliation is psychologically equivalent to sports team loyalty (at least for most citizens). Just as one’s loyalty to a particular basketball team is not a reflection of one’s pre-existing ideological commitments about basketball, one’s political affiliation is also not a reflection of one’s political, moral, or otherwise ideological commitments. Rather, the typical voter becomes attached to a political “team” largely due to accidental historical circumstances.<sup>24</sup> They are simply born into it, just as children typically inherit the religious affiliations of their parents. This is substantiated by a vast amount of empirical work (see Greenstein 1965; Jennings and Niemi 1981; and Sears 1983).<sup>25</sup>

Admittedly, many citizens will describe themselves as “conservative” or “liberal”. But most people actually lack stable beliefs fitting these ideological self-descriptions.<sup>26</sup> They are not deeply committed to their proclaimed ideologies. As Jason Brennan (2019) puts it,

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<sup>21</sup> Achen and Bartels (2016: 307). See also Lenz (2012: 3), who writes: “I find surprisingly little evidence that voters judge politicians on their policy stances. They rarely shift their votes to politicians who agree with them—even when a policy issue has just become highly prominent, even when politicians take clear and distinct stances on the issue, and even when voters know these stances. Instead, I usually find the reverse: voters first decide they like a politician for other reasons, then adopt his or her policy views.”

<sup>22</sup> As discussed in section 2, this casts doubt on the “folk theory of democracy”.

<sup>23</sup> I borrow this type of example from Brennan (2019). Somin (2013: 78-9) also likens voting behavior to that of sports fans.

<sup>24</sup> Brennan (2017; 2019), Achen and Bartels (2016: 213-266), and Campbell et al. (1960) all defend this claim.

<sup>25</sup> This point calls for two important qualifications. First, many voters may initially get their political attitudes by enculturation, but this doesn’t preclude them from genuinely coming to believe some (or a lot) of the things their political party stands for. This may occur through a process of reflection on the attitudes they inherited from their community. Second, political realism is implausible as an account of political elites and people who devote their careers to politics. These people surely have genuine beliefs about the issues. My point, however, is that very few people are like this. The typical voter resembles the sports fan.

<sup>26</sup> This raises an interesting question about what it even means to be a Republican, a Democrat, or any kind of partisan. Campbell et al. (1960) defined partisanship as both a set of *beliefs* and *feelings* that culminate in a sense of “psychological attachment” to a political party.

Their beliefs, if we can even call them that, do not reflect real commitments about the good or just, or about how the world works. Instead, expressing political “beliefs” is largely equivalent to wearing sports team colors; they are a form of conspicuous display intended to show membership in what are, for that voter, socially advantageous groups. For them, advocating a policy is like wearing the Patriots’ blue and silver or waving the Steelers’ terrible towel ... Their commitment is no deeper than Patriots fans’ commitments to blue, red, and silver; if the parties were to change policy platforms, most of their “ideological” voters would claim they agree with the changes, and some would claim they believed such views all along.

To illustrate, Brennan asks us to consider how many Republicans switched their “views” on numerous economic issues when Trump was elected.<sup>27</sup> For example, they went from pro-free trade to protectionist almost overnight, without batting an eye. Even apparently key issues like free trade are, at bottom, just proclamations intended to demonstrate group membership.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, when Democrats say “I’m pro-regulation”, they are often not expressing a belief about appropriate responses to market failure; they are just expressing a commitment to seeing the Democrats win. The implicature is “Hurray, Democrats!” (Brennan 2019).

Indeed, people will support whatever policy or platform they *think* is backed by their party. Geoffrey Cohen’s (2013) work provides a striking example of this. He ran a study in which participants were told about two welfare programs: a harsh (extremely stingy) welfare program and a lavish (extremely generous) one. When Democrats were told that their ingroup party supported the harsh policy, they approved of it. When Democrats were told that their party supported the lavish policy, they approved of that instead. The same thing happened with Republican participants. All that mattered was which party was said to support the program; it made little difference what the actual content of the policy was.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the participants were unaware of this bias. When asked to justify their decision, the participants felt they were responding to the program’s objective merits and insisted that party considerations were irrelevant. Relatedly, studies have found that people are unable to justify political positions they claim to feel strongly about. For example, people who claim to believe deeply in cap and trade often have little idea about what these policies actually entail.<sup>30</sup>

What does all this mean for political disagreement?

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/11/17/16585982/psychology-memory-polls-trump>

<sup>28</sup> This doesn’t mean that the average citizen has no firm beliefs about basic moral issues. Most people probably have a wide range of genuine ethical commitments relevant to their day-to-day lives, such as the morality of keeping promises or stealing (Haidt 2012). The point, as Brennan (2019) says, is that these basic moral principles “radically underdetermine politics”, and that getting to any political policy from these basic moral principles will always require additional empirical claims and opinions about social scientific issues and matters of basic political knowledge.

<sup>29</sup> One might suggest that this is the result of the following heuristic: voters know that a particular party shares their general ideological outlook, so they use this as a way to determine what they would think about other issues. However, Lenz tested this hypothesis and found little support for it. He writes: “...a considerable share of the public exhibits a rather crude form of following. They did not just follow politicians on policy. They also appeared to follow politicians on basic predispositions such as ideology. Furthermore, they followed the views of politicians even when they were ignorant of those politicians’ broader policy outlooks, they followed even when they did not know much about politics in general, and they followed candidates as well as parties.” (2012: 211) The finding that people tend to follow even on basic ideology is particularly striking. Lenz writes: “When citizens who supported a Republican president but whose own ideologies were to the left learned that the Republican Party was on the ideological right, they didn’t shift against the Republican president—they shifted their own reported ideology to the right.” (2012: 18)

<sup>30</sup> See Brennan (2019) and Fernbach et al. (2013). A sizeable minority of citizens do express stable political beliefs. However, the political realist will claim that for most of these seemingly ideological citizens, this amounts to a post-hoc, superficial endorsement of their parties’ platform. Achen and Bartels describe this mental process as one that “feels like thinking”.

It means that when a typical Democrat or Republican expresses their “beliefs” about some political issue, we shouldn’t regard this as evidence that they genuinely disagree with each other. Rather, we should regard this behavior as symbolic, expressing loyalty to their political team and a desire to see that team win, without any deeper commitment to what that team stands for.<sup>31</sup> Thus, many people cannot quite be said to “believe” in their party’s ideology or platform; they only express commitment to it. Consequently, their political “disagreements” are superficial and inauthentic. What looks like the expression of a genuine belief (and thus what seems like evidence of political disagreement) is instead just a proclamation intended to display partisan affiliation.

To be clear, I am not saying that people never choose political parties on the basis of their policy preferences. My claim is only that in a vast range of cases (perhaps most cases), the folk theory of democracy does not fit the general picture of political reasoning that emerges from decades of empirical research across multiple disciplines. This literature suggests that an adequate account of partisan identity must give a central role to social identity, partisan allegiances, and identity-expressive discourse.

## 5. Implications

What are the implications of my argument? Suppose I am right that there is less disagreement in politics than we have been led to believe. What follows?

This account helps to explain why people seem to disagree about well-established facts, even when the evidence for them is unequivocal and easy to access. While this behavior might seem illogical, people are simply making claims about factual issues to signal their allegiance to a particular ideological community.

This idea also helps us understand why debates often go so poorly. According to an optimistic view, political disagreement is a good thing because it allows citizens to encounter diverse perspectives, consider the value of alternative points of view, and evaluate their opinions in light of counterarguments. For these reasons, theorists from Aristotle to Mill, Dewey, and Arendt extolled the benefits of deliberation and disagreement in politics.<sup>32</sup> Why, then, do real life political disagreements swiftly devolve into heated partisan rancor and absolute denouncement? It is because these disputes are not generally treated as opportunities to exchange reasons or make arguments. Rather, they are opportunities for cheerleading and party bad-mouthing. Recall the analogy with sports. When fans cheer for their team, this is not an exercise in rational deliberation. They are just expressing loyalty to their team. If political disagreement is similarly tribal, then we should view partisan claims about global warming, health care, and the like in a similar light. They are not conclusions articulated on the basis of

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<sup>31</sup> Brennan (2016: 32) notes that: “In the 2000 U.S. presidential election, significantly less than half of all Americans knew that Gore was more supportive of abortion rights, more supportive of welfare programs, favored a higher degree of aid for blacks, or was more supportive of environmental regulation than Bush.” Similarly, Gabriel Lenz (2012: 226) reports that, “across [more than 15] different policy issues examined... I typically find that only about 50% of voters could correctly place the major candidates or parties to the right of left of each other.”

<sup>32</sup> As J. S. Mill writes, deliberating in public about political issues is good for a democracy because it affords citizens “the opportunity of exchanging error for truth” and the chance of acquiring a “livelier impression of truth” (1859: 21). For Mill, deliberation is a vital mechanism through which individuals improve and develop their political ideas, without which their “mental development is cramped” (ibid: 39).

reasons, but rather proclamations akin to “Yay, team!” and “Boo, the other guys!” As such, political disputes are not aimed at rational resolutions. And when partisans *do* give reasons or arguments for their views, these are most likely the product of post-hoc reasoning (Haidt 2012).

A lot of empirical evidence indicates that political attitudes and beliefs are not the products of careful reasoning. It might also be true that *they’re not supposed to be*.<sup>33</sup> When people cheer for the Raptors or Golden State Warriors, this is not supposed to be an exercise in rational deliberation. It would be misguided to complain that a Raptor’s fan’s enthusiasm for his team does not reflect a sober appraisal of the team’s recent performance. That would miss the point. If politics is also about expressing team loyalty, then complaining that someone’s views on global warming are not grounded in the facts may also be off the mark. Their views on these issues are not articulated conclusions but expressive proclamations.

In reply, one might argue that even if politics *isn’t* typically an exercise in rational deliberation, *it ought to be*. We should treat political disagreements as an opportunity to exchange reasons, consider the value of alternative perspectives, and evaluate our opinions in light of counterarguments. So even if politics does resemble sports, it shouldn’t. We can therefore criticize individual citizens for failing to meet this standard—or so the objection goes.

However, political views may share another common property with views about sports teams—*they don’t really matter*. As Paul Bloom (2016: 237) observes,

If I have the wrong theory of how to make scrambled eggs, they will come out too dry; if I have the wrong everyday morality, I will hurt those I love. But suppose I think that the leader of the opposing party has sex with pigs, or has thoroughly botched the arms deal with Iran. Unless I’m a member of a tiny powerful community, my beliefs have no effect on the world. This is certainly true as well for my views about the flat tax, global warming, and evolution.

While this view is not uncontroversial, it has many defenders. The idea is that voters are ‘rationally ignorant’ (Somin 2013 and Brennan 2019). Their failure to gather evidence, attend to data, and consider counterarguments in the political domain does not reflect stupidity, laziness, or irrationality. It reflects how many of us make sense of politics: we care more about team loyalty than the truth because, for us, politics *is not really about truth* (Bloom 2016: 237). It also explains why people are unaware of even the most basic facts about the issues, policies, and politicians that they express opinions about.

This would also explain why it is often so difficult to correct false beliefs and change the minds of others. If our political claims are expressions of cheerleading, then providing partisans with correct information may do little to change their attitudes or beliefs (Bullock and Lenz 2019). When our views are not based on the facts or aiming at truth, we should not expect them to be rationally revisable in light of the evidence or reasoned argumentation.<sup>34</sup> This would also explain why disagreements often seem irresolvable: we cannot resolve issues when there is no genuine disagreement. Relatedly, it would explain why people remain so confident in their views. It might seem surprising that people are highly confident in their views despite widespread political disagreement, but their confidence is not very surprising once we realize that these “disagreements” are just a reflection of identity-expressive discourse.

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<sup>33</sup> Bloom (2016: 236) makes this argument.

<sup>34</sup> I am not saying that arguments and evidence never resolve political disagreements; only that they are typically ineffective.

The tendency to signal allegiance by making claims about factual issues would also explain why people often seem to hold blatantly contradictory beliefs. In “Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics”, Elizabeth Anderson points out that the political right-wing tend to make the following claims about Obama: that he was not born in the U.S., that he is a Muslim founder of ISIS, *and* a former crack-addicted gay prostitute, *and* a follower of America-hating Christian preacher Jeremiah Wright, *and* a Communist, and yet *also* hated for bailing out the Wall Street banks. There is no attempt to reconcile these contradictory claims, either with each other or with the evidence. This is because these claims are not to be interpreted as empirical assertions. According to Anderson, they function as shibboleths. These phrases are a way to express that Obama is not “one of us” or a “real” American.

As you can see, the idea that political disagreements are often superficial has a lot of explanatory power. When we realize that political disagreement is largely illusory and merely the reflection of identity-expressive discourse, we can make a lot more sense of our currently political context.

This hypothesis would also explain the rise of echo chambers. One of the worries about echo chambers is that they do not give people a chance to deliberate about political issues, insulating them from opposing perspectives and feeding them only confirmatory evidence. But if deliberation isn’t really what we want to do, then echo chambers are the rational response to cheerleading. As partisan identities strengthen and we become increasingly motivated to protect and advance our group’s status, we will seek out more opportunities to engage in cheerleading behavior.

Relatedly, our tendency to engage in identity-expressive discourse would also explain why people do not often read the news posts they share. Just as the primary function of claims about factual issues is to signal allegiance, the primary function of the communicative act of news-post sharing may also be expressive (Lynch 2019).

The use of political assertions to express one’s allegiance sheds light on another well-known phenomenon, namely, why people’s views about different and seemingly unrelated political issues tend to cluster together. As Michael Huemer (2016: 458) observes, “you can often predict someone’s belief about one issue on the basis of his opinion about some other completely unrelated issue. For example, people who support gun control are much more likely to support welfare programs and abortion rights.” When Democrats and Republicans were asked about seven major political issues (health care, illegal immigration, climate change, ISIS, abortion, gun control, and the economy), the Pew Research Center found that about 40% of people on both sides agreed with their party on *all seven issues*, and a further 30% agreed with their party on at least five out of seven (Doherty et al. 2016). This is striking because these issues are logically independent. However, we can understand why political disagreements break down along basic party lines once we realize that partisans tend to adopt (or promote) the positions of the parties they vote for.

Voters also tend to exhibit a very poor understanding of the issues they are willing to express opinions about. They know almost nothing about topics like: whether the U.S. should impose unilateral sanctions on Iran; whether the U.S. should raise the retirement age for social security; whether the U.S. should transition to a single-payer healthcare system; whether the U.S. should institute a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions; whether the U.S. should institute a national flat tax; and whether the U.S. should institute merit-based pay for teachers. And yet on all these issues voters tend to express strong opinions (Fernbach et al. 2013). The explanation, presumably, is that these are highly partisan issues and voters

will align themselves with the views that are supported by their parties, rather than choosing their parties on the basis of these issues.

## 6. Additional Upshots

If my argument is correct, it has several additional upshots.

First, it suggests that standard survey research methods are flawed.<sup>35</sup> The bulk of survey research assumes that respondents provide truthful answers when asked questions. If this assumption were correct, then conventional survey methods would provide evidence of real and deeply held differences in assessments of political facts. But as the literature on expressive responding makes clear, these partisan gaps are often illusory. The appearance of factual disagreement in politics is, to some extent, an artifact of survey measurement. Admittedly, we do not know the precise extent to which voter misinformation and factual “disagreement” is merely rooted in expressive responding. Nevertheless, the research I have surveyed strongly indicates that many alleged disagreements are not real disagreements, and that what seems like a misinformed public is not in fact so.<sup>36</sup>

Second, the theory of “motivated reasoning”, which is the most common explanation for political misinformation and partisan disagreement, is often incorrect. This theory says that people tend to seek out facts that fit with their existing beliefs and identities, as well as ignore evidence that conflicts with them (Taber and Lodge 2006). As a result, people who come across the same information will walk away with different beliefs about what the evidence supports, since partisanship leads us to process factual information in biased ways. This is by far the commonest explanation for why voters are misinformed and increasingly polarized. However, the theory of motivated reasoning presumes that the misinformation documented by survey researchers is an accurate reflection of what individuals believe. I have thrown this assumption into doubt. When Trump voters point to a half-empty inaugural photo and say it has more people than an obviously full photo, this is not the result of a cognitive processing error. Motivated reasoning has not led them to believe that which flies in the face of unambiguous photographic evidence. Yet this is precisely the diagnosis offered by many commentators. In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, for example, Olga Khazan (2017) argues that these Trump supporters are attempting “to meld new information into their existing beliefs” in order to “preserve their ideological identities.” This would be an example of politically motivated reasoning; but this is clearly *not* what is going on when Trump supporters claim that a half-empty photo is full of people. What looks like motivated reasoning is just political cheerleading.

Anderson suggests that we model these factual claims with partisan implications in terms of insults and cheering. When one person utters “Yo Momma...” to another, nobody thinks the speaker is attempting to cast the other’s mother in disrepute by way of an empirical claim about her.<sup>37</sup> It is just an attempt to

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<sup>35</sup> Bullock et al. (2015), Prior et al. (2015), and Kuran (1995) make this point.

<sup>36</sup> A much deeper problem, which I will not discuss, is that voters’ preferences may be unknowable. To learn about preferences, we ask survey questions. But the way the questions are framed changes the way people answer them. Achens and Bartels (2016: 31) cite experimental evidence from the 1970s in which about half of the participants would “not allow” a communist to give a speech, but only about one-fourth said they would “forbid” him from doing so.” Before the 1991 Gulf War, almost two-thirds of Americans were willing to “use military force,” but fewer than half were willing to “engage in combat,” and fewer than 30% were willing to “go to war.”

<sup>37</sup> I take this wonderful example from Anderson’s (2019) paper, “Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics”.

put down one's interlocutor. A variety of political claims likely function similarly. For example, a lot of populist rhetoric should be regarded as forms of symbolic positioning rather than empirical or factual claims. Anderson (2019) writes:

“Build the wall” is not to be understood as a practical way to stop illegal immigration (the coasts cannot be walled; people are smuggled in trucks; walls do not stop the millions of undocumented immigrants who entered the U.S. legally and overstayed their visas). It is an affirmation of who the (real) people are and recognition of who they must be protected from. “Lock her up!” is not based on a legal argument, but a delegitimizing move. “Voter fraud” is not an empirically determined problem, but a grievance against fellow citizens whom populists think do not deserve to vote.

These claims are a vehicle of symbolic expression in the context of a rivalry between competing identity groups. We use them to express which side we are on, who is the enemy, and who is superior to whom.

This also explains why political “misperceptions” are the most common among the most political engaged. It is commonly assumed that the most strongly partisan are also the most likely to be biased and engage in motivated reasoning. This may be true, but this explanation ignores the fact that the most strongly partisan are also the most likely to engage in cheerleading and other forms of expressive responding. Thus, the theory of motivated reasoning may often misdiagnose partisan cheerleading as biased cognitive processing.

This leads me to another point. It is commonly said that many political disagreements are “deep disagreements” (de Ridder 2019; Kappel 2018; Lynch 2010). A deep disagreement occurs when two (or more) people not only disagree about the facts, but also disagree about how best to form beliefs about those facts—*viz.*, about how best to gather and assess evidence in proper ways. For example, Eliot and Irena may disagree about the causes and consequences of climate change because they have different underlying commitments about what counts as good evidence, how to weigh different sources of evidence, who the experts are, and so forth. When the disputing parties have fundamentally different epistemic commitments, it will be difficult (if not impossible) to reach a rational resolution.<sup>38</sup>

According to Klemens Kappel (2018), *most* societal disagreements are deep disagreements. This allegedly explains why political disagreements are so intractable. However, I have argued that many cases of political disagreement are not genuine disagreements at all; thus, they cannot be deep disagreements. While I do not dispute the claim that political disagreements may sometimes be “deep”, many of them are not. Instead of thinking of these as *deep* disagreements, we should instead think they are relatively *shallow*. This would also explain why these disputes are not rationally resolvable. As I argued above, political disputes are often not aimed at rational resolutions; they are just opportunities to root for one's team. Seeking a rational resolution may thus be beside the point.

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<sup>38</sup> Another common explanation for intractable political disagreement is that people have divergent fundamental principles and values. In other words, disagreements about the merits of political parties, politicians, or policies are the consequences of deeper disagreements about moral issues (see Ancell 2017 for a detailed discussion). For example, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson open their book *Democracy and Disagreement* by announcing that, “Of the challenges facing American democracy today, none is more formidable than the problem of moral disagreement. Neither the theory nor the practice of democratic politics has so far found an adequate way to cope with conflicts about fundamental values.” (1996: 1) Similarly, in *Democracy and Moral Conflict*, Robert Talisse writes, “We are divided over our most fundamental moral commitments. We disagree about moral basics, and accordingly disagree about the precise shape that our politics should take.” (2001: 3) If my hypothesis is right, this explanation gets things backwards: people's beliefs about the deeper moral issues are consequences, not causes, of their beliefs about the merits of politicians, parties, and policies (insofar as they have beliefs on these issues at all).

A final upshot concerns the theory of public reason liberalism. According to public reason liberals, people have a diverse range of moral, religious, and political views. Consequently, citizens deeply dispute the nature of the good, what is just or unjust, and also which institutions, policies, and practices best realize their normative goals. This gives rise to a well-known normative problem in political theory: how can a government impose uniform moral and political rules upon all citizens without treating them as unfree and unequal?

Public reason liberals claim that we must be able to base a justification for coercive moral and political rules on the underlying beliefs of reasonable citizens. According to Jason Brennan (2019), however, this central idea of public reason liberalism rests on a mistake. If ‘political realism’ (discussed in section 4) is correct, then citizens actually have few real political beliefs. But if they lack the right kind of political beliefs, there is no sense in which policies or rules can be justified in light of them. As Brennan puts it,

they [citizens] ‘wear’ their political beliefs the way they wear sports colors, but they are not genuinely committed to such beliefs. So, there is nothing there upon which to base public justification.

This is both good and bad news for the public reason theorist. On the one hand, public reason liberals say that we should not force coercive policies on citizens; policies must be publicly justified on the basis of reasons that all reasonable citizens could accept. This assumes that citizens can themselves recognize and accept moral and political rules in light of their own beliefs. But if people do not actually have the requisite beliefs, values, or commitments, then we cannot justify moral or political norms on that basis. This is bad news. On the other hand, the normative problem is less of a problem if citizens are not actually expressing *beliefs* about justice or politics, but rather are just expressing their commitment to seeing their political team win (without any deeper commitment to what that team stands for). Without any underlying ideological commitments, governments cannot be accused of imposing moral and political rules in the face of reasonable opposition. There is no genuine opposition when objections to these policies have nothing to do with the actual issues and everything to do with preventing a loss for its own sake. Thus, we needn’t worry about running roughshod over the (alleged) reasonable moral and political disagreements of citizens, since there is no disagreement.

## **7. The Good News and the Bad News**

These conclusions have a variety of positive upshots.

Here’s one: the extent to which voters are misinformed is greatly overstated. Although a large number of people will *say* that Obama is the antichrist, that he founded ISIS, and so forth, many of these people do not genuinely *believe* these things. Our worries about voter incompetence have been driven not by *voter misperceptions* but rather by our *misperceptions about voters*. I find this incredibly reassuring. One’s willingness to occasionally disregard factual information is far less pernicious than being misinformed, since genuinely believing incorrect information would preclude doubt and obstruct the attainment of truth.

I do not deny that voters are often *ignorant*.<sup>39</sup> One of the best-established findings of decades of research in political theory is the extent to which ordinary citizens are ignorant of politics.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the studies on expressive responding by Bullock and his colleagues reveal that people will often admit their ignorance on many factual political questions. But this, too, is reassuring. When partisans are motivated to give accurate responses, they display the capacity to acknowledge their own ignorance.<sup>41</sup> The problem is that people are unwilling to admit their lack of knowledge under ordinary survey conditions.

In addition to overstating the actual amount of factual disagreement in politics (and the extent to which voters are misinformed), survey responses also tend to exaggerate the degree to which partisanship biases or distorts our perception of the facts. As mentioned earlier, the theory of “motivated reasoning” assumes that the misinformation documented by survey researchers is an accurate reflection of what voters truly believe. But this is an inadequate diagnosis in many cases. It turns out that citizens have the capacity to perceive reality in a less partisan way than many have claimed. This may be good news for deliberative democracy. If there were genuine disagreement over basic factual issues, then the possibility of democratic deliberation and compromise would be incredibly slim.<sup>42</sup>

In short, people are neither as dumb nor as biased as is commonly assumed. What appears to be stupidity or irrationality is often just expressive responding and cheerleading.<sup>43</sup>

Now for the bad news.

An unfortunate consequence of identity-based polarization is that we cannot resolve partisan conflict by reasoned debate or educating people about the issues. If Mason is right that Democrats and Republicans are affectively polarized despite their agreement on many issues, then attempting to resolve political disagreement by closing partisan gaps on policy issues is misguided. This is a problem for deliberative democracy. If our disagreements are not based on genuine reasons or arguments, then we cannot engage with each other’s views. This is inconsistent with the view that citizens should deliberate with each other via rigorous, careful, and open-minded discussion of the issues.

A larger worry looms: the facts don’t seem to matter. Thus, the typical voter’s political “views” have little intellectual value. As Somin (2013), Achen and Bartels (2016), Mason (2018), Anderson (2019), Brennan (2019), and many others have argued, our political identities are only loosely based on our own interests and issue positions. Citizens do not choose to support a policy on the basis of their own preferences; they instead alter their “reasons” to support a party according to whichever party they support. This means that our political views are not the outputs of a rational process, for they do not rest on evidence or reasons. We are happy to cheerlead and protect our group’s status as if we had the facts, but the facts play no substantive role in shaping our political attitudes or beliefs.

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<sup>39</sup> It is common to distinguish ignorance (a lack of information) from misinformation (false or inaccurate information.). When the public is misinformed, then tend to confidently hold false beliefs. As a result, misinformation is often a greater obstacle to educating people with correct facts.

<sup>40</sup> For surveys, see Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and Somin (2013).

<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, there may still be a failure of self-knowledge, since many partisans claim that they “almost never” agree with the other party’s position (Doherty et al. 2016). Thus, we may often *think* that we disagree even when we are not.

<sup>42</sup> However, it is not clear what hope there is for deliberative democracy if ‘political realism’ is true and people rarely have genuine political beliefs.

<sup>43</sup> Another benefit of superficial political disagreement is that we do not court skepticism. According to a growing number of philosophers, the fact of widespread disagreement provides us with good grounds to skepticism. For example, Sandy Goldberg (2013) argues that disagreements in domains like philosophy (and presumably politics) where disagreement are *systematic* make it unreasonable to think that there is any knowledge, or even justified belief.

It also follows that we're not really interested in genuinely engaging with the other side. When policy debates are just battles between "us" vs. "them", we no longer select policies based on their actual content and we lose all motivation to reach a compromise. Consider what happened with the Affordable Care Act. When constructing the Act, Democrats incorporated Republican ideas in hopes of winning bipartisan support, but they received none. For Republicans, it wasn't about policy. It was about denying their opponents a win and giving themselves a campaign issue. A compromise would have been seen as an unnecessary concession to "the enemy".

This has implications for policy-making. If the political divide cannot be bridged by creative new policies that incorporate ideas from both the left and right, there is little possibility for bipartisan lawmaking. Policy becomes about one side getting its agenda through and scoring a win. Instead of constructing bipartisan policies, then, it seems the only way to reduce partisan antipathy is by reducing the strength or alignment of political identities.

Partisan cheerleading also corrupts public discourse. When empirical language is appropriated to make expressive claims, it generates confusion about what people are actually saying. As Anderson (2019) puts it, "populist political discourse hijacks empirical discourse—the grammar of assertion—for expressive purposes, overtaking spaces normally reserved for empirical policy discussion." This harms public discourse by infecting the public domain with misleading information, thereby corrupting human knowledge.

This, too, has implications for policy. When we mistakenly interpret this discourse literally, we tend to reply with empirical arguments. For instance, if liberal democrats interpret vehement denials of anthropogenic climate change as out of touch with reality, they will criticize their opponents for not engaging with the evidence. This may further antagonize the other side because they will interpret liberals as calling them stupid.

I'll end this section by mentioning a strange upshot of my argument. I have argued that politics is characterized by less factual disagreement than we thought. However, this diagnosis may explain away genuine *agreement* just as easily as it explains away genuine disagreement.<sup>44</sup> For example, two people who claim to be pro-regulation may not actually have any settled beliefs on the matter; they may be making a factual claim to express partisan support. In general, whenever two people seem to agree on some political issue, they may simply be expressing similar pro-attitudes without any corresponding beliefs on the matter. Thus, my central claim that there are fewer political disagreements than we thought does not imply that there is more agreement in politics. We now have to be unsure about whether people who seem to agree are actually agreeing or just cheering for the same side.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

I have no solutions to these problems.<sup>45</sup> The aim of this paper is not to recommend solutions but rather to change how we look at the problem of political disagreement. In our polarized climate, it is easy (and

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<sup>44</sup> Ballantyne (2016: 759) makes a similar point in the context of verbal disputes in philosophy.

<sup>45</sup> Several solutions have been proposed. For example, correcting misperceptions about party supporters tends to reduce animus toward the other side (Ahler & Sood 2018). Mason (2018) suggests that partisan news media should be compelled to present opposing partisans in more sympathetic ways. We may also try to shift the salience of partisan identities. Democrats and Republicans normally perceive each other as members of a disliked partisan out-group. But they are also members of a

common) to conclude that politics is rife with disagreement, including factual disagreement. This is allegedly supported by a wealth of survey data. I have argued, however, that many political disagreements are not really disagreements. What appears to be disagreement is mere cheap talk and partisan cheerleading.

I have also explored the implications of this idea. As we've seen, the very factors that explain why political disagreement is superficial (i.e. partisan cheerleading) also explain why debates often go so poorly, why it is difficult to correct false beliefs, and why people seem to hold blatantly contradictory views. The expressive nature of political engagement also creates problems for standard survey research, the theory of motivated reasoning, and the view that political disagreements are "deep disagreements". The news is not all bad, though. As I've argued, political surveys tend to overstate the level of political misinformation, motivated reasoning is not distorting our perceptions of reality as often as scholars have claimed, and there may be less disagreement over the facts than we thought. Ultimately, I hope to have highlighted the importance of thinking carefully about the concept of "disagreement" for future research in politics.

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common group: Americans. By shifting the salience of partisan identities, they move from out-group members to in-group ones, and hence group-based partisan animus might fade (Levendusky 2018). In general, it seems the only way to reduce partisan antipathy is by reducing the strength or alignment of political identities. Talisse (2019) suggests that we should be less politically engaged, since talking to each other about politics tends to activate our political identities. The better thing to do is engage in non-political activities with members of the opposing side.

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