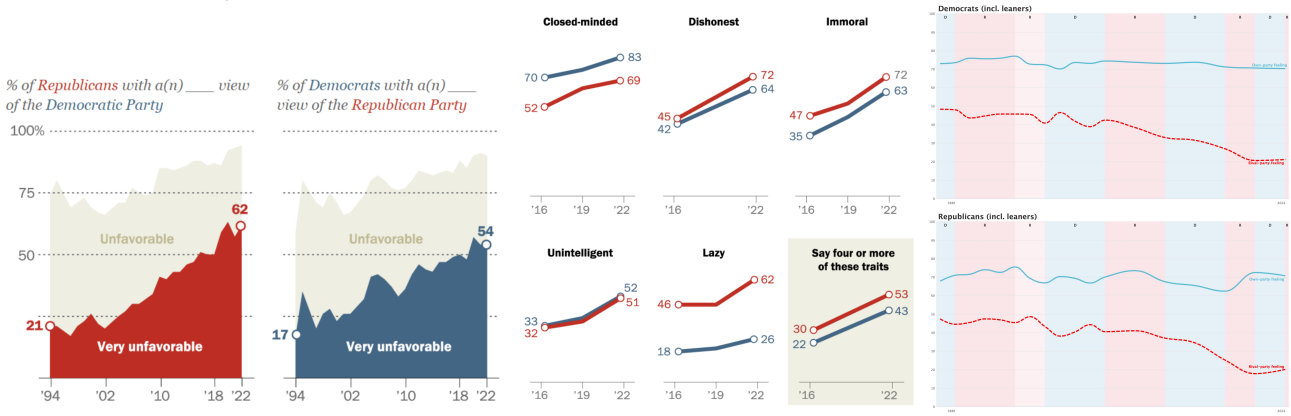
Politics and Rationality

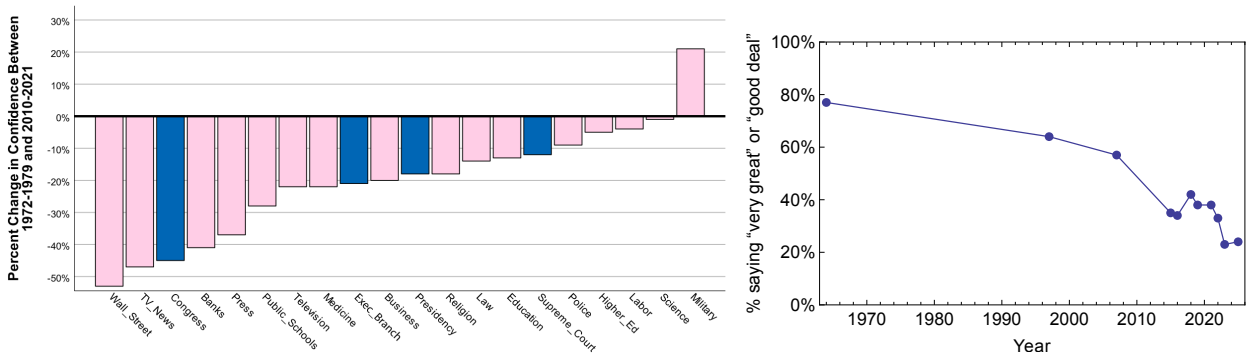
Kevin Dorst 24.805, Fall 2025

I. Our Political Pathologies

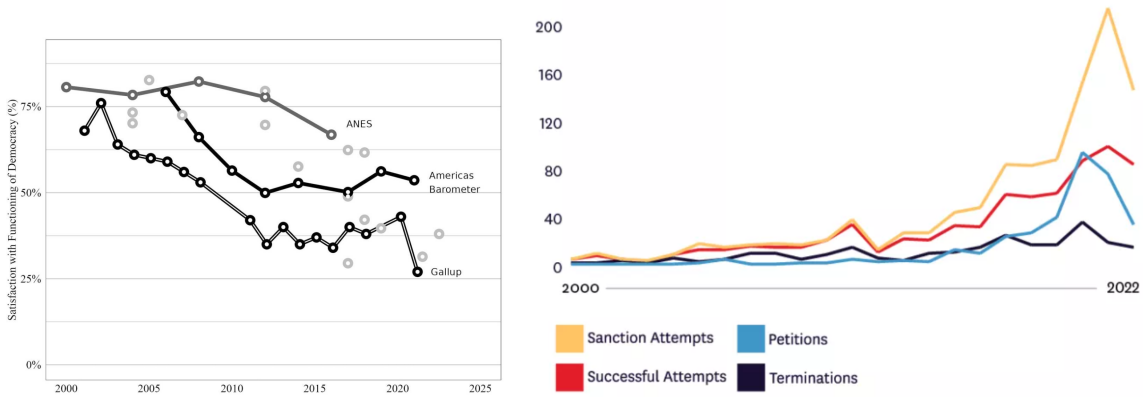
The rise of enmity:



The fall of trust:



The rise of intolerance:



Reasonable Convergence: When evidence is plentiful, if people take reasonable steps to figure out the truth, they'll usually succeed.

These trends are driven by economic and social forces: media fragmentation, the attention economy, social and partisan sorting, etc. But:

Claim: Belief in Reasonable Convergence exacerbates each of the trends.

Theoretical case:

- *Enmity*: if should know better, then blameworthy
- *Trust*: can't be (sufficiently) sensitive to evidence, for otherwise wouldn't act and believe as they do.
- *Intolerance*: if not sensitive to evidence, then nothing useful to contribute to the discussion.

And others likely to be bamboozled.

Empirical case:

- 'Objectivity illusion' positively correlated with affective polarization.
- 'Intellectual humility' negatively correlated with affective polarization, and also with willingness to engage.

II. Floweree: when it's okay to psychologize our opponents

Cases:

Xenophobia: You are having lunch with an old friend, and the topic turns to politics. To your dismay, you discover your friend is a staunch supporter of a politician you despise. As you discuss, your friend lists the reasons she supports this politician: economic policies, education policies, energy policies. You bring up reasons that you consider might outweigh her support: foreign policies, immigration policies, care for civil rights. She brushes this off. 'That's just talk,' she says,'he doesn?t mean that anyway.' As the conversation continues, you grow suspicious. Could it be that, despite her sincere assertions, she actually supports the politician because she is actually racist and xenophobic?

Hormonal: Sarah tells her employee, Brad, that his work is subpar, and his performance must improve in several specific ways if he is to continue as her employee. Brad rejects this assessment and psychologizes Sarah as follows: he judges that she doesn?t really think his work is subpar, but is instead just lashing out at him because she is 'hormonal' and 'too emotional'.

Hungry: You disagree with your partner over where to go to dinner. She becomes more and more adamant that you should go to a place nearly an hour outside of town. You don't like that place, and don't want to wait over an hour to eat. As the disagreement grows, you realize that she is probably suffering from dangerously low blood sugar. From your long history with her, you know that she doesn't realize that her blood sugar is low, and you suspect that her preferences and reactions would be different if her blood sugar were normal. You suggest that perhaps she should eat a bite of a granola bar (you keep them on hand, knowing that she has this condition). She is furious with you for disregarding her preferences.

Bad Faith: The agent avows a reason for her action or attitude, although this reason is not what is actually motivating her, and the agent would disavow an accurate account of her motivation.

Dismissive Psychologizing: dismissing the rational appeals of another person on the grounds that they are not the other person?s genuine reasons [(?)= they are in Bad Faith).

Contrast with Empathetic Imagination

Distinguish sincere from insincere Bad Faith; focus on former.

Q: What does this say about most 'high-level' beliefs, where we (know that we) can't fully articulate our reasons? Does attributing

that you do most of the chores
that immigrants commit fewer crimes.
that racism plays a big role in society.
that God exists

Pressure to psychologize: we are limited agents.
Pressure against psychologizing: respect for rational agency.

Claims:

- If interlocutor is sincere, should default to avoiding psychologizing due to the risks of wronging them.
- If [and only if?] you *know* they are in Bad Faith, then psychologizing is permissible [other things equal?].

Excusable if you have good evidence that in Bad Faith, even don't know.

Worries:

W1 What if they are in Bad Faith, but are nevertheless rational and have good reasons—they just aren't the reasons they think they have. Is it really okay to psychologize?

Knowing *that* Bad Faith vs. knowing what real reasons are.

W2 If (we have reason to believe) Reasonable Convergence is true, then don't we have sufficient evidence that they *are* in Bad Faith?

W3 She focuses on individual interlocutors, and seems okay with psychologizing *groups* (eg in discussion of elite-group ignorance).
How to avoid pragmatic inconsistency? 'Most Republicans are in Bad Faith', while believing each Republican you meet isn't seems... questionable.

'Does the Motivated Ignorance Defeater put you in a position to know that the individual before you is self-deceived with respect to her motivations?'
Or: expecting 80% of them are, but having less than an average credence of 80% in each of the people you meet.

III. Foregoing blame

Dr. Delila prescribes penicillin; I have a bad reaction; can I blame her?

Suppose know she has permissible goals.

Epistemic rationality vs. full epistemic justification.

Epistemic Justification Excuses: In normal cases,[1] if your action was fully epistemically justified, then it is not apt for blame or resentment.

[1] Suppose no special zetetic obligations or assurances made.

It seems like: if I know or lend significant credence to the possibility that Delila was epistemically rational, then I shouldn't resent or blame her.

Now suppose we believe that we're Reasonably Polarized. Then it seems the same is true of MAGA Max.[2]

[2] Or Marxist Max

→ If (we should think) he's fully justified in thinking that Trump is doing good and/or that *we* are acting in bad faith, then even if we know he's wrong, we shouldn't blame him for his beliefs and actions.

Q: Objections? Worries?

Is that verdict desirable in politics? Often, I think yes.
But what about (eg) RFK?

Or your favorite politician to blame

- Necessary vs. apt anger.
- Could have special reason to think irrational.

But imagine not.

- Could have violated special zetetic duties, eg promises to look at evidence impartially.

But that can't *guarantee* truth; so imagine a case where not so.

- *Proposal:* assurances as moral gambles.
  Doctor case.
  Becoming a public figure is making assurances.

IV. Saving Persuasion

In politics, when do we have a duty to persuade?

Start with a clear case.
Community garden discussion. Max proposes his family get it all.

- If (you should think) he's unreasonable, fine to ignore or stonewall.
- If (you should think) he's reasonable, duty to (try to) persuade.

If you can—political strategy might preclude.

Again, circumstances might preclude. Moral traces if so.

Claim: Likewise in politics.

If people are reasonable, should engage with; if not, needn't.
Key point: if we are RP'd, we can be RP'd *about whether we are RP'd*

Even if we are all reasonable, we might well reasonably be confident that the other side isn't.

- Suppose facing someone who is (not violent but) confrontational and dismissive, who doesn't listen to you and tries to work around you.
- If convinced that they are unreasonable, can permissibly do likewise.
- But if convinced that they are reasonable—they reasonably think *you* are the unreasonable one—then owe it to them to engage.

Although circumstances may override

Can political philosophy outsource to 'reasonable' people?

Contractualist theories. Eg Rawls on public reason; Scanlon on reasonable rejection.

Appeal to 'reasonable' people as a thicker notion than mere epistemic rationality.
→ That's fine—add that have morally permissible goals, are committed to engaging in good faith to come up with a fair joint scheme of cooperation, that don't give differential weight to their burdens than ours, etc.

Q: What do they assume about their epistemic states?

Dilemma: either (1) not substantively tamed, or (2) not justified.

1) If assume only that epistemically rational, then because can be RP'd about whether we are RP'd, don't get conclusion that they will agree on any scheme at all—we might well be convinced that the others aren't engaging in good faith.
   After all: *our actual politics* might be this case.

Not substantive.

2) If 'reasonable' includes that we have converged on certain truths, then we are not justified in excluding the opinions of 'unreasonable' people—and they *are* justified in resisting our exclusion.

Not justified.