

"Too Dumb to Know You're Dumb" -- The Dunning-Kruger Effect

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America Never Learns, Now We Know Why

In the past, some prominent psychologists have explained President Donald Trump's unwavering support by alluding to a well-established psychological phenomenon known as the "Dunning-Kruger effect." The effect is a type of cognitive bias, where people with little expertise or ability assume they have superior expertise or ability. This overestimation occurs as a result of the fact that they don't have enough knowledge to know they don't have enough knowledge. Or, stated more harshly, they are "too dumb to know they are dumb." This simple but loopy concept has been demonstrated dozens of times in well-controlled psychology studies and in a variety of contexts. However, until now, the effect had not been studied in one of the most obvious and important realms—political knowledge.

A new study published in the journal *Political Psychology*, carried out by the political scientist Ian Anson at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, not only found that the Dunning-Kruger effect applies to politics, it also appears to be exacerbated when partisan identities are made more salient. In other words, those who score low on political knowledge tend to overestimate their expertise even more when greater emphasis is placed on political affiliation.

Anson told PsyPost that he became increasingly interested in the effect after other academics were discussing its potential role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election on social media. "I follow a number of political scientists who marveled at the social media pundit class' seeming display of 'Dunning-Kruger-ish tendencies' in their bombastic coverage of the election." However, speculation by scientists does not always translate into statistically-significant findings, so Anson began thinking of ways to experimentally test what he described as a "very serious accusation."

In order to have a large representative sample of subjects, Dr. Anson administered online surveys to over 2,600 Americans. The first survey was designed to assess political knowledge, while the second was used to examine how confident they were in their knowledge. Questions quizzed participants on topics like names of cabinet members, the length of term limits for members of Congress, and the names of programs that the U.S. government spends the least on.

As predicted, the results showed that those who scored low on political knowledge were also the ones who overestimated their level of knowledge. But that wasn't all. When participants were given cues that made them engage in partisan thought, the Dunning-Kruger effect was made even stronger. This occurred with both Republicans and Democrats, but only in those who scored low on political knowledge to begin with.

These findings are fascinating but equally troubling. How do you combat ignorance when the ignorant believe themselves to be knowledgeable? Even worse, how do you fight it when America is becoming increasingly polarized, which certainly increases the salience of partisan identities?

While the results of Anson's study suggest that being uninformed leads to overconfidence across the political spectrum, studies have shown that Democrats now tend to be generally more educated than

Republicans, making the latter more vulnerable to the Dunning-Kruger effect. In fact, a Pew Research Center poll released in March of this year found that 54 percent of college graduates identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic, compared to 39 percent who identified or leaned Republican.

Perhaps this helps explain why Trump supporters seem to be so easily tricked into believing obvious falsehoods when their leader delivers his “alternative facts” sprinkled with language designed to activate partisan identities. Because they lack knowledge but are confident that they do not, they are less likely than others to actually fact-check the claims that the President makes.

This speculation is supported by evidence from empirical studies. In 2016, an experiment found that 45 percent of Republicans believed that the Affordable Care Act included “death panels,” and a 2015 study similarly found that 54 percent of Republican primary voters believed then-president Barack Obama to be a Muslim.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is particularly worrisome when considering issues that pose existential threats, like global warming. A 2017 study conducted at the University of New Hampshire found that only 25 percent of self-described Trump supporters believed that human activities contribute to climate change.

This quirky cognitive bias could be making it easier for Donald Trump to continuously dupe his more uneducated followers. Not only are they uninformed, they are unlikely to ever try to become more informed on their own. In their minds, they have nothing new to learn.

While such a thought is disturbing, we should not lose all hope in trying to reach the victims of the Dunning-Kruger effect. At least one study found that incompetent students increased their ability to accurately estimate their class rank after being tutored in the skills they lacked. With the right education methods and a willingness to learn, the uninformed on both sides of the political aisle can gain a meta-awareness that can help them perceive themselves more objectively. Unfortunately, Anson’s study shows that getting through to these people becomes more and more difficult as the nation becomes more divided. And with Trump’s fiery rhetoric and fear mongering, that divide appears to always be growing wider, making one wonder whether Trump—through Googling himself—has become aware of the effect and is using it to his advantage. But that assumption might be giving him too much credit, as he is likely as much a victim of the Dunning-Kruger effect as his followers.

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[However, it is also known that the USA has the lowest standards of public education in the developed world; perhaps that 'minor' factor may also be related to the plague of social cretinism. Clearly, the US user pays system does not favour genius, as genius is produced by nature anywhere, and more often than not, in the most underprivileged environments. Unable to find a positive outlet, talented and highly intelligent youths have no choice but to pursue lives of subversion/crime, as they have few opportunities and rightly feel that the system has let them down. So good luck Uncle, you are, and will remain, your own worst enemy.]

<https://www.rawstory.com/2018/07/heres-psychological-problem-causes-trump-supporters-keep-getting-duped/>

