The Point of Political Belief

Michael Hannon & Jeroen de Ridder

Abstract

An intuitive and widely accepted view is that (a) beliefs aim at truth, (b) many citizens have stable and meaningful political beliefs, and (c) citizens choose to support political candidates or parties on the basis of their political beliefs. We argue that all three claims are false. First, we argue that political beliefs often differ from ordinary world-modelling beliefs because they do not aim at truth. Second, we draw on empirical evidence from political science and psychology to argue that most people lack stable and meaningful political beliefs. Third, we claim that the true psychological basis for voting behavior is not an individual's political beliefs but rather group identity. Along the way, we reflect on what this means for normative democratic theory.

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1. Introduction

On the face of it, lots of people hold political beliefs. Some people even hold lots of them, often with seemingly great confidence. Let's understand political beliefs quite broadly as beliefs that concern, on the one hand, descriptive facts about the workings and development of political systems at various levels (from international to local) and, on the other, normative beliefs about the right course for politics, ranging from very general beliefs about what a just society would look like, to more specific beliefs about what policy proposals would be good to implement, what laws would need to be passed, how best to realize one's political vision, and what candidates to vote for.[1] Also included are beliefs that are, or have become, politically charged, i.e., seen as relevant to one's political choices and action, even if they are not political *per se*; for instance, the belief that Barack Obama was not born in the United States.

Here is an intuitive and commonsensical picture of the point of political beliefs, loosely based on what Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels (2016) call the 'folk theory of democracy'. Imagine a citizenry of individuals who enjoy spending some portion of their leisure time reading newspapers, magazines, and books, consuming news on TV and the internet, debating political issues in various public and private forums, weighing the arguments and evidence for particular policies, laws and other political options, and then forming and updating their political beliefs in light of the evidence. This uplifting picture of democracy has its roots in the Enlightenment tradition of rational choice. Voters seek reliable information, formulate their political views on the basis of that information, assess where candidates stand on the issues, and then choose to support the candidate or political party that best embodies their own preferences and values.

This folk theory of democracy is a *belief-first* model of political behavior.[2] It assumes a model of voter political psychology that is cognitive, doxastic, and epistemically rational. On this theory, then, the point of political beliefs is to form an accurate picture of (a) political reality, (b) one's personal political values and preferences, and (c) the courses of action that are most likely to realize (b) given (a). Political beliefs subsequently form the basis of political actions like voting, activism, or other political engagement. This account of political belief fits with the broader commonsense view that beliefs and desires together cause and explain behavior.

Drawing on various strands of literature from cognitive and social psychology, as well as political science, this chapters asks whether this portrayal of political belief is accurate. Spoiler alert: for many people, it is not. At best, it is accurate for a select few highly informed and reflective political buffs. For many others, political beliefs fulfill different roles and it is even doubtful whether we should call the mental states playing these roles 'belief' in the first place.

2. Political Beliefs as Socially Adaptive Beliefs

All humans need true beliefs to survive and flourish. We must truly believe that our bodies need water in order to stay alive; we must figure out which foods are poisonous in order to avoid death; and if we falsely believe that we are performing well at our job, we are likely to get fired. If our minds were filled with false beliefs, human life would be frustrating, unpleasant, and short. Indeed, it would probably have ended long ago. As Quine once said, "Creatures

inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind" (1969: 126).

In the philosophical literature, it is commonly held that beliefs 'aim at truth' (Williams 1973; Velleman 2000; Shah 2003). Precisely how to interpret this claim is a matter of controversy. Our framework will be a *teleological* conception of belief according to which the functional goal of cognitive systems is the formation and maintenance of true beliefs. Thus, an attitude counts as a belief if it is formed and regulated by cognitive processes that are truth-conducive (Fassio 2015: §2a). There are many reasons to think that beliefs are deeply connected to truth. It is a truism to say that to believe something is to believe that it is true. And as soon as we regard something as false, we stop believing it. Furthermore, we have no direct choice in the matter. It is not up to us to decide whether to retain the belief or not. We cannot believe directly at will, no matter how convenient that might be (Williams 1973). Finally, there are normative constraints on belief that imply the goal of truth. For example, it seems *irrational* to hold beliefs without evidence, and evidence is needed because it increases the probability of truth. False beliefs seem defective.

Yet many beliefs do *not* seem to aim at truth. Our focus is on political beliefs, but similar points could be made about moral, religious, and other beliefs. In all these cases, humans tend to evaluate evidence and form beliefs in non-truth-conducive ways. For example, we tend to seek out, uncritically accept, and better remember evidence that is favorable to our view; whereas we tend to avoid, forget, and be more critical of counterevidence (Lord et al. 1979). This

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general human tendency is known as *motivated reasoning*. (For more details, see the chapters by Keith Stanovich and Robin McKenna in this handbook.) We also tend to discuss our political beliefs primarily with people who agree with us, and those who care most about politics often choose to receive political information through like-minded media (Mutz 2006). In political contexts, people will also misinterpret simple data that they could easily interpret correctly in other contexts (Kahan et al. 2017).

All this fits poorly with the idea that truth is the aim of belief. We humans regularly engage in motivated reasoning, identity-protective cognition, confabulation, and we succumb to a variety of positive illusions that make us feel better about our own lives—all at the expense of truth. This is not to deny that beliefs formed through biased and unreliable processes may still *seem* true to us from the inside, but from an external perspective it is hard to maintain that such beliefs aim at truth in any meaningful sense.

A plausible hypothesis is that *false beliefs are often adaptive* (see Stich 1990; Kahan et al. 2017). They can provide us with psychological comfort, foster group loyalty and belonging, and serve a variety of other ends unrelated to truth. A primary function of political beliefs, we submit, is *social bonding*.[3] A lot of evidence shows that people tend to conform their beliefs and attitudes to those around them, particularly when they view others as similar to themselves (Cialdini 1993). In politics, for example, people often prefer to hold the same beliefs as those they want to associate with (Huemer 2016).[4] It is a way to satisfy their emotionally-charged group loyalties. Somin makes a similar observation:

Both sports fans and political fans tend to be dogmatic and closed-minded in large part because seeking truth is not the main reason why they choose to pursue these activities in the first place. Instead, they have motives such as entertainment, confirming their pre-existing views, enjoying the camaraderie of fellow fans, and so on. (Somin 2013b)

When information threatens our sense of self or our social identity, our "psychological immune system" is programmed to adjust our beliefs to ward off such threats (Mandelbaum 2019). This often requires avoiding harsh truths and believing pleasant falsehoods.

We can incorporate these observations by bifurcating the concept of belief. Borrowing from Williams (2020), we can distinguish between *ordinary world-modeling beliefs* and *socially adaptive beliefs*. The functional properties of these two types of beliefs are sufficiently different to warrant status as different kinds of cognitive attitude.[5] Whereas ordinary world-modeling beliefs are geared towards truth, socially adaptive beliefs aim at social-psychological goods. For both types of belief, mechanisms for belief production can be said to function *properly* (that is, doing what ancestral tokens of that type were selected for doing). Imagine someone who falsely believes *that Hillary Clinton gave classified information to Russia in exchange for donations*. This may not be an error in their belief-system's processing. Rather, it may stem from the system functioning as it should. This is because the *point* of such beliefs is not to be true, but to be socially adaptive.

This distinction may help illuminate the sort of mental states that political beliefs often are. In general, deeply held political beliefs seem unresponsive to evidence, driven by affect, and formed on largely non-evidential grounds (Achen and Bartels 2016). For these reasons, political beliefs (and other identity-constitutive beliefs) seem to be a different cognitive attitude than many ordinary world-modelling beliefs. In politics, we often care more about belonging and team loyalty than truth because, for many, politics *is not really about truth*. This is likely because it is often far more important for our ordinary world-modelling beliefs to be true than it is for our political beliefs.[6]

That last point might sound counterintuitive. Political beliefs are often assumed to be very important, while many ordinary beliefs are mundane. But Paul Bloom nicely illustrates the importance of having accurate ordinary beliefs over political beliefs:

> 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. They don't have to be grounded in truth, because the truth value doesn't have any effect on my life. (…) To complain that someone's views on global warming aren't grounded in the fact, then, is to miss the point. (Bloom 2016: 236-7)

When a false belief provides us with *social benefits* and comes with *almost zero practical costs*, our cognitive processing seems geared toward promoting and sustaining such beliefs. This also explains why it is often so difficult to correct false beliefs. If a belief is (strongly) socially adaptive, then providing people with correct information may do little to change their minds.[7]

None of this should deter us from accepting the plausible claim that it is *usually* valuable to avoid falsity (Cowie 2014: 4007; Street 2009: 235). It would clearly not be adaptive to believe that we are immortal, or infallible, or capable of flying, even though acknowledging these limitations may cause us negative affect. However, the simple view that construes beliefs as oriented toward truth alone ignores the many forms of cognitive processing that serve functions other than truth.

3. Political 'Beliefs' as Expressive Behavior

A different and arguably more radical response to the evidence that many political beliefs are produced and sustained in biased ways and often unresponsive to evidence is to reject that they are beliefs in the first place. What look like assertions of political belief are really expressions of different underlying attitudes.

According to new research on political attitudes, people often deliberately misreport their beliefs as a way to *express their attitudes*. This is called "expressive responding" or simply "cheerleading" (Bullock et al. 2015). Consider what Trump supporters said when asked to

compare a photo of his 2017 inauguration crowd with a photo of Obama's inauguration crowd

in 2009. In a survey of almost 700 American adults, participants were shown both photos and

asked a very simple question: "Which photo has more people?" Although only one answer is

clearly correct, almost 15% of Trump supporters (n=218) said that the half-empty photo of

Trump's inauguration had more people, compared to only 2% of Clinton voters (n=275)

(Schaffner and Luks 2018).

Did these Trump supporters really *believe* there are more people in an obviously half-empty

photo? It would be mistaken to interpret their responses in this way. Instead, some Trump

supporters clearly decided to *express their support* for Trump rather than to answer the

question factually. These expressions still reliably correspond to an underlying trait or fact

about the sender (e.g., a pro-Trump attitude). In this sense, deliberately misreporting one's

belief is not necessarily a deceptive act. But expressive proclamations are *misleading* when they

are interpreted as genuine belief reports. Here's another example: expressive responding may

explain why approximately one in seven Americans says that Obama is "the antichrist" (Harris

2013). Do they really believe this? More likely, such reports reflect partisan cheerleading rather

than genuine belief.

How often do people misreport their beliefs? Recent research in political behavior suggests 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 answer

correctly. As a result, the gap between Democrats and Republicans in response to factual

questions sharply decreases. 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. Multiple

independent studies report similar findings (Prior et al. 2015, Huber and Yair 2018, and Khanna

and Sood 2018).[8]

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. As Gary Langer (2010), former chief pollster for ABC

News, 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."

Public opinion polls are consistently showing that partisans are unable to agree on the facts

(Bartels 2002; Sinnott-Armstrong 2018). These patterns are ordinarily taken as evidence that

partisanship affects factual *beliefs* about politics. But, given the above findings, 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. An alternative explanation is

that such patterns merely reflect a desire to praise one's own party or condemn another.

People believe one answer, but express a different answer to support their party. This is

potentially good news. Expressive responses tend to mask shared, bipartisan beliefs about

factual matters. Thus, people are not seeing "separate realities" (Kull et al. 2004). Rather, these

political disagreements reflect partisan bad-mouthing and the joy of cheerleading.

4. Political Beliefs as 'In-between' Beliefs or Acceptances

Let's recap. In section 2, we distinguished socially adaptive beliefs from ordinary factual beliefs,

and we claimed that socially adaptive beliefs do not aim at truth, but at securing social benefits.

In section 3, we explored the idea that political 'beliefs' may not really be beliefs at all, but

rather expressions of partisan allegiance. In the current section, we introduce yet another way

of thinking about political 'beliefs', which steers a middle course between the options from

sections 2 and 3. In the case of some political attitudes, it neither seems accurate to describe a

person as *believing* nor to describe them as *not believing*. Schwitzgebel (2001) calls these cases

of "in between" believing.

According to Achen and Bartels,

> 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. (2016: 307)

The true psychological basis for voting behavior, they claim, is not formed by an individual's

political beliefs but rather by group identity. As a result, many partisans are not deeply

committed to their proclaimed ideologies.

To illustrate, consider how many Republicans switched their views on numerous economic

issues when Trump was elected. For example, they went from pro-free trade to protectionist

very quickly during the 2016 campaign.[9] This suggests that even apparently key issues like free

trade are, at bottom, proclamations intended to demonstrate group membership. Similarly,

when Democrats say "I'm pro-regulation", it is unclear whether they are expressing a firmly

held belief about appropriate responses to market failure; instead, they may just be expressing

a commitment to seeing the Democrats win (see Brennan forthcoming).

Indeed, people will support whatever policy or platform they think is backed by their party.

Geoffrey Cohen's (2003) 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 in-group 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. Moreover, the participants were unaware of their bias. Indeed, they denied having it when asked.

This doesn't detract from the fact that people might experience these 'beliefs' – if that's what we want to call them – as genuine beliefs, report that they truly believe them when asked, and even stand by them when incentivized to give answers that accurately reflect their internal convictions, in contrast with the merely expressive model from the previous section. Instead of deciding whether or not these are cases of full belief, perhaps we can regard them as "in-between beliefs" (Schwitzgebel 2001). When it neither seems accurate to describe a person as believing p, nor correct to describe them as not believing p, we can say it is a case of "in between" believing. Such cases do not force a yes-or-no intuition about whether the agent possesses a (full) belief. Schwitzgebel offers the following examples: a person who asserts that white people are not superior to black people, and yet displays behavior indicative of racist bias (Schwitzgebel 2010: 532); a person who receives an email that a bridge will be out, and yet takes the route to that bridge and only recalls the email upon approaching the bridge (ibid.: 533).

Similarly, when Republicans switched their 'views' when Trump was elected, it neither seems clear that they now *believe* that protectionism is better for the economy, nor that they don't. On the one hand, it does not seem to be a full-fledged belief because it is not associated with the dispositions constitutive of full belief. This belief does not guide behavior in the robust way

that full beliefs do. On the other hand, it also doesn't seem to be a merely expressive attitude.

Indeed, these beliefs are sincerely professed by the agent: they are *taken to be beliefs*.[10]

Alternatively, one might follow Jonathan Cohen's (1992) distinction and argue that many

political opinions are 'accepted' rather than believed. To accept that p is to have or adopt a

policy of positing or postulating that p. In contrast to belief, acceptance is under direct

voluntary control. Moreover, the reasons for acceptance are often practical rather than

evidential. This seems more in keeping with the sort of political beliefs mentioned in this

section, where voters adopt whatever opinions are endorsed by their party and then go on to

proclaim these 'beliefs' (e.g. "I'm pro-regulation").[11] Thus, it may be that the positive attitude

that voters have toward *many* central doctrines of their political party is best understood as

accepting such views rather than believing them.

5. Evidence for Political Beliefs?

We have presented three models for thinking about political 'beliefs', all of them suggesting

that many people's political beliefs are not quite—or not at all—like ordinary beliefs. In this

section, we will consider two ways of resisting this suggestion and show that both fail.

Isn't there substantive empirical evidence from survey research that the electorate is

increasingly polarized along ideological lines? (We focus on the U.S. political context, but claims

about increasing polarization have been made about the UK and various European countries

too.) Republicans are allegedly becoming more conservative and Democrats are reportedly

more liberal. Political opinions have shifted towards the more extreme ends of the political spectrum, leaving the middle ground mostly vacated. Surely this suggests that people have stable, but increasingly extreme political beliefs?

This assumes that surveys reliably get at people's stable political beliefs. There is reason to doubt this. John Zaller's 1992 seminal book, *The Nature of Origins of Mass Opinions*, argues that a substantial portion of respondents to political surveys tend to construct their responses on the spot (see also Zaller & Feldman 1992). For example, the person who reports believing *that Hillary Clinton gave classified information to Russia in exchange for donations* may not really believe (or have ever thought about) any such thing prior to being asked. When citizens are at a loss as to what their view is on a political issue, they often form improvised 'beliefs' that are based on whatever considerations become salient to them in the moment.[12]

Consider another example: a taxpayer might initially oppose increased school funding because high property taxes come to mind (Kuklinski 2001: 243). However, they may later support increased school funding because another consideration, such as low teachers' salaries, gains their attention. According to Kuklinski, "the taxpayer is ambivalent, and thus her expressed attitude at any point in time depends on whether she is cued to think principally about the pro or con considerations" (ibid.). In short, she is simply making up her mind as she goes.

The precise extent to which this occurs is debated. According to Zaller, "most people, on most issues, do not 'really think' any particular thing" (1994: 194); and "most people really aren't

sure what their opinions are on most political matters" (Zaller 1992: 76). Sniderman, Tetlock, and Elms (2001) offer a more moderate interpretation. We do not aim to settle this issue here. Whether the situation is *extremely* bad or just *pretty* bad, it is widely agreed that individuals lack stable beliefs on many political issues.

One might think, however, that this doesn't quite settle things yet. Maybe many people lack stable political beliefs *on specific, particular issues*, but nonetheless possess a stable set of core political convictions, a *political ideology*, which they unfortunately have a hard time applying consistently to specific political issues. An ideology is, roughly, a configuration of beliefs that express what people take to be right and proper. Following Kinder and Kalmoe (2017: 12–3), we can say that ideologies have the following characteristics: their subject is society, economics, and politics; they are comprised of ideas that form an organized structure (i.e., the ideas are arranged in ordinarily, predictable patterns); these ideological structures are shared (i.e., an ideology organizes politics for many, not just one); rival ideologies compete over plans for public policy (i.e., they provide the justificatory basis for particular social and political arrangements and process of a political community); and the beliefs that constitute an ideology are held sincerely and steadfastly (i.e., they are resistant to change). The reason people make up survey answers is that they don't always see immediately what their ideology means for a novel political question.

However, Converse (1964) famously argued that few people are ideological; most citizens simply lack any recognizable ideology. Building on Converse's work, Kinder and Kalmoe (2017)

argue that the American electorate is very far from polarized in ideological terms.[13] While

political *elites* are strongly ideologically divided, ordinary voters are not. Most people are

indifferent to—or confused about—liberalism and conservatism as political ideas. Indeed,

according to Converse (1964) five in six Americans lacked understanding of what it even means

to be a liberal or a conservative. Thus, the typical citizen's opinions on government policy

display little evidence of coherent organization (or polarization) along ideological lines.[14]

But the narrative about polarization is not entirely false. The American electorate is increasingly

divided along *partisan* lines. In particular, citizens are polarized in the sense that Republicans

and Democrats feel more anger, fear, and loathing toward each other than in previous decades

(Iyengar et al. 2012). In other words, the electorate is *affectively* polarized, but not *ideologically*

polarized (Mason 2018).

The existence of affective polarization without ideological polarization indicates how

unimportant ideology is to partisanship. For the most part, voters do not base their political

identities on systems of stable core ideological beliefs. When deciding whom to elect or which

policy to support, ideology is not the organizing principle. Rather, as we saw above, political

preferences arise from group attachments, which are affective rather than cognitive in nature.

As Kinder and Kalmoe put it, public opinion mostly reflects the "attachments and antipathies of

group life" (2017: 136), not our ideological convictions about politics, society, or economics.

Thus, the American public is increasingly partisan, but for identity-based reasons rather than

ideologically-based ones.

Ideological innocence has profound implications for the nature and significance of political beliefs. An ideology provides an intellectual framework, a system of belief that "supplies citizens with a stable foundation for understanding and action" (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017: 12-3). When one lacks an ideology, one tends to express policy preferences that change randomly over time and reflect almost no liberal-conservative coherence across issue domains.[15] As a result, the majority of people lack stable, consistent, meaningful beliefs about political issues.

6. Conclusion

When thinking about the point of beliefs, we tend to think their function is to represent the world. Beliefs aim at truth. This line of thought, however, is a poor fit with many people's political 'beliefs'. These often appear to serve different functions: bolster group loyalty, protect identities, or receive psychological gratification. We have discussed three different models to make sense of this: political beliefs as socially adaptive beliefs, as expressions of non-cognitive attitudes, and as in-between beliefs.

We have not tried to decide which of these three models is the most plausible or promising. As we see it, they may co-exist peacefully: perhaps some political beliefs are best understood as socially adaptive, whereas others are better seen as expressive attitudes, and yet others as in-between beliefs. We are also not that interested in taking a stand on whether the attitudes described by these models deserve the label 'belief'. Some may prefer to call them political 'opinions' or 'attitudes'. As long as it is clear that there is a rich variety of mental attitudes

relevant to understanding political behavior, it is largely immaterial which of those get to be called belief.

All of this raises important and fundamental questions for normative democratic theory. If many people's political beliefs aren't stable, consistent, and indicative of underlying ideology, this throws into doubt the folk theory of democracy with which we started this chapter. Political disagreement shouldn't obviously be thought of as cognitive and evidence-based, but rather as affective and identity-based. The function and normative assessment of various forms of political engagement, such as voting and deliberation, need to be revisited, as they are premised on a belief-first model of politics. Answering these questions is far beyond the scope of this chapter, but clearly there is plenty of work left to do at the intersection of political philosophy, epistemology, political science, and political psychology.[16]

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[1] By including normative beliefs, our characterization is broader than what political scientists measure when they investigate citizens' political knowledge (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Somin 2013a). This is typically limited to factual issues about the political system.

[2] Simler and Hanson (2017: 264) describe a 'belief-first' model of *religious* behavior, according to which one's religious beliefs explain their religious behavior.

[3] According to Graham and Haidt (2010), this is the function of religious belief and practice.

[4] As Huemer (2016) points out, this likely explains why political beliefs cluster together around logically unrelated topics.

[5] Funkhouse (2017) makes a similar distinction. He says that beliefs serve a *navigational* function (which requires truth) and a *social signalling* function (which may conflict with truth). We will return to the social signalling function shortly.

[6] As Papineau (2013) argues, we ought to form true beliefs when something important hinges on "getting it right", but we can relax the standard if nothing important hinges on the matter.

[7] A model for thinking about beliefs that is highly congenial to the line of thought presented here is to conceive of beliefs as *social signals* (Funkhouser 2017). Social signals enable people to fit in, stand out, or advertise their loyalty to communities. Their point is not to model the world accurately, it is to get you invited to barbecues, dinner parties, camping trips, and so on. (For similar thoughts about beliefs as social tools, see Simler and Hanson 2017.)

[8] For a dissenting voice, see Berinsky 2018.

[9] According to Pew (2017), Republican support for free trade dropped from 56% in 2015 to 36% in 2017.

[10] As Rose, Buckwalter, and Turri (2014) show, frequent assertion is the single most powerful cue for belief attribution by ordinary people, even when these assertions are inconsistent with the agent's behavior.

[11] We do not claim that political beliefs will meet all the conditions for 'acceptance'. For example, Cohen says that accepting p is being disposed to employ p in one's deliberations and to act upon it to guide one's behavior by relying on it in theoretical and practical reasoning. However, many political opinions do not even meet this dispositional requirement. Our main claim is that political opinions often meet conditions for attitudes that are distinct from beliefs.

[12] Zaller claims that people tend to have many relevant considerations in their mind for any given policy domain, so an individual's preference will depend on which of these considerations prevail at any given time. Precisely which considerations prevail will depend on innumerable factors, such as what they saw on the news recently, the wording of the question, the question order, race of the interviewer, social cues they happen to receive, and numerous other internal and external considerations. This differs from Converse's explanation of political attitudes, as we'll describe below.