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Heuristic shortcuts in policy decisions *

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Abstract

Cognitive sciences, especially psychology and social neuroscience, have offered in recent years, thanks to advances in brain research and non-invasive neuroimaging techniques, novel methods to understand the neurobiological mechanisms underlying decision making. Therefore, this paper seeks to understand the extent to which heuristic shortcuts contribute to political decision making, by contrasting the different mental shortcuts and cognitive biases assumed by voters when choosing candidates or political parties.

Atajos heurísticos en las decisiones políticas

Palabras clave
Heurística; decisiones; política; sesgos; prejuicios

Resumen

Las ciencias cognitivas, en especial la psicología y la neurociencia social en los últimos años han ofrecido gracias a los avances investigativos del cerebro y a las técnicas no invasivas de neuroimagen métodos novedosos para comprender los mecanismos neurobiológicos subyacentes a la toma de decisiones. Por tanto, en este documento, se busca entender y comprender en qué medida los atajos heurísticos contribuyen a la toma de decisiones políticas, al contrastar los diferentes atajos mentales y sesgos cognitivos que asumen lo votantes a la hora de elegir candidatos o partidos políticos.

Atalhos heurísticos nas decisões políticas

Palavras-chave
Heurística; decisões; política; preconceitos.

Resumo

As ciências cognitivas, especialmente a psicologia e as neurociências sociais, têm nos últimos anos oferecido novos métodos para a compreensão dos mecanismos neurobiológicos subjacentes à tomada de decisões graças aos avanços na investigação cerebral e às técnicas de neuroimagem não invasivas. Portanto, este artigo procura compreender até que ponto os atalhos heurísticos contribuem para a tomada de decisões políticas, contrastando os diferentes atalhos mentais e os preconceitos cognitivos que os eleitores assumem quando escolhem candidatos ou partidos políticos.

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1. Introduction

Humanity has always been interested in the mysterious place where the power of consciousness, reason, emotion, and trifling and important decisions that we as a species make throughout our lives. As social animals, human beings constantly need to make decisions, ranging from simple choices such as what clothes to wear or what juice to drink to such important life choices as deciding to get married or have children.

Today, advances in science and technology aided by non-invasive neuroimaging techniques have made it possible to explore as never before the brain mechanisms that underlie cognitive and emotional processes so important for decision-making. This brain exploration has allowed cognitive sciences, psychology, and neuroscience to make essential contributions to try to understand and comprehend the circuits that modulate the human social brain. Thus, these fields of science have gradually elucidated the human capacity to perceive emotions, intentions, desires, beliefs, and even prejudices.

So much has been learned about such human mental faculties that it is now known that the decision-making process is generally not logical and rational, but rather a mechanism often guided by emotion and intuition. The most widespread conceptual frameworks for decision-making are based especially on dual systems models. In their traditional form, these models suggest that decisions result from competing interactions between two systems: one slow, effortful, reflective, conscious, deliberative, and anticipatory, and the other fast, automatic, unreflective, unconscious, and present-focused (Kahneman, 2013).

Neuroscience has suggested that human decisions are contingent on experience, intuition, learning, and emotion, which are integrated and filtered through sensory information from a constantly changing environment and context. According to Kahneman (2013, p. 14), "most of our impressions and thoughts arise in our conscious experience without us realizing how it happens, so the mental work that produces impressions, intuitions and a multitude of decisions goes on silently in our mind". [la mayor parte de nuestras impresiones y pensamientos surgen en nuestra experiencia consciente sin que sepamos de qué modo, de esta manera el trabajo mental que produce impresiones, intuiciones y multitud de decisiones se desarrolla silenciosamente en nuestras mentes].

Thus, it can be inferred that the power of decisions is generally due to the detection of patterns in a sociocultural environment and the elaboration from them of mental models that allow understanding the reality of a complex world full of data and information. For Manes and Niro (2018), what the human brain perceives of the world does not coincide with what is happening. For these authors, the brain reads signals, extracts patterns, and makes sense of the information that arrives, constructs a subjective world, full of related shapes, colors, and sounds, in such a way that it reconstructs the data of the environment according to previous experience. That is, it does not portray reality as a scanner, but rather gives meaning to what is perceived.

These mental models admit prospective and collective imaginative advances that allow us to conceive changes in the environment in search of better welfare. In this way, the human social brain can transmit these changes to other individuals, so that together we can contribute improvements to these advances, converting knowledge and imagination into a collective social effort that can be transmitted from generation to generation.

From there, as the social animals that they are, humans can persuade others to cooperate and work collectively based on the prospective mental models created, thus, the collective social effort allows what as individuals would be impossible to achieve. In this way, collective social mental models are repeated countless times, creating human sociocultural traditions, which in turn generate what could be called societies.

Now, being the human species a species with admirable cognitive and emotional capacities, which has a brain with such extraordinary faculties, how is it that it acts or functions badly in certain situations? How is it possible that human beings make decisions that are difficult to understand, that sometimes can even be fatal? How to understand human belief in derisory and unreal things, lacking in sense, ignoring many times the scientific and reasonable evidence?

The human mind is capable of conceiving theories and systems so complex that explain the laws of the universe and life, and at the same time is unable to decide not to consume sugary drinks or smoke, or in the case of politics to elect politicians of dubious credibility or support candidates implicated in acts of corruption or even worse to support programs

that threaten the environment, How is it that the organ that makes us special among animals allows us to build or shape a world according to the desires of humanity and at the same time leads entire societies to act systematically and proceed by making the worst possible choices for the world and the species?

Most likely there are no answers or a single clear explanation, what is certain is that the solutions are found in the organ that makes us "sapiens" and in the way, it is used. This means that the human brain, the product of evolution, is not the result of a meticulous process of perfect design, but the product of a long evolutionary process of selection, based on trial and error that made the species the only survivor among the human species. Thus, the human brain was molded, attending to hostile contexts and creating neural structures and mechanisms based on its experiences, learning, and mental shortcuts, which allowed it to adapt and survive.

These mental shortcuts, called heuristics according to Phillips (2019), are essential for the human species to survive, to interact with others, and above all to learn from experiences. And it is that these shortcuts, allow people to solve problems and make judgments quickly and efficiently, in such a way, that they shorten the decision-making time and allow individuals to function without constantly stopping to think in front of certain actions.

The term "heuristic shortcuts" proposed by Tversky and Kahneman (1974), points out the difficulty that individuals have when making decisions, since most of the time they are made far from the basic principles of probability, especially in uncertain moments or environments. According to Manes and Niro (2021, p. 194), these shortcuts consist of "rules of thinking that are not based on a careful and systematic calculation of variables, nor on predictions of possible outcomes based on Bayesian statistics". [reglas de pensamiento que no se basan en un cálculo cuidadoso y sistemático de las variables, ni en predicciones de posibles resultados basadas en la estadística bayesiana]

While heuristics can facilitate problem-solving and decision-making, these shortcuts often result from rules of thumb that can lead to irrational and inaccurate decisions, creating cognitive biases. Being aware of how heuristics work, as well as the potential biases that occur, can help to make better and more accurate decisions.

In the field of politics, these decisions are fundamental for nation-states and societies. Knowing how to choose, making the right decision for the collective good, and overcoming hatred, prejudices, and extremes are essential for democracy. In countries like ours where corruption, impunity, and inequality reign, the choices of political leaders should be a moral imperative when deciding. Understanding how the mind works and understanding the shortcuts it takes when deciding could be key when voting, thus, critical thinking and cognitive flexibility that each subject assumes before the transcendental political decision will be key for society and for the nation in general.

Now, understanding in a general way how the brain makes decisions and how it faces certain problems to solve them, in this document the reader will find studies and research worldwide that reveal how mental shortcuts and cognitive biases act in individuals when making political decisions, as well as a conceptual approach about the main heuristic shortcuts and cognitive biases present in human beings at the time of voting and choosing a candidate; At the same time, the role of the media, social networks and fake news in voters' decisions and electoral contests will be analyzed.

1.1. Political brain

As social animals, humans process data and information from the environment to live in the community and generate adjusted responses to act by the relationship with others and the norms for living in society. According to Soroka and Wlezien (2010), choices in politics matter because, individual choices collectively influence the direction of public policy and ultimately the welfare of society and the individuals in it. Therefore, politics and the decisions that emanate from it are nothing more than a social effort to live in society and to generate answers or solutions to collective problems.

Political decision-making has an important correlation with these norms for living in the community and is essential for democratic societies. Research has shown that these decisions are not merely deliberative processes, and many times these are made in the wake of cognitive heuristics or biases. These biases according to Marshall, Trimmer, Houston, and McNamara (2013) and Korteling and Toet (2022), are systematic cognitive dispositions or inclinations in human thinking and reasoning that often do not comply with the principles of logic, probability reasoning, and plausibility. These intuitive and subconscious tendencies are at the basis of human judgment, decision-making, and behavior.

Thus, in addition to the rational variables that may be involved in such decisions, with advances in neuroscience it is widely accepted that a variety of factors, including sociological, psychological, and neurobiological variables, are key to such deliberations. In this context, evidence in recent years has suggested that the choice of political leaders and political parties may be determined by rapid, unreflective, and automatic processing, supported by heuristics, which as mentioned above are believed to have an important influence on human belief systems.

Tversky and Kahneman (1974), pointed out three different types of heuristics: availability, representativeness, and anchoring and fit authors such as Shenkman (2016), suggest the six most common cognitive biases for social scientists: perseverance, source confusion, projection, self-serving, superiority, planning fallacy and optimism. For these authors, each type of heuristic is used to reduce the cognitive effort needed to make a decision, which will be made by attending to the environment or context presented. In this case, we will analyze the most common mental shortcuts which individuals tend to incur when making political decisions or endorsing candidacies or political parties.

1.2. Availability heuristics

One of the most widely shared assumptions in decision-making, as well as in social justice research, holds that people estimate the frequency of an event, or the probability of its occurrence, by the ease with which it comes to mind (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). That is, the frequency or probability of an event is generally judged by the ease with which that information is accessible or available at the time. Often, events that are part of the daily news are more easily remembered. Therefore, a political party or politician can be judged favorably or unfavorably according to the amount of news that comes out of it.

Thus, unfavorable news related to acts of corruption or any event that goes against our mental patterns causes a certain degree of aversion in the mind in a conditioned way. Many times, even if the news or information lacks support, the conscience will take such assertions as true, discarding even reliable information or even favorable data.

In this sense, the role played by the media, social networks, and advertising in electoral contests is important. These media, according to their political and economic interests, flood citizens with information to favor or disfavor their candidate or political party. According to Markman and Medin (2002) it is often the case that more frequent events are more easily remembered than less frequent events, so this mental manipulation regularly leads to quick and accurate judgments in a variety of real-world scenarios.

Fake news, dirty propaganda, and misinformation play a crucial role in shaping availability heuristics. The media, politicians, and social networks can use availability bias to their political advantage. Overemphasizing certain issues, threats, or even the negative qualities of an opposing candidate can lead people to believe that these things are more prevalent and relevant than they are. In the same way, positive news, favorable comments on social networks, and abundant publicity create in individuals in a certain way a collective conscience towards certain parties or candidates. Hence, the importance that social networks and paid political advertising have gained in recent years.

These heuristic shortcuts could have a positive or negative impact when making a political decision. Therefore, the information available days and even weeks before an election is crucial and plays in favor of certain political parties or candidates. Therefore, the availability of heuristics in citizens with a low level of analysis, metacognition, or reduced critical thinking is crucial when voting or making political decisions. The biased decision in this case comes from taking into account only the information available to the mind at the time or that which is most easily remembered.

Hence the importance for nation-states of control and vigilance by control agencies in political campaign spending, and especially in the legislation associated with social networks, disinformation, and false and malicious news. We cannot continue to allow the abuse of social networks and the massification of news that is rigged to political and private interests, much less normalizing the insults and insults typical of electoral contests in the name of freedom of expression. Although the right to express oneself freely is enshrined in the constitution, this right does not provide grounds for delegitimizing, insulting, or discrediting the adversary without basis, especially if this opinion has a purely political and electoral basis.
zt the likelihood of a person or object emerging from some category based on the extent to which the person or object in question is similar to the mental pattern of that category.

1.3. Heuristic of representativeness

A second type of heuristic is the representativeness heuristic. Humans often rely on this heuristic when making probability judgments. This tends to classify events into categories, which, as Tversky and Kahneman (1974) point out, can result in the use of this heuristic. According to Rampello (2019), representativeness refers to the notion that certain characteristics better define objects, people, or events than others. Thus, probability judgments are made about the likelihood of a person or object emerging from some category based on the extent to which the person or object in question is similar to the mental pattern of that category.

For example, in politics it is common to label or make mental representations of political candidates, creating stereotypes of them. Thus, it is common to have prototypes of politicians by categorizing them into left, center, or right, or conservative or liberal individuals. According to Kanai, Feilden, Firth, and Rees (2011), conservative politicians tend to process things in a more fear-based and amygdala way, and liberal thinkers tend to be more open to change and progressive ideas. This for these authors could help explain why conservatives may resist change and progressive policies.

Thus, if a politician launches proposals that reject the legalization of marijuana or abortion, that individual is likely to be judged as conservative. Likewise, politicians who have ideas of basic income, social subsidies, or bans on fracking are judged as likely to belong to left-wing parties or to be liberal. These biases arise even without any solid evidence to support such an assumption.

On the other hand, the representativeness heuristic is also implicated in politics when representative stereotypes of traditional politicians are created. Thus, people who aspire to public offices of popular election are generally more acceptable when they are white, mature, Catholic, heterosexual men in suits and ties. Any individual who breaks these stereotypes would be assumed by most voters to be a mental shortcut. Even the personality traits of political leaders are an important direct influence on political decisions and voting.

Facial features and appearance of political candidates have been reported to predict electoral outcomes in countries with different electoral systems and institutions, thus, voter preferences are influenced by the politician's physical characteristics such as appearance, tone of voice, and smiles (Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2010; Laustsen, 2014; Laustsen & Petersen, 2018). Similarly, it was confirmed that immediate ratings of unknown political candidates, based on attractiveness and perceived competencies, were reliable predictors of actual election outcomes (Todorov, Mandisodza, & Goren, 2005; Olivola & Todorov, 2010). In this sense, the study of these authors showed that facial judgments predicted winners by 70%.

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that in addition to perceived competence and candidate attractiveness, some studies suggest that candidates who appear dominant and masculine are preferred over their feminine and non-dominant counterparts (Laustsen and Petersen, 2015)

Although physical appearance should play no role in voters' decisions, and their policy proposals should take precedence, in light of this evidence it is clear, that most people's political decisions are made in ignorance of information and enjoy a high degree of irrationality. The emotional expressions of faces influence the social attributions that are made of candidates, and faces that are perceived as more trustworthy, extroverted, and approachable tend to favor voting, while angry faces are perceived as untrustworthy, dominant, and threatening by voters (Banducci, Karp, Thrasher and Rallings, 2008; Manes and Niro, 2021). Similarly, Lenz and Lawson (2011) posit that trusts in competing facial cues are higher among people who know less about politics and watch a lot of television exposing themselves to the visual appearances of candidates.

For Kahneman (2013), judging probability by representativeness has important advantages, as many times the intuitive impressions and stereotypes that the mind generally produces are often accurate. However, in various contexts false stereotypes, and representativeness heuristics can induce bad decisions, especially if those decisions ignore data that point to the contrary. For example, a female, brown-skinned, homosexual, casually dressed politician might turn out to be more honest and not at all corrupt compared to a male, white, suit-and-tie, heterosexual politician. Representativeness will say to bet on or vote for the white, white, male, coat-and-tie individual who represents the mental construct of the traditional, competent politician.

1.4. Perseverance bias

This mental shortcut refers to the inability of people to change their own beliefs, even after the information that originated has been refuted or has proven to be inaccurate (VandenBos, 2015). In other words, the perseverance heuristic is the tendency of people to cling to their beliefs even when they should not.

This bias applied to political decisions refers to the individual inclination to hold an opinion once it has been stated, such that, once an opinion has been formed, it is not easily abandoned, even when contradictory evidence appears to undermine it. In this sense Bacon (2021, p.36) points out:

> "The human understanding, once it has adopted an opinion, draws all other things to support and agree with it. And though there are a greater number and weight of instances that lie on the other side, it either neglects and despises them, or, by some distinction, turns them aside and rejects them".
> [El entendimiento humano, una vez que ha adoptado una opinión, atrae todas las demás cosas para apoyarla y estar de acuerdo con ella. Y aunque hay un mayor número y peso de instancias que se encuentran en el otro lado, sin embargo, o bien las descuida y las desprecia, o bien, por alguna distinción, las aparta y las rechaza].

This mental shortcut usually arises based on individual experiences or personal events that leave an emotional imprint, thus, political opinion usually arises from something read in newspapers or magazines, seen on television, or social networks. To Manes and Niro (2018), people tend to read newspaper editorials that confirm their political convictions and watch on television and social networks the opinions that coincide with their vision of reality. Likewise, experts tend to be considered more legitimate and respectable as long as they support what they believe.

In the United States, most Republicans watch Fox News or other media with similar beliefs and ignore any other news source that may contradict their dogmas. In Colombia, making the analogy, it could be said that right-wing people prefer RCN channels and Semana magazine and left-wing people prefer Noticias Uno and Cambio magazine. It does not matter to which political ideology one belongs, the important thing is to think that one is right.

Thus, trying to change someone's political belief or opinion based on one's knowledge of the facts, only to deny the validity of the information that has been presented, leads to the heuristic of perseverance. People have a natural tendency to cling to their pre-existing beliefs, even when new information is provided that proves those beliefs incorrect. In other words, beliefs persevere. This is something that is regularly seen today in debates about politics, presidential elections, climate change, and immigration. Once someone has adopted a belief, even if the evidence is weak, it is very difficult to change it.

Now, there is a term used in psychology and neuroscience that often accompanies perseverance heuristics, the "confirmation bias." For Anderson, Lepper, and Ross (1980), perseverance heuristics are often confused with confirmation bias. For these authors, a confirmation bias is a bias in which people search for and recall information that supports their preconceived beliefs. In contrast, belief heuristics do not involve using the information to confirm a belief, but rather the rejection of information that might refute it. However, confirmation bias is a type of mental shortcut that also needs to be considered in policy decisions.

For Peters (2022), confirmation bias is the tendency to seek, interpret, favor, and remember information in a way that confirms or supports individual beliefs or values. One seeks information that confirms what one believes and rejects information that refutes it, such that this bias can lead to the heuristic of belief perseverance. In this sense, Schopenhauer (2009, p. 246), states, "an adopted hypothesis gives us eagle eyes for everything that confirms it and blinds us to everything that contradicts it". [una hipótesis adoptada nos da ojos de lince para todo lo que la confirma y nos ciega para todo lo que la contradice]

According to Tversky and Kahneman (1974), these heuristics and biases derive from people's preference for certainty and continuity, such that they like their knowledge to be consistent, linear, and absolute. In other words, people like to have the truth and be certain of what is believed to be true. For Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker (2021, p. 52), "we don't want the truth to prevail, we want our version of the truth to prevail." [no queremos que prevalezca la verdad, queremos que prevalezca nuestra versión de la verdad]

In this sense, it is easier for individuals to accept ideas and systems as they are working than to change and try to improve them, even if this means an improvement in living conditions. In the same way, there is a tendency to deterministic or extreme thinking, which, when taken to politics, causes polarization and division in societies. It is easier for people to place themselves in the extremes, which have absolute beliefs and thoughts than to place themselves in the center, where ideas do not enjoy deterministic thoughts as such.

The country is currently going through a period of political, social, and environmental reforms typical of a leftist and liberal government. For Colombia, a country accustomed to right-wing governments and systems that for years have worked for better or for worse, the change of these generates uncertainty and fear in a large part of the population. The brain prefers certainties. Although systems require reforms, for this cognitive organ it is better to leave things as they are than to try to change what works for many, even if only partially.

The cognitive cost of accepting that being wrong or mistaken requires integrating new information will be much easier if I simply accept that my previous belief is true. In the words of Tversky and Kahneman (1981, p. 454), "maintaining doubt is harder work than sliding toward certainty." [mantener la duda es un trabajo más difícil que deslizarse hacia la certeza] Now, why do beliefs have so much power over data and evidence? One of the phenomena that have been proposed to explain this is called cognitive dissonance. This is used to describe mental discomfort in the face of a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, which produces a sense of mental discomfort that leads people to tend to seek consistency in their attitudes and perceptions to reduce discomfort and restore equilibrium (Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones, 2019; Tandetnik *et al.*, 2021).

For the human brain, the world must make sense, therefore, any mental tension that occurs tends to generate discomfort, therefore, this phenomenon is what people feel when confronted with evidence that threatens their way of conceiving reality. For Tavris and Aronson (2020), even though many times these data or facts go against our beliefs, what they cause is the reinforcement of pre-established opinions and the conviction of our opinions or truths.

In the world of politics, the fact of imagining or conceiving worlds that go against personal ideologies causes cognitive dissonance, thus, many people, regardless of the candidates to be elected, prefer mental patterns that are in line with their beliefs. Fear of political change leads to continues despite reluctant failures in environmental, economic, and social aspects. People who consider themselves right-wing and conservative find it difficult to conceive of a political society with left-wing or liberal thinking.

1.5. Source confusion bias

This bias, also known as source misattribution or unconscious transference, is a type of error that occurs in memory and occurs when someone does not remember where certain memories come from or make erroneous attributions of the origins of a memory (VandenBos, 2015).

In this way, it could be pointed out that political opinions and decisions are often subordinated unconsciously by what the media and social networks dictate, in such a way, that most people learn about facts or events given by these communicative channels, immediately generating opinions without any support of veracity. In fact, according to Shenkman (2016), when a person sees a TV ad criticizing a politician, he is aware at that moment that the source is biased. But after one or two weeks? He is likely to remember what was said, but not remember where he heard it or where the information came from.

Now since this stems from an inability to correctly assess the validity of the information, the brain may find it difficult to distinguish between a valid primary source and a secondary source, with one replacing the other. According to Zaragoza and Lane (1994), source confusion is often a cause of imagination inflation, whereby imagining an event that never really happened can increase the certainty that it did occur. For these authors, this bias also applies to how humans construct an understanding of the world. The content of our memory is disassociated so that we have equal confidence in all content despite not having equal confidence in all sources. For example, while one trusts world-renowned newspapers such as the Washington Post more than a Facebook meme, the information obtained from each has similar validity later on.

Then, any news or event given by the media or social networks that make imaginary or false data or information seems truthful can lead people to incur this bias, therefore, this increases the likelihood that fake news or false memory will be

considered true. Since the problem has important consequences, politicians, political parties, media, and social networks often use fake news or fake news to reinforce this bias.

1.6. Projection bias

Another of the mental shortcuts applied to political decisions is the projection bias. This bias is the bias that people assume when they think that others share the same pattern of thinking, values, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, to the point of wanting to impose their point of view (Holm, 2015). Thus, this bias arises from the interaction with other people, such that the ideas, feelings, values, and beliefs present are considered accurate, appropriate, and truthful.

For Kaufmann (2019), this bias causes people to make myopic decisions, based on current emotions, beliefs, and values that will not necessarily hold in the long run. In this way, people end up making decisions that satisfy their current emotional state, a fact that can easily lead to the regret of the decisions made.

For Loewenstein, O'Donoghue, and Rabin (2003), people's current emotional states become the anchor point of their tastes, behaviors, and beliefs, so the brain uses these shortcuts as references, to such an extent that decisions in the wake of emotions influence cognitive processes. In this sense, Westen (2008), debunks the notion that the voter's mind is a brilliant calculator that makes decisions by weighing evidence and points out that, for better or worse, emotions, not reason, play a more prominent role in the choices of electoral contests.

For Westen (2008), it was previously erroneously and naively believed that political decisions by the electorate were made in the realm of rationality and democratic principles. For this author, in politics, when reason and emotion clash, emotion invariably wins. Elections are decided in the marketplace of emotions, a marketplace filled with values, images, analogies, moral sentiments, and stirring oratory, in which logic plays only a supporting role.

Since projection bias also causes people to overestimate the degree to which they agree with personal beliefs and political ideologies, awareness of projection bias might also help to be more open-minded. Instead of assuming that individual political beliefs and ideas are correct and held by the majority of the population, one can seek alternative views and broaden one's view of society and the political world.

2. Final considerations

Cognitive science and especially social neuroscience have suggested that humans are bad at using reason, thus, human biases usually get in the way of clear and rational thinking. Evolutionary psychologists argue that human mental shortcuts are not designed flaws, they are design features, as they helped hominins survive and adapt to hostile environments for millions of years (Haselton, Nettle, & Murray, 2015).

The key to understanding how the modern mind works is to realize that its circuits were not designed to solve the everyday problems of a modern human: they were designed to solve the everyday problems of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. These stone-age priorities produced a brain that was much better at solving some problems than others (Petersen, 2015).

Although today's world is very different from what it was in the Pleistocene, it is not entirely different. The challenges facing the human species, while they might at first glance be different, present similar challenges. There is still distrust of strangers, and poor immigrants, and fear and a sense of security still underpin many political candidacies. In short, the human species has the same brain that allowed it to survive in the Pleistocene in the Anthropocene era.

Can or cannot instincts be trusted in politics? In light of psychological research and studies in social neuroscience, it seems not. There are too many factors involved in our citizenship and instincts and mental shortcuts are often misleading. If you consider the heuristic shortcuts and biases that come into play in political decisions, what do voters who use recognition bias do when they mark their candidate on the ballot? They will probably vote for the candidate whose name or face they recognize. Does this make any democratic sense? It could be that the candidate has been able to spread his name and face on billboards all over the city, or that he/she has displayed excessive publicity in the media and social networks because he/she has a lot of economic resources. Shouldn't the citizens ask themselves where all the money spent by the candidates on publicity has come from?

Given the national political, social, and economic reality, citizens would do better if, by instinct, there was a bias of non-recognition. This would somehow tend to balance the democratic system against candidates who enjoy the economic resources of the powerful and elite groups in the country. So, is recognition bias a good reason to support these candidates? It might be a good reason if you are convinced that things are going well and consider your vote a stamp of approval for the status quo. But using this perspective could lead you to support a candidate who doesn't deserve it.

Collective support for candidates for public office can lead to bad decisions. Worse, social neuroscience asserts that familiarity leads to a positive feeling, the same feeling that humans experience when they are happy, and what happens when you have the feeling of happiness? People become less reflective and analytical (Dejonckheere, Rhee, Baguma, Barry, Becker, Bilewicz, Castelain, Costantini, Dimdins, Espinosa, Finchilescu, Friese, Gastardo-Conaco, Gomez, Gonzalez, Goto, Halama, Hurtado-Parrado, Jiga-Boy, & Bastian, 2022). Name recognition leads individuals to be less reflective and more susceptible to manipulation.

Confirmation bias, like the other mental shortcuts, just reviewed, prevents probing for the truth. The biases give priority to easy answers when difficult answers are more likely to be correct. A study by Lazarsfeld (1944) pointed out that voters need more than information so that if voters are given facts and real, truthful information, they will make the right decisions. Unfortunately, in a globalized society full of information and data where the veracity of facts counts for little, it is difficult to make the right decision.

Citizens usually have at hand all the information concerning politicians, and usually know when they are involved in cases of corruption and abuses of power. Despite that, many citizens ignore real information and facts and refuse to leave their opinions or beliefs in front of them. In this sense, biases cloud reason and it does not matter what the facts dictate, but individual opinion, a classic illustration of perseverance bias.

As in most elections, in the plebiscite on Colombia's 2016 peace accords, people did not vote based on what they expected to happen in the future upon reaching peace with the FARC guerrillas, but voted, thinking about the past and the present, bringing to mind all the atrocities this insurgent group committed. After all, the future is abstract, the past and the present, on the other hand, are concrete. As emotional human beings, we respond more strongly to the concrete. People did not vote so much for what peace represented, but against what the FARC guerrillas represented.

Now, this is less strange than it seems. Biases are so common in all social spheres. If you think that those who protest are lazy and that Afro-Colombians and indigenous people are lazy and you come across research that shows the opposite, and they are simply people who lack opportunities, is it likely that the underlying bias that all those who march are lazy and that all Afro-Colombians and indigenous people are lazy will be relinquished? It will probably be difficult to change minds. It is much more likely that ways will be found to dismiss the research or ignore the obvious.

One of the reasons to explain this phenomenon is that individual opinions and beliefs reflect the way each person understands and comprehends the world around them. Will it be easy for an individual to change the principles and beliefs on which his or her conception of society is based? The answer is no. Changing and rethinking assumptions is difficult and creates cognitive dissonance, which entails cognitive expense. According to Kahneman (2013), the brain tends to take the easy path whenever possible, as it tends to be lazy (expending fewer energy resources). Humans prefer not to think, as this requires cognitive energy. So if findings or facts are found that go against our beliefs or opinions, we prefer to dismiss them out of hand rather than face their implications.

On the other hand, if you have to choose between hard truth and soft optimism, which would you choose? The answer seems to be obvious, optimism. In the Pleistocene, life was often so hard and conditions so harsh that the only way forward was to deny reality. Survival often depended simply on the hunter-gatherers' ability to endure. To make it to spring, you had to survive the winter using whatever means you could think of, and if you couldn't think of it anyway, well, you simply lived on hope (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021).

Hope was thus a sound strategy. But in 21st-century societies, in a globalized world where millions of people interact in complicated ways within the confines of well-established institutions, hope seems not to be the right strategy. It is often a recipe for social non-conformity. In today's world, optimists are not needed, but realists.

Biases suggest that human beings are designed to be optimists. Neuroscientist Sharot (2011), points out that 80% of human beings are optimistic by nature (optimism bias). For this author, inferences about what will happen in the future are fundamental for decision-making, since they allow us to prepare actions to avoid damage and obtain rewards. Given the importance of these future projections, one would expect the brain to possess accurate and unbiased foresight. Humans, however, exhibit a pervasive and surprising bias: when it comes to predicting what will happen tomorrow, next week, or fifty years from now, the probability of positive events is overestimated and the probability of negative events is underestimated.

For example, the chances that a candidate immersed in corruption cases or supported by political clans will not favor the economic interests of economic groups or political elites against collective and social interests are underestimated. Thus, optimism bias is the difference between a person's expectations and the result obtained. How many times have citizens been disappointed by the expectations generated by their elected representatives?

Along with this bias, there are other common biases in citizens and political leaders. The self-interest or self-serving bias. People are motivated to maintain a positive view of themselves in a variety of different ways. Although often considered universal, this tendency may be rooted in an independent model of the self. If individuals believe that they are independent and separate from others, they may be strongly motivated to establish the positivity of this personal self by cognitively elaborating and emphasizing the positive characteristics of the self while, at the same time, dissociating it from any potentially negative characteristics (Park & Kitayama, 2012; Zhang, Pan, Li, & Guo, 2018).

Thus, when something good happens, people tend to take credit for it, but when something bad happens, the blame is placed on others. This explains what happens daily with political parties and candidates when they have a retrospective vision and blame the failures in economic, social, and security policies on their predecessors. The last thing anyone wants to be reminded of is the truth and their mistakes, let alone be reminded that other people or opponents often get things right. No politician likes to be reminded of his failures and made to see the reality.

Ordinary citizens and voters, as we have seen, generally do not like to be told the truth. They want hope and optimism. If the truth steals hope, it is better not to hear it. According to Shenkman (2016), the Catholic vote, the female vote, and the black vote pale in comparison to the optimistic vote. If a political candidate proposes to raise taxes and tax more food with VAT on the family basket, he or she would be committing one of the worst pre-election political approaches.

These studies would seem to contradict what happens in American democracies, where the Catholic vote, and especially the evangelical vote, plays an essential role in presidential and congressional elections. The weight that these religious structures represent in these countries determines in most cases the electoral triumph. In countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and even the United States, this religious vote has millions of votes and represented in past elections for Brazilians the electoral triumph of Bolsonaro and for North Americans the triumph of Donald Trump.

In this line, Colombia must carry out studies and research to determine and analyze the influence that social networks, the media, and religious and political positions have on Colombians when it comes to making political decisions. Likewise, it would be convenient to analyze the most dominant types of biases and heuristic shortcuts in the population, and thus, characterize in a certain way the Colombian voter.

Avoiding biases and prejudices in our society will be difficult if we do not have a quality education system. Critical thinking, metacognition, and social and emotional skills are essential for the development of reflective, critical, and empathetic individuals. As long as these types of skills and competencies are not strengthened in individuals in training, societies will continue to be limited and permeated by corrupt politicians, social networks, and the media. The key to avoiding these cognitive shortcuts and biases lies in education. Recognizing, understanding, and comprehending them will make individuals more reflective and critical when making political decisions.

In short, human beings possess innumerable instincts and biases, which involve any human activity. According to Petersen (2015), human evolutionary mechanisms are designed to help evaluate people in the environment. They are less good at helping to evaluate people from a distance. Natural gifts for reading people are largely neutralized when reading politicians. The circumstances under which you get to know them are so artificial that most of the time it is impossible to grasp the essence of the real person underneath the fictional character created for public consumption. There is a tendency to believe that politicians are well-known, but they are hardly known at all.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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