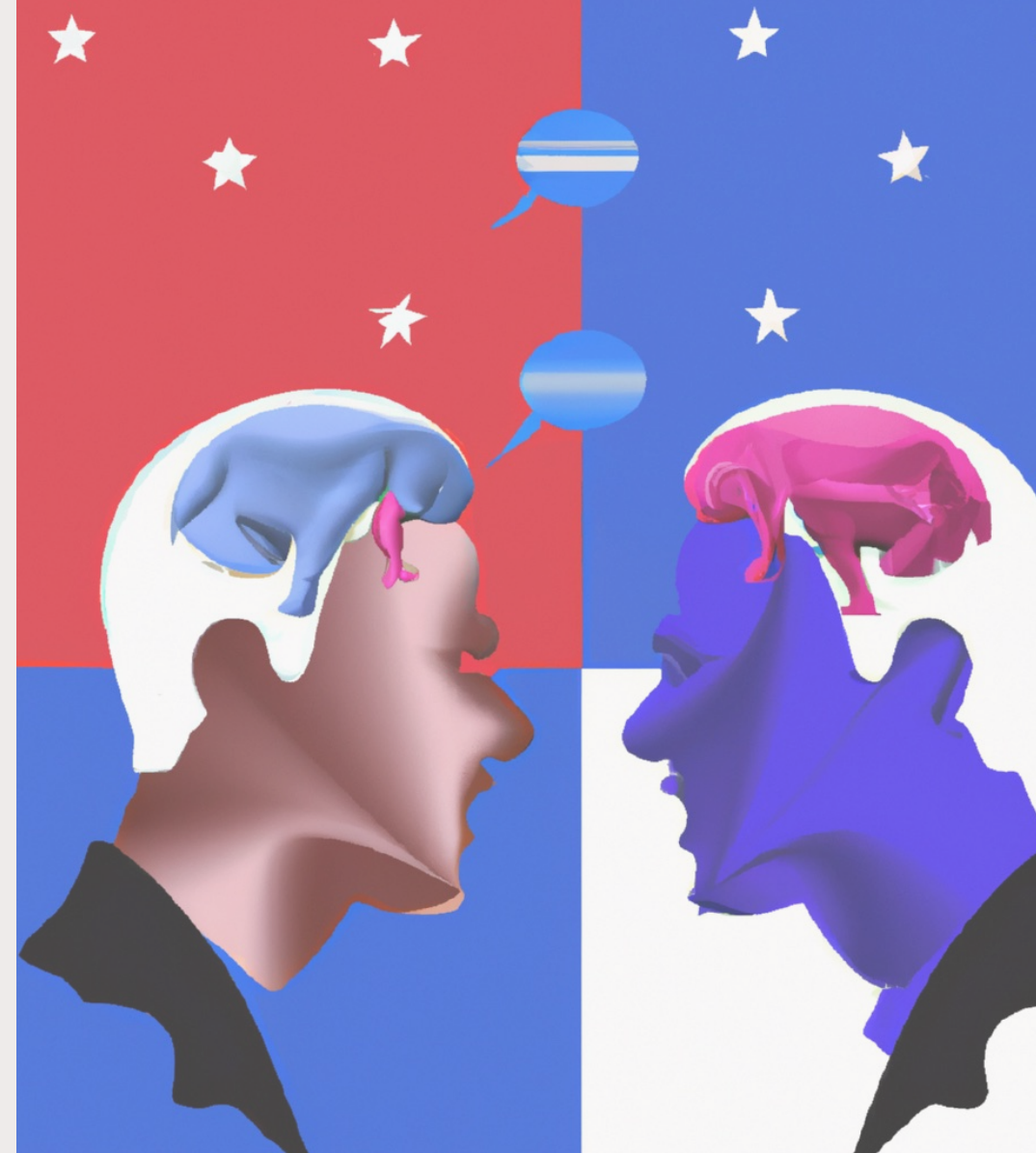


# What's Wrong with Political Deference?

**Elise Woodard (MIT / KCL)**

*European Face of Political Epistemology*

14.07.23



# How should citizens form responsible political opinions?

## Examples:

- Should the government increase the federal minimum wage?
- Should the state introduce a mask mandate?
- Should I support the union strike?
- Which candidate should I vote for?

# Options



DEFER TO OTHERS



THINK FOR THEMSELVES



SUSPEND JUDGMENT

# What is deference?

A defers to *B* on the question whether *p* if A believes that *p* (or  $\neg p$ ) because *B* does.



# Plan



Motivate deference as a good way to form our political beliefs.



Summarize arguments in favor of *partisan deference*.



Argue that these views face normative and epistemic objections.



Suggest that we reconsider our expectations of citizens in a democracy.

# Politics is Complex

## Answering Political Questions Requires:

- Knowing scientific or economic facts and theories
- Knowing legal, social, psychological, or historical facts
- Making complex value judgments
- Answering questions about political strategy & implementation



# Limitations



Time



Information



Skills

# Why not suspend?

## When we vote or act:

- Importance of (informed) opinion for democratic legitimacy
- Not meaningfully different from deference → delegating to others
  - Not choosing is still choosing (Lillehammer 2021)

## Generally:

- Excessively risk-averse (Beerbohm 2012)
- Public discourse & epistemic commons



# Deference to Co-Partisans

- Philosophers have recently defended **deference to co-partisans** as a good way to form political beliefs.
- Deference is permissible when it is empirical or mixed.



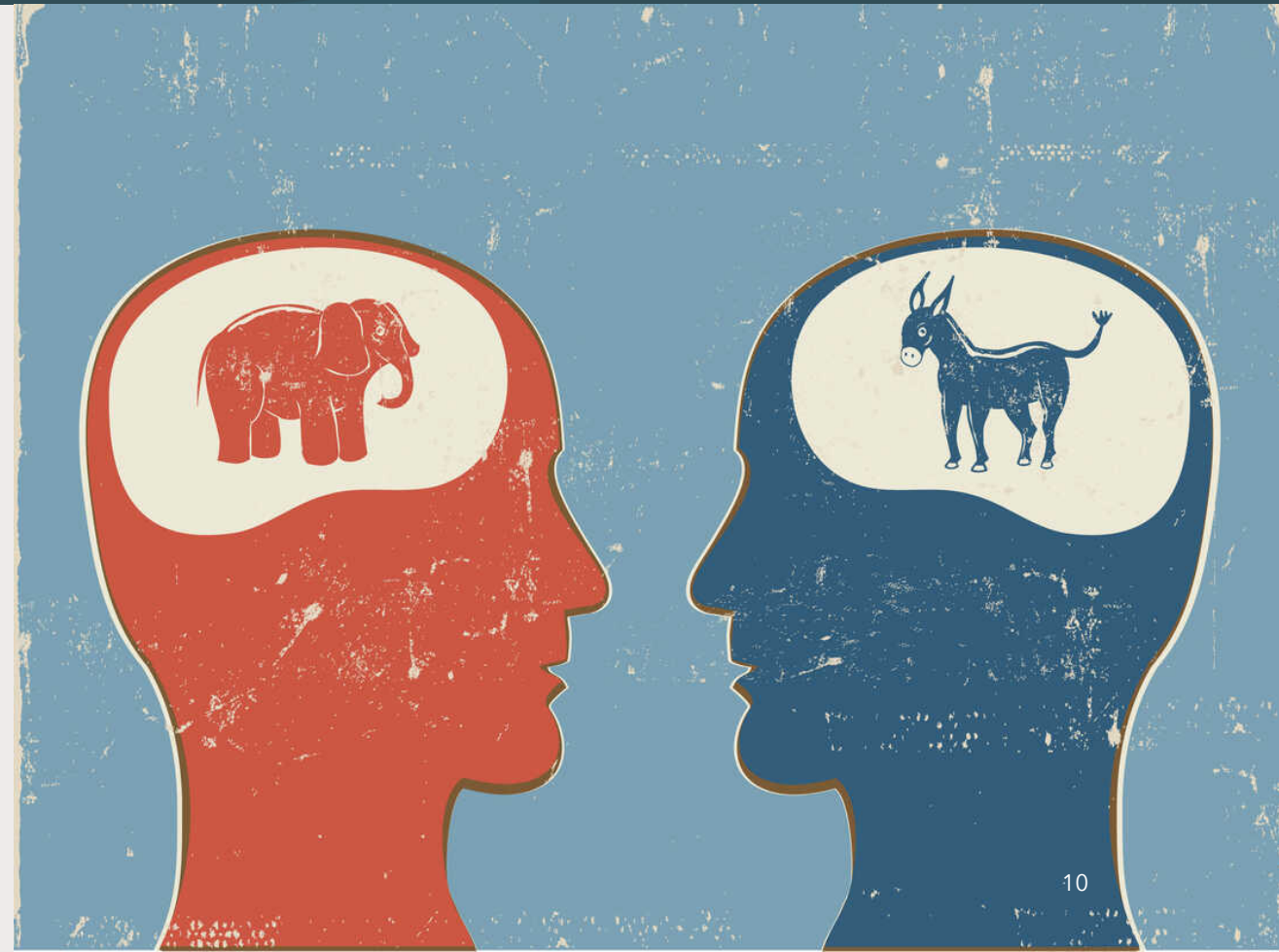
# Co-Partisanship

Co-Partisans  
share a political  
affiliation

Labor vs.  
Conservative /  
Right vs. Left

Treated as a  
proxy for  
shared values.

You're permitted to  
defer to people  
with whom you  
(think you) share  
values.





## Argument for Partisan Deference

1. Political affiliation reflects one's values.
2. If (1), then it can be epistemically permissible to defer to co-partisans.
3. So, it can be epistemically permissible to defer to co-partisans.

# Pros of Partisan Deference

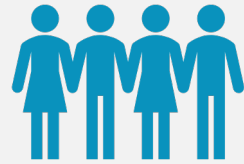
## Empirical:

- Easy to identify co-partisans
- Action-guiding
- Compare: experts

## Normative:

- Purely normative deference is *prima facie* problematic.
- When we defer to co-partisans, we treat them as a *proxy* for ourselves.

# Worries



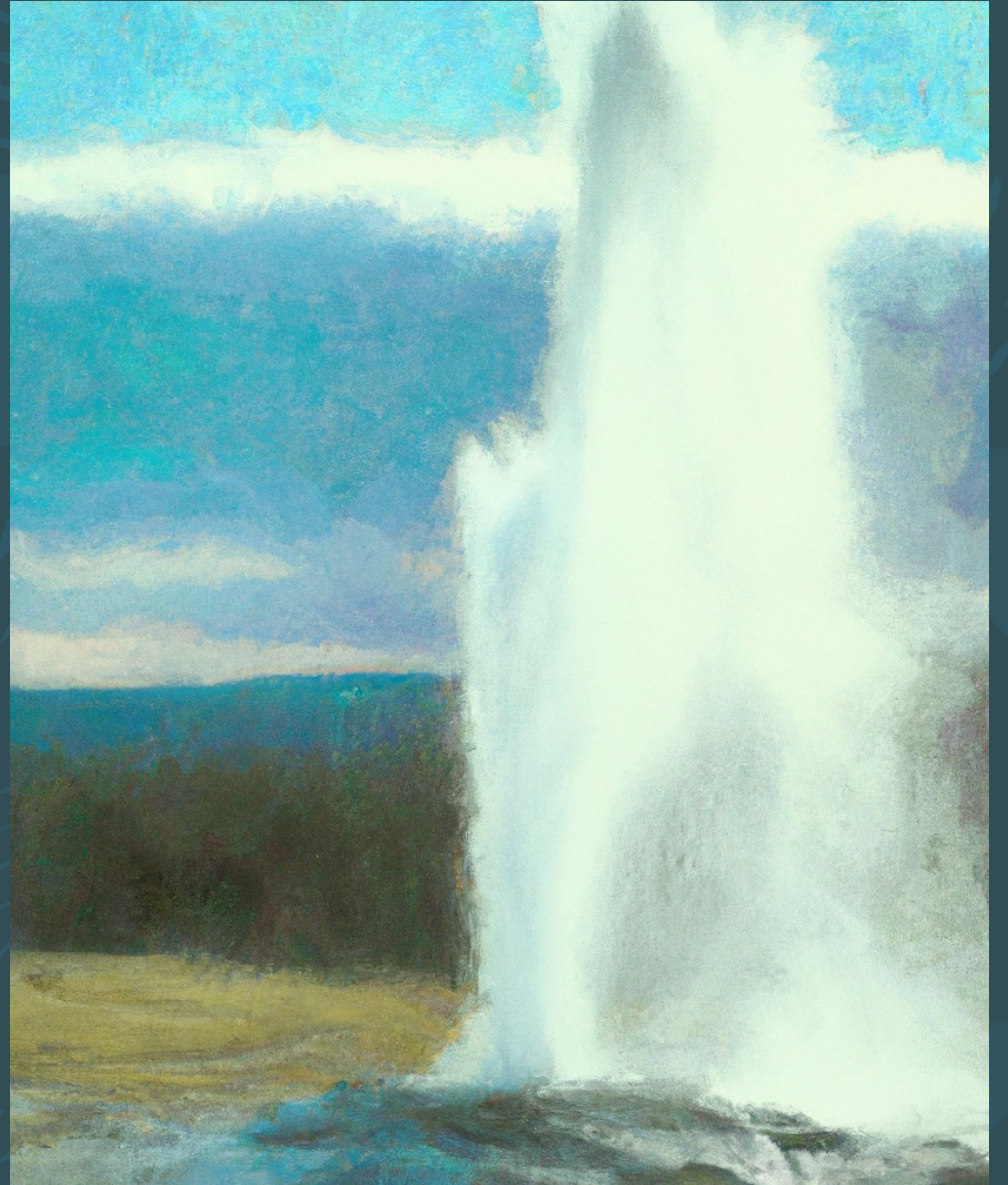
NORMATIVE



EPISTEMIC

# Normative Deference Redux

- Do people defer because they share values antecedently?
- Or do they share values because they defer to fellow partisans?
- If the latter, then we have normative deference again.



# Two Models of Partisanship



ISSUE-DRIVEN



EMOTION-DRIVEN

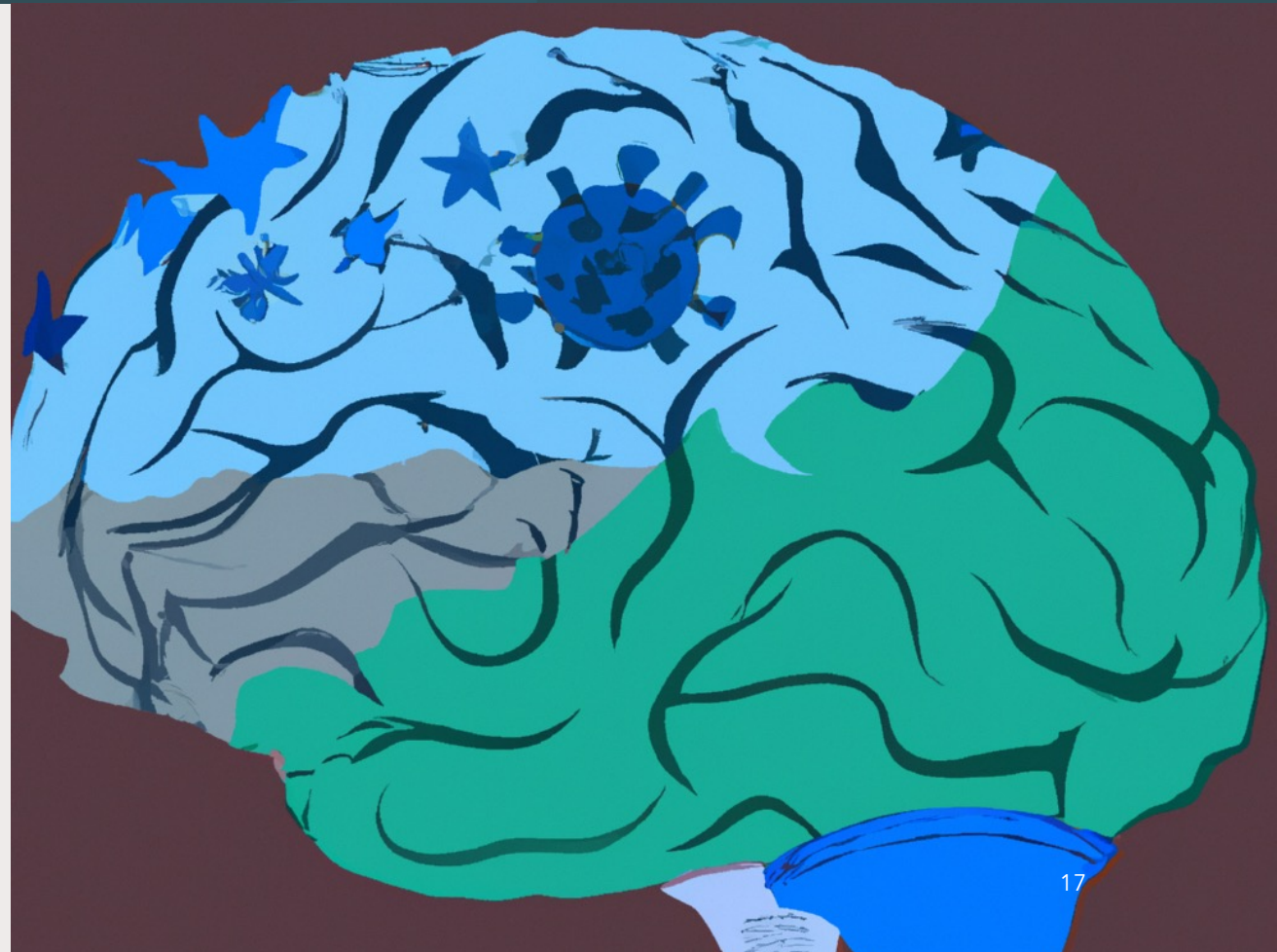
# Party Over Policy

- The majority of people tend to **change issue-position to match party**, rather than change party to match their view on the issue.
  - Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*
  - Lenz, *Follow the Leader*
  - Goren et al, "Source Cues, Partisan Identities, & Political Value Expression"
  - Carsey & Layman, "Changing Sides or Changing Minds?"
  - Cohen, "Party Over Policy"
  - Lavine et al, *The Ambivalent Partisan*
- Some partisanship may be issue driven.
  - Worries about deference less stark
  - But deference is less necessary: already more knowledgeable!



# Epistemic Worries

Partisan deference can be *irrational*,  
*unreliable*, and *vicious*.



# Epistemic Irrationality

- Philosophers have argued that partisan deference is rational because it is conducive to realizing their values.
- This is still not enough to render it rational! At best, it's reliable.
- For deference to be rational, co-partisans can't defer for reasons that have *nothing* to do with its reliability.
  - **Analogy:** Deference to parents
- People typically defer to co-partisans due to group loyalty & emotional attachments.

# Unreliability

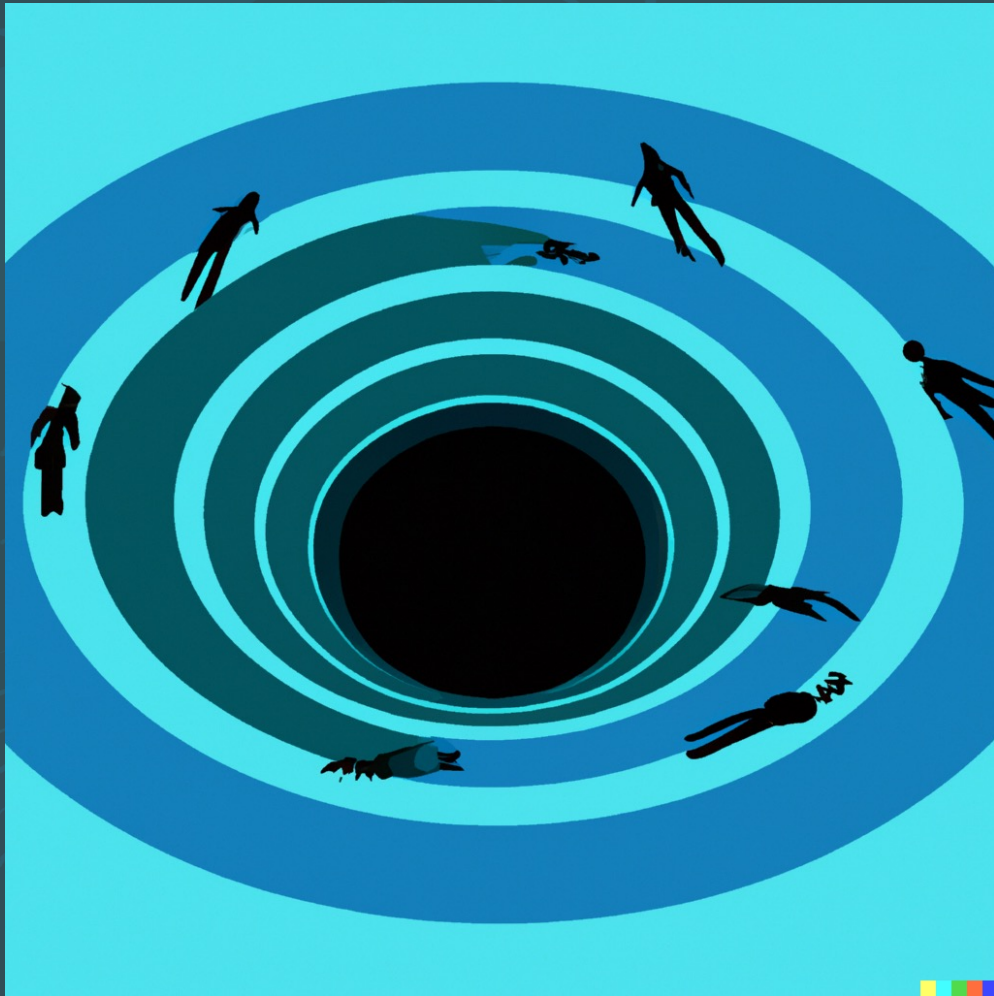
- Assume that realizing one's values is all that matters.
- **Problem:** Partisan deference often makes one *less* likely to realize one's values:
  - Learning candidates' party affiliations often decreases the likelihood of "voting correctly" (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).
  - Partisans prefer policies endorsed by members of their own party, even when an alternative policy option is clearly closer aligned with their values (Lavine et al, 2012)



# Epistemic Spillovers

- Learning someone's political views affects our judgment of their competence on non-political tasks.
- **Ex:** Shape Recognition
- Prefer to defer to those who are **like-minded** but **less accurate** than those who are **dissimilar** but **more accurate**





# Recap

- **Starting Question:** How should citizens form (responsible) political opinions?
- **The problem:** In contemporary electoral democracies, it's exceedingly hard to!



# **Solutions: Individual vs. Institutional**

# Revisiting the argument for deference

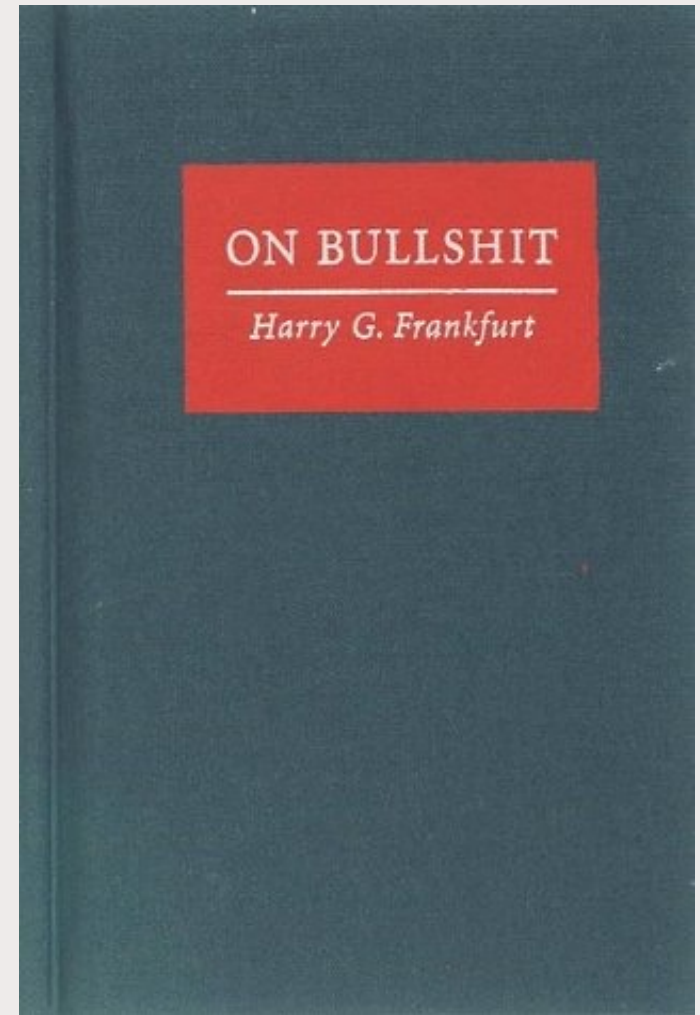
Assumed that **forming beliefs** about **a wide variety of topics** is central to being a good democratic citizen.



# Frankfurt on Bullshit

Frankfurt worried that pressure to have many opinions leads to bullshit:

“Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. . . . Closely related instances arise from the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country’s affairs.” (Frankfurt 2009)





# Reduce pressure to...

## Form beliefs...

- Focus on non-political activities, rather than forming beliefs, to bring about social change (Freiman 2020)

## About so many things...

- Allow suspension about many issues
- Increase quality, reduce quantity (cf. Elliott 2023)

# Institutional Solutions

- Reduce the salience of partisan identity
- Improve conditions for responsible opinion formation and deliberation
- Requires rethinking contemporary politics
- Could bolster arguments for alternative political arrangements (e.g. lottocracy)



# Further Work



Ethics of political belief



Belief-action principles in  
politics

# Conclusion

1. Deference is widely viewed as necessary.
2. Deference to co-partisans seemed morally & epistemically responsible.
3. But there are serious worries about partisan deference.
4. We should reconsider our expectations and requirements of citizens in a democracy.