

Good argument

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How do we decide?

How do we decide?

How do we make up our minds about where we stand on a new question or issue?

How do we decide?

Consider the various courses of action and reason about which is most just?

Ponder the scientific research findings and then weigh the facts?

How do we decide?

Most often, we side with our "team"

How do we decide?

Our team is any group we identify with

Democrats

Southerners

Jews

Mormons

Environmentalists

Libertarians

Upper East Side intellectuals

Country music fans

Finance guys

Rush Limbaugh listeners

Red Sox nation

Economists

How do we decide?

Often, we take our cue about what our team believes from an influential organization or person

AARP

Chamber of Commerce

Martin Luther King

Sarah Palin

Rush Limbaugh

Is the solid evidence the earth is warming?	Rep	Dem	Ind
	%	%	%
Yes	38	79	56
Because of human activity	16	53	32
Because of natural patterns	18	18	17
Don't know (Vol.)	3	8	7
No	53	14	31
Mixed/Don't know (Vol.)	9	6	12
How serious a problem?			
Very serious	14	50	30
Somewhat serious	27	32	32
Not too serious	23	8	17
Not a problem	34	7	18
Is it a problem requiring immediate government action?*			
Yes	24	68	44
No	39	19	31
Do scientists agree the earth is getting warmer because of human activity?			
Yes	30	59	41
No	58	32	45

Bad argument

Bad argument

Our inclination to side with our team leads us to uncritically
accept argument and evidence consistent with our position
reject opposing argument and evidence

Bad argument

It also encourages us to use bad argument and evidence to try to sway others

Sometimes this is conscious, sometimes unconscious

Even the wisest among us are susceptible

It's particularly likely in a format designed to persuade: political speeches and commentary, talk radio, op-eds, films

Tricks

Present only your side of the argument; don't address objections

or

Address weak arguments the other side doesn't actually make

Tricks

Answer a different question

Tricks

Tell a story, and generalize from that anecdote

Tricks

Tell some history. Then suggest that today's similarities or differences give us the answer.

Tricks

Posit a "big tradeoff"

Tricks

Suggest there are only two alternatives, and one is extreme

Tricks

Use a theory based on highly-simplified assumptions to infer about the real world

Tricks

Cherry-pick data

or

Treat a single scientific study as though it were definitive

Tricks

Defer to public opinion ("it's what Americans want")

Tricks

Data tricks

The really big number

Use percentages to exaggerate the degree of change

Use a crude measure to hide nuance

Use the average when the median is better

Graphing tricks

Think

Think

I haven't yet said anything about good argument. We'll get to that during the semester

The key is to think

- Resist the urge to side with your team

- Be aware of tricks

- Consider the evidence

- Try to come to your own conclusion