

**Thrasymachus's Blush:**  
Political Psychology and the Road to Democratic Realism

May 18, 2020

Word Count: 10,586

*Abstract.* Political scientists and political theorists have long struggled to find common ground on which to engage each other fruitfully. Recently, though, such mutual indifference has begun to ebb. For example, influential political psychologists have applied their findings to democratic theory, claiming that rationalist political theories rest on untenable empirical premises. The supposedly devastating consequences of partisan motivated reasoning, affective primacy, social intuitionism, and group loyalties has prompted a retreat to less ambitious theories of “democratic realism.” We argue that the anti-rationalists’ uptake in democratic theory exemplifies how applying faulty interpretations of political science to political theory leads to bad theory and bad practice. The anti-rationalists’ results are better interpreted as *elaborating* rationalist theories, rather than undermining them. After analyzing more promising—if still strained—attempts at engagement, we outline an inferentialist model of political judgment that better addresses difficulties in translating between the normative and scientific study of democracy.

*Thrasymachus conceded all these points, but not in the easygoing way I have just described. He had to be dragged every step of the way, sweating profusely, as you might expect in summer. This was the occasion when I saw something I had never seen before—Thrasymachus blushing.*

– Plato, *Republic* 350d

Plato’s Thrasymachus is one of the first great “realists” in western political thought. He famously defines justice as the advantage of the stronger. Less famously, though just as importantly, he goes on to argue that as an empirical matter, the rhetoric of reason and justice actually tends to further the interests of the powerful. Versions of Thrasymachus’s claims have echoed and evolved down through the history of political thought, all the way to contemporary discussions about the efficacy of public deliberation and “realist” theories of democracy.

Research on partisan motivated reasoning, affective primacy, social intuitionism, and group loyalty appears to support such pessimism about democracy by demonstrating the ways in which people’s emotions and partisan identities drive how they present, assimilate, and process political arguments and information. Recently, several influential scholars have offered radical interpretations of these results, arguing that such phenomena are so predominant as to leave notions of public reason—and, indeed, much of democratic theory—unmoored in practice. For example, Lodge and Taber (2013: *i*) summarize their enormously influential research thus:

Human beings are consummate rationalizers, but rarely are we rational... [P]olitical behavior is the result of innumerable unnoticed forces, with conscious deliberation little more than a rationalization of the outputs of automatic feelings.

Similarly, Achen and Bartels (2016) argue that being “realistic” about democracy requires that we reorient our theories away from reason and toward affective group loyalties: basically helping our friends and harming our enemies (cf. *Republic* 332d). Jonathan Haidt is even more pointed, arguing that reason evolved as a tool of rhetoric rather than the other way around, and that reason’s

evolutionary origins still predominate when it comes to applications in modern politics. The inferences he draws about politics explicitly echo Thrasymachus. Haidt even goes so far as to call his theory “Glauconian,” after Thrasymachus’s ally in the dialectical jousting with Socrates: “In fact, I’ll praise Glaucon for the rest of the book as the guy who got it right” (Haidt 2012: 86).

In *Republic*, though, Thrasymachus, the cynical sophist, blushes when Socrates unmasks his arguments as cynical and sophistic. This detail is curious and striking. As Bloom notes, “The apparently shameless Thrasymachus, willing to say anything, is revealed in all his vanity, for he blushes” (1968: 336). Such reactions make little sense on the reason-as-rationalization account. Indeed, contemporary research reveals the existence of cross-cutting forces that hem in our tendencies to behave as cynical sophists, a photonegative of partisan motivated reasoning.

In addition to the evolutionary tendency to use reason sophistically, our common ancestry also has made it so that very few of us—i.e., sociopaths—are so immune to shame as to be able to behave as cynical sophists through and through. We are disposed to track and respond to reasons in ways that are not purely strategic (Tomasello 2009). It turns out that even Thrasymachus is what we might call a “theoretical” (not a congenital) sociopath: whatever his professed views about justice, power, and the sophist’s vocation, he blushes and literally feels the force of social accountability in the face of Socrates’s superior reasoning.

Lodge and Taber, Achen and Bartels, Haidt, and others, though, purport to show that “rationalist” political theories rest on untenable empirical premises. Their work has been published by the best journals and presses, and their ideas have been discussed and deployed in a wide range of fields including political science, psychology, philosophy, communications, law, anthropology, and sociology. Haidt has published a best-selling book (2012) and taken to TED talks and the pages of the *New York Times* to advance the revolutionary implications of his research for our

political self-understanding.

Thus research on partisan motivated reasoning, affective primacy, social intuitionism, and group loyalty has gained widespread traction. For example, Haidt's moral foundations theory has been influential in several fields of political science (e.g., Clifford and Jerit 2013; Kertzer et al. 2014; Ryan 2017; Smith et al. 2011). If these anti-rationalist thinkers are correct, then some very prominent theories of political justification—e.g., those based on public reason (Rawls 2001) and deliberation (Habermas 1996)—would seem to have no anchor in the political world.

Indeed, political theorists make this point against rationalist theories, developing alternatives that take the anti-rationalist empirical findings as a constraint (Disch 2011; Kelly 2012), sometimes to alarming effect. For example, in his 2017 book *Against Democracy* Jason Brennan discusses Haidt, Lodge and Taber, and other political psychologists to motivate his “epistocratic” alternative to democracy, noting that “The overwhelming consensus in political psychology, based on a huge and diverse range of studies, is that most citizens process information in deeply biased, partisan, motivated ways” (37). Less radically, though more consequentially, Thaler and Sunstein (2009) defend “libertarian paternalism” as an antidote to the “biases and blunders” of democratic citizens (17). For political theorists, political psychologists, and even for political practitioners, a lot rides on whether the anti-rationalist implications of such work go through.

We argue that these implications do not go through. The anti-rationalist research program stands as a remarkable case study of how applying flat-footed interpretations of social science to democratic theory can lead to both bad theory and bad practice. In the end, the anti-rationalists' empirical results are either incoherent with the purposes to which they are put, or they are better interpreted as elucidating, rather than undermining, broadly rationalist theories of politics.

Of course, we do not wish to make the obverse mistake that political behavior is or should be

devoid of emotion, intuition, or group loyalty. Nor do we dispute that (some) irrational tendencies are well established empirical regularities. Our claim is instead that this evidence does not warrant starkly anti-rationalist conclusions. Just because humans sometimes employ non-rational—or even irrational—processes to form judgments does not mean they are incapable of rationality. So in addition to critiquing the more extreme versions of anti-rationalism, we assess a range of more temperate empirical and theoretical contributions to the interplay of reason and emotion in democratic politics. Taken together those contributions begin to frame a more productive set of interpretive options for applying political psychology to democratic theory.

The point, however, is not merely to correct interpretive mistakes. We show that the *way* the translation process often goes wrong exemplifies a recurring theme in such attempts, one rooted in the disciplinary divide over facts and values. So we conclude by articulating and defending an *inferentialist* model of political judgment that can help bridge the fraught territory between empirical research and normative theorizing about democracy.

### **Intuitionism against Political Rationalism**

The social intuitionist model (SIM) posits that affectively managed intuition drives political judgment. People have immediate gut feelings that manifest in quick evaluations (Haidt et al. 1993). The slower, more deliberative process of reasoning plays only an ancillary role (Haidt 2001). Reasoning in the SIM is typically just *ex post* rationalization of one's own positions. People attempt to win others to their position by any means, not on the basis of “good” or “better” reasons (whatever those might be). Haidt explicitly calls affect-as-intuition the “senior partner” to reason (2010: 184). The SIM is based on a considerable body of research and dovetails neatly with other important theories from modern psychology, such as the dual-process model of cognition

(Kahneman 2011) and motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990).

Haidt casts his model as a response to Kohlberg's "rationalist" model of judgment. The principal difference between Kohlberg's model and the SIM is the direction of the causal arrow between judgment and reasoning: Kohlberg's model takes reasons to drive judgment, and the SIM takes judgment to drive (*post hoc*) reasoning. In Haidt's words, Kohlberg posits reason as the "senior partner." Haidt argues that if Kohlberg's model were right, the judgments people offer on moral and political questions would have to have been caused by reasons. But he reports that frequently people cannot identify the reasons why they judge some actions to be right or wrong.

Building on the SIM, Haidt has articulated a moral foundations theory (MFT) of judgment (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Haidt 2012). People base their moral and political judgments on clusters of intuitive reactions which include care (utilitarian beneficence), fairness (rights and justice), in-group loyalty, hierarchical authority, and notions of "purity" (failures of which elicit disgust reactions). Individuals vary in the degree to which they respond to these foundations, and that variation correlates with the liberal-conservative dimension of politics. MFT has been applied prominently in political science.

Haidt thus encourages us to collapse descriptive and normative politics—i.e., how, as an empirical matter, we in fact *do* tend to make judgments with how, as a normative matter, we *should* make those judgments. If (1) judgments are primarily caused by intuitions, (2) intuitions are analogous to disgust reactions, and (3) different people are affected by different subsets of those intuitions, then differences in judgments cannot be resolved by saying that one side is right and the other is wrong. For example, denying the judgment "homosexual activities should be against the law" would be similar to denying that it is reasonable to have a disgust reaction to eating insects. Thus, political foes do not properly have access to claims of the better argument. Instead,

they merely have different tastes—Haidt explicitly uses analogies to taste buds and aesthetics (2012). His argument entails a fairly strong version of relativism, despite protestations to the contrary. Reason plays a negligible role, and is generally just a rhetorical tool to convince others by any means available. As with Thrasymachus, justice becomes the right of the stronger in wielding those and other more avowedly manipulative tools.

### **Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow, and Thinking Again**

We do not intend to critique Haidt's theories in their own right, so much as the implications that he claims for them. We argue that this senior/junior partner debate rests on a false dichotomy, which follows from mistaking a vaguely defined notion of frequency with causal and conceptual importance. Lab experiments do not test for frequency in any externally valid way, or even employ a well-defined concept of frequency. As Kahneman (2003) notes in his discussion of intuition (System 1) and reason (System 2), "There is, of course, no way to ascertain precisely the relative frequencies." But even if we were to grant that affect determined behavior more often than reason, the significance of such a finding for rationalist theories of politics is not clear.

Rationalist political theories make a point of arguing that explicit reasoning is a fairly specialized and episodic process. Habermas (1996), for example, argues that for everyday interactions we rely on settled background assumptions and affectively managed behavioral dispositions to coordinate our actions and furnish appropriate social judgments. For Habermas, we rely on the *lifeworld*—which can be readily glossed as "social intuition"—to manage the great bulk of mundane interactions. Crucially, though, such assumptions and behavioral norms have an implicit presumption of legitimacy. It is only when the presumptions of legitimacy are challenged that we problematize the implicit social rules that undergird our intuitions, subjecting them to

explicit reflection. For Habermas, the arch-rationalist, the anti-rationalists' findings about "frequency" are to be expected—indeed they are functionally necessary.

But perhaps more importantly, it is not clear that the anti-rationalists have even conceptualized reason in a helpful way, nor identified operational tests that could be interpreted as establishing their claims. Their argument for the primacy of intuition is based on how often, *in their experiments*, we observe intuition cause actions, relative to how rarely we observe reason cause actions. In addition to posing a rather crucial sample frame problem, equating frequency and causal importance is hardly obvious or sensible. Intuition and reason work on different timescales, and it is not clear why a single causal instance in which reason prevails ought to count the same as each instance in which that intuitive disposition causes a political judgment.

Consider an analogy to a ship. The captain orders the helmsman to lay in a course, say once every few hours (timescale 1). The helmsman will not simply turn the wheel to a locked position. Instead, she will keep vigil over her heading, monitoring changes from her environment, and issuing course corrections. Suppose that she does so every couple of minutes (timescale 2). Her only action of interest is to direct the rudder. Water flows pushes against the rudder. Small changes in the vortices of the water shift the rudder. Very small changes in the water are corrected by the very small actions of the rudder, at a very small timescale, say every few seconds (timescale 3). We could continue this down to the level of quantum mechanics.

However, if we are concerned about why the ship ends up where it does, we face a scale problem. We can tell causal stories about the captain, or about the helmsman, or even at some more fine-grained level. But, at least in navigation, when we tell such causal stories, we seldom descend past timescale 2. Although actions at smaller timescales are perfectly causal, these actions are simply not very informative about why the ship moves where it does. Normative questions,

such as, “Where should the ship go?” or “What is the best way to get there?” have even less interesting or meaningful answers at small timescales.

When affect-as-intuition scholars argue that reason should be viewed as the junior partner because the latter causes political judgments more often than the former, they are ignoring the idea that a little bit of tutelage can go a long way. At a short timescale, intuition often seems to be the senior partner, just as the helmsman seems to be more causally efficacious than the captain. But on a longer timescale, intuition recedes in importance, and the relatively rarer, but more influential role of reason seems to be where more of the interesting action is.

If our intuitive judgments rooted in the lifeworld were once the subject of explicit debate and contestation (as many plainly were), they can inherit a rational genealogy from the indirect, long-term effects of that debate. Similarly, at the level of the individual, many of our skills and habits were once deliberately cultivated. No one would say that the chess master who instantly recognizes that white can mate in three moves is not relying upon reason in a broad sense (Kahneman 2003). The fact that actions flow more or less automatically from intuition at one timescale does not impugn the sense in which we can consider them the product of reasoning. It is not even clear, then, how we should parse the direct and indirect effects of reason versus intuition, especially over time. Each is junior and senior, depending on the frame of reference, and democratic theory can plausibly claim the larger frame as more relevant to its concerns.

### **Partisan Motivated Reasoning & Democratic Competence**

Lodge and Taber’s (2013) *The Rationalizing Voter* advances arguments and claims similar to Haidt’s, but with a tighter focus on distinctly political judgment. They announce their target in the opening sentence: “Grounded in an Enlightenment view of Rational Man, political science has

been dominated by models of conscious control and deliberative democracy” (1). Their findings will show, on the contrary, that “[Political] deliberation is a bobbing cork on the currents of unconscious information processing... [W]e have [merely] the illusion of standing at the helm.” They conclude that we should be, “skeptical of the ability of citizens to reliably access or veridically report their beliefs and attitudes” (22). If so we might join Richard Lau, whose endorsement for the book asserts that it “might be better titled ‘The Illusion of Choice in Democratic Politics.’” The normative thrust of their interpretation is unmistakable: any account of democracy that relies prominently on public reasoning is built on foundations of sand.

For rationalist democratic theorists, however, the implicit antonym of reason is not emotion, but illegitimate power. Arbitrary or malignant authority are the bads to be avoided. Affect and emotion, in themselves, do not pose any threat to reasonable outcomes in this sense. Relying on the everyday sense in which reason and emotion are opposite is highly misleading in this context (Neblo, 2020). As we noted, emotions can be both responsive to reason and to shape our reasoning in ways that are warrantable. Thus, Lodge and Taber’s findings that reason and emotion massively interpenetrate does not cause problems for rationalist theories at all, nor (for the reasons we adduced above) does the apparent sense that affect is somehow “primary.”

That said, some of Lodge and Taber’s more specific findings would seem to cause trouble for a too-easy reconciliation between reason and affect. For example, the most apparently damning phenomenon that they elucidate to illustrate their point is partisan motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013: Ch. 7). Citizens are often “motivated more by their desire to maintain prior beliefs and feelings than by their desire to make ‘accurate’ or otherwise optimal decisions” (150). The evidence for partisan motivated reasoning rests on four interrelated phenomena: (1) a *prior attitude effect* in which people often evaluate supportive arguments as stronger than opposing arguments;

(2) *biased processing* in which people often spend more time and effort thinking about and challenging arguments that go against their political priors than those that support them; (3) *attitude polarization*, in which exposure to a “balanced” set of considerations often leaves people more strongly in favor of their initial position; and finally (4) the *sophistication effect* in which those who are more knowledgeable and sophisticated about politics exhibit even more belief maintenance (1), bias (2), and polarization (3).

Again, we are less interested in contesting Lodge and Taber’s findings than their interpretation of those findings. It is not clear that any of these phenomena necessarily bespeak irrational behavior or require positing a special motive to maintain prior beliefs. If I am already sympathetic to conservative arguments, for example, it is hardly surprising or problematic that *ceteris paribus* I should find further arguments that tilt conservative more convincing since I am already committed to a web of corresponding principles.

Similarly, at least some “biased” processing is entirely reasonable. One might spend more time processing counter-attitudinal arguments merely because they are less familiar and require more effort to address (Ross 2012). Moreover, coherence among our beliefs and commitments is an eminently reasonable goal. If I encounter some highly incongruent new information it can be reasonable for me to subject it to extra scrutiny: When psychologists published a new set of findings purporting to find evidence of ESP, the research community reacted with more than standard skepticism and scrutiny, relative to findings that did not pose fundamental challenges to their discipline’s belief system (Bem 2011). *A fortiori*, reflective equilibrium (as opposed to deductive theory testing) in the face of potential value pluralism creates even more scope for potentially reasonable “biases” in processing.

Moreover, if one subjects challenging evidence to higher scrutiny and then finds the new

evidence lacking, there is a sense in which one's prior beliefs have survived a test, in which case it is not always unreasonable to update toward those priors. And we should expect political sophisticates, with stronger priors and more capacity for processing the implications of challenging evidence, would be more pronounced in manifesting these effects.

The second main thing to note is that these effects are just that—effects. That is, Lodge and Taber's evidence does *not* show that people generally give no weight to counter arguments, or completely dismiss disconfirming evidence. We do not deny that aspects of partisan motivated reasoning can be problematic from a normative perspective. But without a normative theory of political judgment it is difficult to get a sense of *how* problematic such effects are. Citizens do not have to be perfectly rational to support democratic decision procedures.

This problem is not unique to Lodge and Taber; it also manifests outside the lab in interpretations of observational studies. For example, Achen and Bartels (2016) argue for their general conclusion that we need a “realist” theory of democracy oriented around the affective ties of group loyalty. Reason will not do because “voters’ retrospections are blind” (118). They warrant such claims with a case study of voting in New Jersey after a spate of shark attacks in 1916, specifically reporting that Woodrow Wilson's vote share dropped by “about ten percentage points” (127) in affected beach communities. Leaving aside that majorities in none of these communities went for Wilson in 1912, it is notable that even in this case, *most* voters do not seem to have been driven by blind retrospection—ten percent is merely a large (non-decisive) effect. Similarly, Healy, Malhotra, and Mo (2010) conclude that “voting decisions are influenced by irrelevant events” (12806), reasoning from their findings of the causal effects of college football and basketball games on aggregate voting outcomes. The effect sizes are smaller, but the conclusion remains generalized: “we find that voters respond to the random, unexpected outcome of

game[s]...[and] appear to be responding to short-term emotional stimuli” (12804). Here, too, the authors observe statistically significant effects, and then infer something general about the irrational behavior of generic “voters”.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, in cases when we do think that directional biases are problematic, there is reason to believe that the problem can be substantially remediated. For example, simply prompting people to think about how they would evaluate a given methodology had it produced the opposite conclusion almost completely eliminated the differential (Lord et al. 1984). A whole subfield in political psychology has grown up around such techniques for individual-level debiasing (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Moreover, there is reason to believe that the contestation and pervasive social accountability surrounding real politics in the wild will often help constrain the degree and scope of the phenomena that Lodge and Taber identified in their lab experiments (Druckman 2012). People exposed to more than one set of frames and streams of information are less susceptible to framing effects, as are those who process such information in groups (Druckman 2004), as well as those who expect accountability to others with differing views (Huckfeldt et al. 2004). And with some relatively mild inducement, people can be encouraged to engage in cognitive reflection (Turgeon 2009), and thus our intuitions can be “tamed” (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017).<sup>2</sup> The evidence for affectively “tainted” reasoning hardly constitutes grounds for despair about the role of reason in democratic politics. Even less so does it warrant the apparent

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<sup>1</sup> Here we take these results at face value; but see Fowler and Montagnes (2015) and Fowler and Hall (2018) for critiques of the research designs and estimates themselves.

<sup>2</sup> Arceneaux and Vander Wielen (2017) frame their takeaway as a matter of “taming intuition” yet they analyze traits, not states, limiting their ability to speak to the *dynamics* of intuition.

elitism or arbitrariness that supposedly follows on such despair.

### **From Descriptive to Normative Politics**

We have argued that the anti-rationalists' claims about political reasoning being decisively subordinate to affect-as-intuition are not well conceptualized, and therefore it is not clear that the empirical evidence that they deploy supports their interpretation. Moreover, even if it were well conceptualized and supported, prominent rationalist political theories can and do accommodate versions of the idea quite consistently—i.e., it would not count decisively against rationalism in the way they claim. These issues, however, are relatively benign compared to the problematic way in which Haidt, Lodge and Taber, Achen and Bartels, and others move between descriptive and normative claims about politics. When anti-rationalists distill prescriptions from their findings, they often recommend *normative leveling*: different intuitions and hence political judgments should be accorded equal weight and respect, with little regard to the different lines of reasoning that they may summarize, or how they may have come to exist in the first place.

Returning to the analogy of the ship, if we focus on small timescales we risk encouraging the inference that actions at the higher timescales are not really actions at all. From the perspective of the helmsman just doing her job, there are no good grounds on which to prefer one destination from another. Rejecting a meaningful role for the captain is the analogue of the normative leveling that anti-rationalists engage in when they move too quickly between descriptive and normative accounts of politics. According to them, we ought to reject the notion that some foundations of judgment are more important than others because, from the intuitive perspective, all of them look the same. But this leaves out the possibility that less frequent causal actions at larger timescales, like those of reasoning, are meaningful, despite their relative “rarity” such as it is. On the

“inferentialist” account we sketch below, people sometimes change their minds because they are committed to beliefs that constrain what one can coherently maintain.

This sort of assumption is missing from the anti-rationalist model, and so, therefore, is the ability to be wrong about political judgments in any meaningful sense. On this account, a political argument can only be more or less persuasive in the descriptive sense of garnering support or changing people’s minds. We simply trade one intuition for another. But there is no non-circular account for why one intuition should be stronger than another. Similarly, attempts to persuade are either effective or ineffective, but there is no way to distinguish between persuasion for good reasons versus bad reasons, or for that matter, between persuasion *per se* and manipulation. Intuitions and emotions here are fundamental, and, although they may be influenced by other people’s rationalizations, such influence is a bare, contingent fact.

Though not made explicit, the line that anti-rationalists often imply is a second-order appeal to liberal respect and toleration. For example, Smith et al. (2011) argue that “Most [people] are proud of their political orientations [and] believe them to be rational responses to the world around them...[But] if political differences are traceable in part to the fact that people vary in the way they physically experience the world...the hubris that fuels political conflict” (8-9) should abate. Similarly, Haidt argues that liberals should not be so dismissive of conservatives because the latter are actually more attuned to all foundations, rather than just care and fairness (Haidt 2012). These arguments seem to suggest that such descriptive diversity in political values *deserves* our respect, which is quite plausible, but highly ironic.

Such rationales are close to the one—dismissed and even mocked by Haidt—that Rawls uses to defend his theory of justice. For Rawls, respect and fairness undergird a theory that protects our rights against overly expansive claims of utility (i.e., exclusive reliance on the harm “foundation”).

But one of the main purposes of such rights is to allow us to develop forms of *private* life that often place great value on: submission to hierarchical authority (e.g., the Catholic magisterium), or in-group loyalty (e.g., to co-ethnics), or avoiding those regarded as violating purity (e.g., homosexuals). The anti-rationalist interpretations end up being a consequential mistake for both science and for the way that such science purports to constrain plausible political theories.

### **Between Rationalism and Anti-Rationalism in Political Science**

Not all political psychologists make such sweepingly pessimistic claims about the prospects for reasoning and democratic competence. Scholars have advanced a range of interpretations of empirical evidence,<sup>3</sup> from the highly optimistic—e.g., that affect and bias actually conduce *toward* rationality—to versions of democratic realism that are more nuanced than those we have considered so far. Some accounts even reject normative leveling (if implicitly) by building research agendas designed to remediate pathologies of politics.

At the more optimistic end, much of the literature on heuristics as low-information rationality (Popkin 1991) and affective intelligence (Marcus, Neuman, and Mackuen 2000) suggest that System 1 thinking and emotions actually *contribute* to citizen competence rather than undermining it. The former advances the claim that shortcuts such as party cues enable citizens to make more rational decisions, while the latter asserts that emotions manage citizens' attention efficiently. Following this line of thinking, even elite polarization can have desirable consequences, as it enables voters to hold more consistent attitudes (Levendusky 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed not all of the evidence for partisan motivated reasoning has held up to scrutiny (e.g., see Guess and Coppock 2018, and Wood and Porter 2019), never mind their interpretation.

But this optimism seems to be a minority opinion among political scientists, at least in recent decades. In fact, our argument is structurally similar to an older argument made by Kuklinski and Quirk (2000), who are skeptical about optimistic interpretations of heuristics as low-information rationality. They lay out a set of findings that warrant a less sanguine conclusion: that cognitive processes are not “well adapted to the tasks of citizens” (165), that “we should expect systematic bias in heuristic judgments” (166), and that “on the whole, we should not expect a great deal of ordinary citizens’ political judgments” (167). Both we and Kuklinski and Quirk seek to destabilize hasty inferences from empirical evidence to democratic competence, though in different directions. Their claim is antipodal to ours: Kuklinski and Quirk advise against the most optimistic conclusions about what political psychology suggests for citizen competence, whereas we advise against the most pessimistic such conclusions.

Crucially, though, Kuklinski and Quirk do not counsel normative leveling. Instead, they and their co-authors suggest that, in certain environments, citizens are quite capable of forming preferences rationally (Kuklinski et al. 2001). In other words, they hold open the possibility that contexts exist (and presumably can be promoted) in which citizens behave in normatively desirable ways. Others distinguish between types of people and general contexts for which intuitive processes can be destabilized. Lavine et al. (2012) identify a subgroup of people—ambivalent partisans—whose psychological motivations lead them to “approximate the type of critical, systematic, and open-minded thought praised by democratic theorists” (215), while Arceneaux and Vander Wielen (2017) characterize certain psychological needs—low need for affect and high need for cognition—as key to “taming intuition.” And Druckman and colleagues have identified general ways in which framing effects—which bespeak a persistent instability in citizen preferences—are themselves defeasible. For example, Druckman and Nelson (2003) find that

interpersonal conversations featuring conflicting points of view is sufficient to eliminate framing effects. And Chong and Druckman (2007) show that such competing arguments are more effective at limiting framing, only insofar as the arguments are “stronger,” a notion which seems to intimate the “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1996: 306). Furthermore, Klar (2014) shows that even partisan-motivated reasoning is defeasible in social settings that promote disparate views.

So what are the consequences of such findings for democratic realism? One school of thought counsels a more nuanced, contextual interpretation (e.g., Leeper and Slothuus 2015). For instance, Arceneaux (2012) examines the role of anxiety in evaluating competing arguments, finding evidence that individuals perceive their feeling of anxiety itself as a form of argument strength. He further argues that “the normative implications of these empirical findings are not clear-cut” (282), depending on whether the particular emotions are evoked in an appropriate way. So he allows for the possibility that emotional activation can be both good and bad, kicking the ball up to the elite level by relying on the behavior of elected officials to dictate whether emotions result in normatively good outcomes for democracy. Similarly, Albertson and Gadarian (2015) examine the role of anxiety, such as that elicited by a public health crisis, for example, in how citizens search for and process information. They conclude that, while anxiety does have positive consequences, it “is not an unalloyed good” (156). Scholars in this camp effectively argue that the evidence damages a baseline presumption of citizen competence in certain cases—based respectively on elite behavior, external events, or psychological traits.

While these authors view the empirical record as delimiting the scope of democratic realism, others have explored the ways in which problems such as partisan motivated reasoning can be mitigated. Kahan (2013), for example, finds that more sophisticated people are more likely

to fall prey to such biased thinking. But rather than conclude that the prospects for democracy are therefore immutably limited, he calls for developing science communication strategies to mitigate the effects of partisan motivated reasoning.

We have seen that not everybody is as flat-footed as Haidt, and Lodge and Taber. But even those who are more careful do not seem confident in linking their empirical research to democratic theory. And understandably so. Political psychologists are not typically trained to be normative theorists; there appears to be a professional norm against crossing the fact/value divide. And, yet, many clearly recognize the need for cross-over work. For example, Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013) conclude their study of framing, competing arguments, and polarization thus:

“What exactly do we want ‘quality’ opinions to be? Despite more than a century of grappling with what makes for a ‘good’ public opinion, scholars and theorists continue to advance widely different and contradictory standards... This divergence has far more than pedantic implications—if political scientists hope to play a role in promoting civic competence...there needs to be greater discussion on what it means to be competent. This requires increased conversations between empirical scholars and normative theorists” (75).

Happily, several political theorists have recently begun to think in a more flexible way about the interaction between reason and emotion, intuition and deliberation, applying empirical findings to democratic theory.

### **Between Rationalism and Anti-Rationalism in Political Theory**

Some political theorists push back hard against the notion that social scientific findings should hem in our political imaginations much at all (Estlund 2019). But others argue that the

evidence for affective primacy, partisan motivated reasoning, social intuitionism, and group loyalty sharply delimit the plausibility of various political theories (Kelly 2012)—with some going so far as to call democracy into question wholesale (Brennan 2017). As with the political scientists above, however, many political theorists also take a corresponding middle-way between blithe utopianism and quiescent realism. They try to take broad account of empirical findings on how reason and emotion interact, but not in a reductive or one-sided way. We consider five such efforts beginning with (roughly) the least cognitivist approaches working our way toward more avowedly rationalist accounts.

Even if we take emotion to be the “senior partner” to reason, one need not embrace normative leveling. Sharon Krause (2008), for example, starts from a basically Humean perspective which establishes emotion, affect, and sentiment as the origin of political judgment and democratic deliberation. She seeks a middle way, though, between what she criticizes as the overly strong forms of rationalism in Rawls and Habermas, and the overly particularistic approaches of some of their critics. In doing so, Krause’s approach explicitly rejects normative leveling and Thrasymachus’s position: “When it comes to questions of justice and basic liberties...citizens owe it to one another (and themselves) to decide on the basis of something other than who has more power” (165). She goes on to develop a sophisticated account of the interplay of reason and emotion that culminates in her notion of “affective impartiality” in political judgment. She posits that sympathy can widen our circle of concern progressively in a way that actually serves the goals of impartiality often thought to be accessible only through the application of reason alone. On this account, emotion does not play only an ancillary normative role in politics by motivating action; it actually challenges the primacy of reason at the deliberative stage itself. Thus Krause manages to sketch a plausible philosophical psychology that can account for at least

some of the “political realist” empirical findings without collapsing into normative leveling.

As we argued above, we think that the junior/senior partner question is not well conceived. Bryan Garsten (2006) implicitly agrees. In his rehabilitation of political rhetoric and situated persuasion, he places appeals to *pathos* (emotion), on the same level as *ethos* (character, credibility, or authority) and *logos* (rational demonstration), sidestepping the issue of relative importance entirely. As with Krause, however, Garsten takes pains to distance his Aristotelean-Ciceronian theory from the normative leveling of the neo-sophists: “It is important to recognize the differences between...rhetorical politics and the sophistic view because today some of the strongest calls for seeing the virtues of rhetoric have come from theorists who admire the sophists.” Such neo-sophists regard invoking political principles as merely “facilitating the efforts of partisan agents to attach an honorific vocabulary to their agendas” (144). In contrast, Garsten does not claim “that deliberation never requires putting one’s personal feelings aside, but only that it does not necessarily require doing so” (195). This modest claim is clearly compatible with fairly robust rationalist theories. Garsten’s only quarrel is with theories that require *everyone* to be persuaded by the *same* reasons (189).<sup>4</sup> In the typical case of persuasion both reasons and emotional considerations enter into an all-things-considered judgment that can be “deliberate,” while including considerations beyond those that are narrowly reason based. His theory is thus even more flexible than Krause’s in the ways that it can relate to empirical political psychology.

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<sup>4</sup> Garsten mentions Rawls, Cohen, and Habermas in this regard (189). While there is truth to his claim here, it is also somewhat misleading. Habermas, for example, only imposes such strictures on discourse about universal principles--i.e., basically human rights. Ethical-political discourses (i.e., most of everyday politics) can accommodate the rhetoric of persuasion more comfortably.

Tarnopolsky's (2010) revisionist reading of Plato's *Gorgias* seeks to recover an even more (if broadly) rationalist notion of rhetoric than Garsten's. Her account elucidates the way that emotions—in particular, shame—play a crucial role in classical political theory. As with Garsten, such a recovery teaches lessons relevant to contemporary democratic theory. We are inclined to think of Plato as an arch-rationalist, and of course in a certain sense he is. But as noted above, starkly contrasting reason and emotion as antonyms presents a false choice for a thinker like Plato: “an emotion like shame is active *and* passive, cognitive *and* affective, and this is no less true for the other emotions” (176). As such “one of the most important corrections that both Plato and Aristotle can make to contemporary theories about the role of emotions in politics is to illustrate the fact that...all emotions have the possibility of becoming an integral part of our democratic virtues or vices” (6). Even as discrete phenomena (like shame), never mind as a class (like “negative” emotions), affect can function for both good and bad in democratic politics. In this context, trying to establish who is the senior and who the junior partner is, again, a fool's errand, and misunderstands the complex ways that cognition and affect interpenetrate in yielding political judgment and action. Moreover, Tarnopolsky's neo-classical approach to “respectful” shame clearly eschews sophistic normative leveling in that it is developed in the context of Plato's depiction of Socrates's refutation of the great sophist Gorgias. She engages extensively with work in cognitive psychology to warrant her approach to mixing reason and affect, but the effort is directed more against rationalist political theories than it is toward finding ways to test some of the implicit claims in her account.

In contrast to Krause, Garsten, and Tarnopolsky's theories of the emotions, Nussbaum's (2003) neo-Stoic account is fully cognitivist; indeed, she subtitles her book “The Intelligence of Emotions.” Contrary to most theories, Nussbaum goes so far as to deny that emotions necessarily

have an embodied-feeling component. Instead, she “argues that emotions are evaluative appraisals that ascribe high importance to things and people that lie outside the agent’s own sphere of control” (2004: 443). As such, emotions are intrinsic to politics: at least in democratic regimes, being a matter of public concern implies that it is (or should be) outside of each individual’s sphere of control in any unilateral or dispositive sense. Yet Nussbaum does not want to develop a specific political theory from her theory of the emotions, but rather describe a class of viable theories and how they would be constrained by her account. She explicitly countenances liberal Aristotelianism, “flexible” neo-Kantianism, and Millian Utilitarianism so long as they make room for mutual respect, reciprocity, and an adequate concern for the needs of distant others (446). Flexibility about adequate theories of politics is a far cry from normative leveling, which seems to be pointedly excluded here. Indeed, all three of the approaches she countenances are broadly rationalist.

Nussbaum engages with an enormous range of natural and social scientific work on the emotions, but, curiously, very little from political psychology and political science. As with the previous theorists we have considered, her use of empirical research is directed more toward warding off opponents than it is toward facilitating ongoing engagement.

Neblo (2020) takes an alternative approach by explicitly organizing his theoretical apparatus around facilitating collaboration between empirical and theoretical inquiry. He defends deliberative democratic theory from the charge that it denigrates or even just ignores the emotions. Habermas’s deliberative theory (1996), for example, is archetypally rationalist, and serves as one of the primary targets of the anti-rationalist program. Thus, there is no worry about normative leveling. The suspicion that deliberative democrats are hostile to the emotions, however, is rooted in a misunderstanding about how they use the concept “reason.” In ordinary language reason is

often contrasted with emotion. But deliberative democrats aim to contrast legitimation through reason with the exercise of arbitrary power, not with emotionally laden decision processes. As with our discussion of the lifeworld above, on this account emotion and intuition can lead directly to perfectly rational outcomes. Moreover, they are always operative—at least indirectly—even in explicit processes of practical reason. They help flag politically relevant questions for our attention in the first place, serve as the inputs to our deliberations, and underwrite our motivations to act on the outcomes of those deliberations. Indeed, Neblo sketches out twelve distinct roles that the emotions play in deliberative theory.

As with the political scientists discussed in the previous section, though, even these more nuanced accounts of the relationship between reason and emotion in political theory tread lightly on the fact/value divide. They all make use of a kind of philosophical anthropology and sometimes even specific scientific findings to give shape to their theories. Political theorists are not typically trained to be political psychologists. And yet, as with the empirical scholars above, many theorists also recognize the need for cross-over work. Dennis Thompson (2008) poses the problem crisply:

“Normative and empirical inquiry are distinct, and justifiably so...But our understanding...will fall short until theorists and empiricists take greater steps to bridge this division. Some might say that unless philosophers become political scientists, or unless those who now are political scientists become philosophers, there can be no end to troubles in our discipline” (516).

With top scholars on both sides of the divide emphasizing the importance of such crossover work, why has so little materialized? Perhaps surprisingly, we do not think that the need for specialized training is the main impediment (though it is likely part of the story). Some scholars do have joint training, and in any case, people with different specialties successfully collaborate all the time.

The main problem is our lack of a bridging theory—one that can explain how normativity emerges out of concrete practices, affording a foothold for both political scientists and political theorists. Though fully developing such a theoretical apparatus is far beyond the scope of this paper, we do aim to sketch in very broad strokes how such a theory might work.

### **Making Our Political Intuitions Explicit**

What we need is a theory of political judgment that can accomplish four tasks. First, this theory ought to explain the empirical evidence offered by both rationalists and anti-rationalists. As such, it ought to subsume both social intuitionism and rationalist theories like Kohlberg's. Second, the enriched theory should feature a key role for timescale. Practically speaking, we want a theory that looks intuitionist at small timescales and rationalist at larger timescales. Third, the theory should help us adjudicate between benignly “motivated” reasoning, and instances that we rightly judge as problematic. But most importantly, this theory ought to provide a road map that can be used to avoid normative leveling, or at least to know it can be avoided. That is, the theory ought to provide a more convincing bridge between descriptive and normative politics, and thus explain how we can avoid leveling in a *principled* fashion.

Robert Brandom (1994) constructs an inferentialist model that we extend to incorporate both the intuitionist and rationalist models of political judgement. Brandom identifies the process of “giving and asking for reasons” as the empirical basis for developing principled justifications for normative claims from otherwise mere rationalizations. The title of Brandom's major book, *Making It Explicit*, nicely illustrates the connection between reason and affectively mediated social intuitions. Inferentialist articulation is the process by which, when challenged, we take our intuitions and try to explain and justify them explicitly by reference to mutually interpretable

standards. Not coincidentally, then, social reasoning is a linchpin of both models. Combining these models, we can deploy Brandom to sketch an inferentialist model of political judgment that features an account of the social emergence of culturally meaningful political principles via interactive reasoning (timescale 1), and an account of split-second political judgments via affectively mediated intuitions (timescale 2). Transitions between timescales are accomplished by viewing intuitions and reasons each in terms of the other. Intuitions can be interpreted as encoded reasons as in the on-line model of memory and political judgment (Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). Reasons can be interpreted as coherent and self-stable bodies of intuitions accrued in an evolutionary process of interactive reasoning (cf., Bowles and Gintis 2011). Neither reason nor intuition can operate well without the other.

Brandom casts giving and asking for reasons as elements of a game, in which players track each other's behavior through a process of *deontic scorekeeping*. Essentially, a player's score is just a summary statistic to keep track of when they engage in incoherent or hypocritical behavior. This social accountability helps overcome the fact that we sometimes do not know our own minds when it comes to the sources of our intuitions. In the game, making a claim has the dual consequences of (1) entitling one to assert any statement that is an inferential consequence of that claim, and (2) prohibiting one from asserting any statement that is incompatible with that claim. Just what counts as an inferential consequence or an incompatible statement is defined by bootstrapping the rules of the game. For example, a player could hypothetically claim that a rule of elementary logic is invalid. But in so doing, that player would back herself into a corner, wherein she would inevitably be forced to rely on the socially articulated consequences of that rule to justify other claims she might want to make. Ultimately, she would have to drop her original claim and agree to live by the logical rule.

Brandom's key move is the bootstrap, in which the simple rules of deontic scorekeeping explode into a universe of inferential consequences. A similar bootstrap is also central to Habermas's conception of the *lifeworld* and the processes of its evolution. The lifeworld is basically the sum total of what is taken for granted in discourse. When a piece of the lifeworld is thematized, for example by becoming the subject of a political argument, it ceases to be taken for granted, and thus ceases to be a part of the lifeworld. When people argue in good faith, they attempt to warrant their judgments and actions by relying on the remaining totality of the lifeworld. Over very large timescales, new pieces of the lifeworld come into being through many acts of communication. The evolution of the lifeworld is essentially a manifestation of Brandom's bootstrap.<sup>5</sup>

But the bootstrap is not cheap. Critics question the empirical value of Brandom's model: How can people possibly keep track of the explosive multiplicity of inferences that this model identifies? Habermas (1996) explicitly argues that the great bulk of our everyday normative judgments do (and even must) occur via social intuition. That is the whole point of the theory of the lifeworld, and our limited ability to problematize ever larger swaths of it. Democratic deliberation, discourse, and explicit reasoning about politics are quite specifically exceptional.

We take the social intuitionist model to be a psychological theory of the lifeworld. Humans

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Kohlberg's model isolates the deontic element of Brandom's bootstrap. The player responsible for an inconsistency must reason her way to a more coherent inference, where coherence is itself socially defined. At the timescale of cognitive development, this process explains how Kohlberg can "commit the naturalistic fallacy and get away with it" (Kohlberg 1971), showing how normative principles can emerge from empirical social practice.

do not track each inference in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Instead, we track summaries of these inferences, encoded as automatic intuitions and emotions. As noted, a similar process is at work in the on-line model of memory and judgment. Intuitionism shows how judgments can be issued quickly and cheaply, and even identifies how the larger processes of interactive reasoning and lifeworld formation can enter back into our intuitive processes, as the model includes a role for others' people's reasoning to affect one's own intuitions.

Because the inferentialist model subsumes the intuitionist model of political judgment at small timescales and the rationalist at larger timescales, it can also explain their empirical findings. For example, the inferentialist model helps to make sense of an emerging body of evidence that cannot easily be accounted for by intuitionism. One set of experiments tests how actions and judgments change when people are forced to pause before acting or judging. For example, Rand, Greene, and Nowak (2013) find that when people are forced to wait as little as ten seconds before deciding how to act in a collective action game, they tend to donate less to the collective good, an action which is consonant with individual utility maximization. Paxton, Ungar, and Greene (2012) observe that when people are forced to wait for several minutes before rendering judgments in a social dilemma, they tend to be more permissive. Intuitionism does not offer a good reason why different intuitions ought to crop up differently at different timescales, but the inferentialist model does. Moreover, inferentialism can accommodate Sklar et al.'s (2012) findings that people can do arithmetic nonconsciously, which suggests that partitioning reason and intuition does not have the force against the rationalist notion of persuasion claimed for it.

The second and more important advantage of the inferentialist model is that it avoids normative leveling. Ironically, the element missing from anti-rationalism is the ability to be wrong in a normatively meaningful sense. In Brandom, Kohlberg, and Habermas, "being wrong" is the

practical equivalent of eventually coming to agree with an interlocutor that one has made a mistake, and to retract it, typically after much communication. Anti-rationalists admit that persuasion happens, but interpret it as merely activating new intuitions. Doing so begs the question of how we construe “persuasion.” The inferentialist model not only provides a way to be wrong, it turns being wrong into the fundamental building block of what it can mean to be right. In so doing, we can stake a claim that some political intuitions are better than others, and thereby escape the torpor—or worse, Thrasymachus’s equation of power and justice—of normative leveling.

## **Conclusion**

For two millennia, philosophers were the best social scientists of their day. Their descriptive psychology was designed from the beginning to serve as a logical base for their moral psychology, which served, in turn, to underwrite their political theory. Moving in the other direction, their descriptive psychology had to be compatible with, and preferably entailed by their epistemology and, in turn, their metaphysics and ontology. In short, these were systematic thinkers whose work spanned the practical, the scientific, and the philosophical (Neblo 2007).

The rise of modern social science created a necessary, and in many ways salutary, division of labor between political theorists and political scientists, driven partly by the need for specialization in the face of technical advances. This is not to say that the two have proceeded in isolation from each other. Many political scientists aspire to be practically relevant and regard their research as having important implications for democratic theory and practice—“giving hands and feet to morality” in the words of one (Lasswell 1941; Neblo 2004). Similarly, many political theorists question the sharpness of the divide, or at least believe that their conceptual apparatus should help orient political science’s research agenda, just like the normative category of “disease” guides

medical research without compromising its scientific status.

And yet, because the division of labor has only intensified, the ability to manage good integration of political theory and political science has become fraught with dead ends and positively harmful missteps in translation (Neblet et al. 2017). The current incarnation of the ancient debate between rationalist and sophistic theories of politics illustrates this phenomenon and the stakes that attend it. Haidt's and Lodge and Taber's attacks on rationalism, unlike Thrasymachus's, come with the force of modern political psychology behind them. But unlike past debates, such critiques lack an integrated philosophical framework to help place the scientific findings in a more systematic interpretive context. We hope to have shown that even if we accept the political science findings at face value, democratic realism does not follow. Moreover, by sketching a substantive account of rationality that can link political behavior and political theory, we can create a more stable bridge to integrate scientific and normative theorizing, to the benefit of both. The normative force of giving and asking for reasons explains why even the sophist blushes. And that, in turn, should give us hope that, despite the scope of the cynical use of power, justice in practice need not reduce merely to the advantage of the stronger.

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