

ARE YOU A SHEEP CLONE-HUMAN THAT CANNOT THINK FOR YOURSELF?

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The Bandwagon Effect: Why People Tend to Follow the Crowd And Want White Picket Fences, Shop At Whole Foods and Live in Clone Suburbs

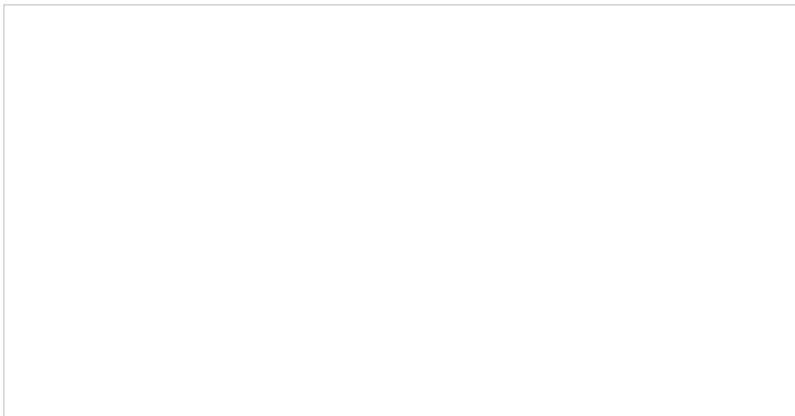


Bloggers on Reddit believe that *"those who are follow-victims of trends are doomed to become stereotypical bitches who look like every other clone-addict..."*

Life is more complex than that, though:

The *bandwagon effect* is a [cognitive bias](#) that causes people to think or act a certain way if they believe that others are doing the same. For example, the bandwagon effect can cause someone to adopt a certain political ideology, because they see that other people in their social circle have adopted the same ideology.

The bandwagon effect can have a powerful influence on people in many areas of life, so it's important to understand it. As such, in the following article you will learn more about the bandwagon effect, understand why people experience it, and see what you can do in order to account for its influence.



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Examples of the bandwagon effect

One example of the bandwagon effect is that when people see a comment on social media that received a lot of likes or upvotes, they become more likely to [upvote it themselves](#). Another example of the bandwagon effect is that when people see that others are pumping money into the stock market, they become likely to invest too, which can lead to [speculative bubbles and market crashes](#).

Furthermore, there are various other areas of life where the bandwagon effect can influence people. For example:

- **The bandwagon effect can influence people's political choices.** For example, voters sometimes provide increased support for a certain political party, simply because that party is [doing well in recent polls](#) (a behavior sometimes [referred to as bandwagon voting](#), or the *rally-around-the-winner effect* or *follow-the-winner effect*).
- **The bandwagon effect can influence consumers' decisions regarding which products to buy.** For example, people often buy the same type of clothes that other people that they know are wearing, because they want to show that they're [following the latest fashion trends](#) (a behavior sometimes [referred to as bandwagon consumption](#), which is taken advantage of in [marketing](#) and [advertising](#)).
- **The bandwagon effect can influence doctors' medical decisions.** For example, many medical procedures have been widely practiced for long stretches of history, despite a lack of sufficient supporting evidence for their efficacy, because they were considered [popular](#) by [the medical community](#).
- **The bandwagon effect can influence people's tendency to litter.** For example, people are more likely to litter if they're in an environment that's already littered, and less likely to litter if they're in an environment [that's clean](#).
- **The bandwagon effect can influence organizations' implementation of new technologies.** For example, many businesses in the hospitality market ended up implementing new features on their websites only when it became popular to do so, despite the fact that doing it earlier could have given them a [competitive advantage in the market](#).

Another well-known example of the bandwagon effect appears in what is often referred to as the *elevator experiment*.

"[The elevator experiment] appeared on the TV show *Candid Camera* in 1962. In the episode titled *Face the Rear*... unknowing individuals entered an elevator where everyone else was facing backwards. Despite this being a completely unnatural thing to do, many individuals 'went with the crowd' and rode the elevator facing away from the doors."

— From "Cognitive Errors and Diagnostic Mistakes" (Howard, [2019](#))

In addition, the bandwagon effect can also influence people in a more general manner. As one scholar notes:

"The bandwagon effect may also affect people not just with a specific decision, but with regard to the overall culture and work environment. Group attitudes and norms are 'contagious.' We are unconsciously influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of those around us. We have all found ourselves in an unpleasant group before, perhaps one of many angry airline passengers waiting for a delayed flight. The tension can be palpable, and we may find our own anxiety rising in response to that of the strangers next to us. Similarly, experiences such as sporting events and performances are enjoyable largely because the excitement of the crowd spreads to us all."

— From "Cognitive Errors and Diagnostic Mistakes" (Howard, [2019](#))

Finally, the bandwagon effect also [plays a central role in various](#) related [phenomena](#). This includes, for example, *herd behavior*, which is the way individuals in a group think and act in [a similar way](#) due to local interactions rather than centralized coordination, *groupthink*, which is the way certain groups [strive for conformity](#) in the thoughts and actions of [group members](#) in an uncritical and detrimental manner, as well as other phenomena, such as *social contagion*, *mob mentality*, and the [false consensus effect](#).

Note: the term "bandwagon effect" is sometimes used in a specialized sense in specific contexts. For example, in the context of consumption and economics, the bandwagon effect is often used to refer to [increased demand](#) for a certain good as a result of seeing others use it.

Why people experience the bandwagon effect

The bandwagon effect—together with the behaviors that are associated with it, such as following the crowd and following popular trends—can be attributed to several psychological causes.

One such cause is **normative social influence**, which [represents the tendency](#) to conform with others out of a desire to fit in with the crowd and [gain approval](#) from others.

Another such cause is **informational social influence**, which [represents the tendency](#) to conform with others out of a desire to be right, under the assumption that others may know something that you don't, or may understand the situation better than you.

Furthermore, relying on the opinion and actions of others can often serve as a useful **heuristic**—a mental shortcut that helps people form judgments and make decisions, especially in certain situations, such as when people need to choose quickly or under uncertainty. The use of the bandwagon effect as a heuristic in this manner can either be something that people do intuitively without being aware of, or it can be something that people actively choose to do.

All these causes of the bandwagon effect mean that when people encounter *bandwagon cues* (sometimes also referred to as *popularity cues*), which are [signs](#) that other people believe something or are doing something, they [use those cues](#) to guide their own actions, under the assumption that it's beneficial to act the [same way as others](#) or that other people's judgment is [worth relying on](#). For example, when people are asked to rate the importance of news articles, they [tend to give higher ratings](#) to articles when they believe that those articles cover a topic that's also covered by other news agencies, since this serves as a signal of the importance of the story.

Finally, **other factors** can cause people to experience the bandwagon effect or to be more susceptible to it in certain situations. For example, in [some cases](#), the *fear of missing out* can make people susceptible to the bandwagon effect, such as when someone sees that other people are taking advantage of a unique investment opportunity, which pushes this person to

do the same, even if they're not sure that this opportunity is actually good. Similarly, in the case of voting for a candidate because [they're in the lead](#), the [desire](#) to support a "winner" (or avoid support a "loser") can be what makes people susceptible to the bandwagon effect.

Note that any combination of these causes may be responsible for people's bandwagon thinking and behavior, and the causes of the bandwagon effect can vary across people and circumstances. This means, for example, that different people may experience the bandwagon effect due to different causes under the same circumstances, and that the same person may experience the bandwagon effect due to different causes under different circumstances.

Overall, people experience the bandwagon effect for various reasons, such as because they want to conform with others in order to gain their approval, because they believe that relying on the opinion of others is beneficial, or because they're motivated by additional mechanisms, such as the fear of missing out.

Note: because various mechanisms can lead to the bandwagon effect, different people may experience it for different reasons under the same circumstances, and the same person might experience the bandwagon effect for different reasons under different circumstances. In addition, people sometimes engage in bandwagon behaviors even though they're not influenced by the bandwagon effect, but rather because they are driven to it by something else, such as [strategic considerations](#).

How the bandwagon effect spreads

In many situations, the bandwagon effect can spread quickly and on a large-scale through a *positive feedback loop*, whereby the more people are affected by it, the more likely other people are to be affected by it too. This can be attributed to a number of underlying mechanisms, such as the increased likelihood of observing someone display the behavior that's prompted by the bandwagon effect, and the increased pressure to act the same way as a result of that behavior becoming an accepted norm.

A practical example of how the bandwagon effect can spread appears in the case of [the medical sciences](#), which are generally viewed as rigorous, objective, and empirically-driven, and therefore less likely to be influenced by this and similar phenomena. One paper on the topic, titled "[The Bandwagons of Medicine](#)", describes how a new medical concept or treatment can gain momentum and become mainstream, as a result of a large-scale bandwagon effect:

- The media finds out about a new treatment and publicizes it, often by publishing pieces that are exaggerated and misleading.
- Various organizations, such as government agencies, research foundations, and private companies also promote the new treatment, because they have some vested interest in seeing it succeed.
- The public picks up on the now-publicized treatment, and pressures medical practitioners such as doctors to adopt it, especially when that treatment is [perceived as being novel](#).
- Doctors often want to accept the new treatment, because it offers a compelling solution to a difficult problem.
- Furthermore, since doctors have to consume increasingly large amounts of medical information in order to stay aware of the latest trends in their field, it's sometimes difficult for them to read new material in a sufficiently critical manner.

This demonstrates how a new concept, which is originally promoted by only a single advocate or a small group of advocates, can quickly grow and become widely popular, even when lacking sufficient supporting evidence.

Though this example focuses on the topic of medicine, similar processes can occur in other fields, such as fashion and politics. In all of these fields, what happens is that a new concept gains a small following, which [grows](#) until it reaches a critical mass, for instance until it starts being covered by mainstream media, at which point a large-scale bandwagon effect begins, which causes more people to support this concept, in increasingly large numbers.

This is associated with a closely related concept called the [availability cascade](#), which is a self-reinforcing process through which a certain stance gains increasing prominence in public discourse.

Note: a closely related phenomenon is the "[diffusion of innovations](#)", which explains how new technologies and trends are adopted. In this process, there are generally five classes of people: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards, and as more people adopt the new technology (especially those [with high reputation](#)), more people who were initially reluctant to do so also change their mind and jump on the bandwagon.

How to avoid the bandwagon effect

Since the bandwagon effect is a cognitive bias, you can reduce its impact on you and on others by using appropriate [debiasing techniques](#), which help you think and act in a rational manner. Such techniques include the following:

- **Create distance from the bandwagon cues.** For example, you can create *physical* distance from those cues by moving away from people who exert peer pressure before you make a decision, or you can create *temporal* distance by waiting for a day after talking to people before you make a decision.
- **Create optimal conditions for judgment and decision-making.** For example, before you make a decision that might be influenced by the bandwagon effect, go somewhere quiet, where you can properly concentrate while thinking about the situation.
- **Slow down your reasoning process.** This involves taking time to think through the situation in a slow and analytical manner, rather than relying on intuition or hurried reasoning.
- **Make your reasoning process explicit.** For example, if you're debating whether to follow a certain course of action that's associated with bandwagon cues, you can explicitly list its pros and cons, and then clearly verbalize what decision you've made and why.
- **Hold yourself accountable for your decisions.** Remind yourself that ultimately, you're responsible for any decision that you make, even if that decision is prompted by the bandwagon effect or other types of social influence.
- **Examine the bandwagon.** For example, try to identify who's promoting it and why they're doing so (e.g. a marketer is promoting it because they're trying to get people to buy their product).
- **Recall similar situations in the bandwagon effect played a role.** Thinking of similar situations in which you experienced the bandwagon effect can help you assess its current influence on you, identify the potential consequences of that influence, and remember that just because something appears popular, that doesn't mean that it's right or that it's the best course of action.
- **Consider alternative options.** For example, try to identify one alternative course of action than the one suggested by the bandwagon cues, and consider its potential advantages.
- **Create psychological self-distance.** When considering how you should act in light of bandwagon cues, you can improve your ability to think rationally by creating [psychological self-distance](#), for example by using self-distancing language and asking yourself "what should *you* do in this situation?".
- **Visualize the consequences of your decisions.** Specifically, consider what the consequences would be if you followed the course of action suggested by the bandwagon effect, in terms of factors such as what would happen and how you would feel.
- **Elicit external feedback.** For example, you can talk to a trusted individual, who isn't likely to be influenced by the particular bandwagon effect that you're worried about, and ask them what they think about your reasoning process.

In addition, it's often beneficial to **identify the causes of your bandwagon effect** (e.g. desire to fit in), since this can help you figure out which techniques you should use to reduce it. This has the added benefit of helping you identify situations where you're likely to experience this bias, which can help you prepare for it in advance, for example by setting a standardized implementation plan, in terms of how you'll react if you feel that you're about to experience this bias.

Furthermore, it's important to remember to **keep the bandwagon effect in mind in various situations**, since you generally need to be aware of its potential influence in order to address it properly. This means, for example, that whenever you're about to make a decision while experiencing some pressure from others, you should remind yourself of this effect, so you can properly account for its potential influence.

Finally, note even though it's beneficial to be able to avoid the bandwagon effect, that *doesn't* mean that bandwagon cues are necessarily wrong and should be ignored. Rather, they can sometimes be valuable tools that lead you to an optimal decision.

As such, you generally shouldn't dismiss those cues without consideration, but rather make sure to analyze them in a rational manner, without falling for the bandwagon effect. This means, for example, that if you're trying to decide which book to read or which product to buy, you can likely benefit from looking at ratings and reviews that people left, while making sure to analyze them in a rational manner, and also taking other relevant factors into consideration if possible.

Overall, to reduce the bandwagon effect, you can use various debiasing techniques, such as creating distance from the bandwagon cues, slowing down your reasoning process, holding yourself accountable for your decisions, visualizing the consequences of your decisions, and considering alternative options. In addition, it's often beneficial to identify the causes of your bandwagon effect, and it's important to remember that even though the bandwagon effect can be problematic, bandwagon cues aren't necessarily wrong, so you should generally assess them properly rather than dismiss them with no consideration.

How to use the bandwagon effect

In some cases, it can be beneficial to use the bandwagon effect in order to influence people's thoughts and actions. For example, if you're an author, you might want to include bandwagon cues and similar signals of social proof on your book cover, such as blurbs from influential people or notifications of best-seller status, in order to prompt people to buy your book.

To use the bandwagon effect in an optimal manner, it's important to first understand what it is, why people experience it, and how it can affect people. Then, you should assess the situation to determine how to best apply the bandwagon effect in your particular situation, by asking yourself questions such as the following:

- What outcome am I trying to achieve?
- Who is the target audience?
- What are the characteristics of the target audience, when it comes to things that pertain to the bandwagon effect? For example, am I targeting just one group of people or multiple ones? If I'm targeting multiple groups, in what ways do these groups differ from one another socially?
- What underlying psychological mechanisms could cause my target audience to experience the bandwagon effect? For example, are people in the target audience likely to experience the bandwagon effect because they rely on other people's assessment of information?
- What can I do to promote a bandwagon effect in practice? For example, which signs of social proof can I use to generate the bandwagon effect?
- How will my target audience respond to the different approaches that I can use to create a bandwagon effect? Specifically, which approaches will my target audience respond to favorably, and which approaches will they respond to negatively (and why)?

Sometimes, you may not have all the relevant information that you need at the start. For example, you may not immediately know how your target audience will respond to different approaches. To get the necessary information, there are several things that you can do:

- **Talk to relevant individuals**, in order to get their perspective directly, while keeping in mind that people aren't always fully aware of why or how they act, or of how they're likely to act, due to issues such as the [empathy gap](#).
- **Observe relevant individuals**, for example to see how they respond to bandwagon cues in practice, while keeping in mind that your observation of their behavior gives you [limited insights](#) into what they're thinking and why they act the way that they do.
- **Consider relevant research and case studies**, in order to get relevant insights; for example, if you're designing a website, you can examine [related](#) websites and [research](#) into how bandwagon cues, such as ratings and reviews, influence people's opinions.
- **Run experiments**, in order to directly test how well your approaches work in your particular situation.

Overall, using the bandwagon effect can be beneficial in a wide range of situations. To use it effectively, you should first learn how the bandwagon effect works, and then assess your situation to determine how you should use it, by considering aspects such as who your target audience is and what are the outcomes that you're trying to achieve, and by potentially also gathering relevant information through methods such as observing individuals and running experiments.

Additional information

Individual variation in the bandwagon effect

There is substantial individual variability when it comes to people's susceptibility to the bandwagon effect, which [can](#) be [attributed](#) to various [personal](#) and situational factors. This means that different people are likely to be influenced by the bandwagon effect to different degrees, in different ways, and for different reasons.

For example, when it comes to politics, people who are strongly invested in their current political party likely won't vote for an opposing party just because it's doing well in the polls, while people who are unsure who to vote for [might be swayed](#) by these polls, especially if they don't have strong preexisting political beliefs.

The concept of individual variation in the bandwagon effect is illustrated in one of the best-known experiments on the topic, generally referred to as the *Asch conformity experiment*, which is described as follows:

"A group of eight individuals was instructed to judge a series of simple, clearly structured perceptual relations—to match the length of a given line with one of three unequal lines.

Each member of the group announced his judgments publicly. In the midst of this monotonous 'test' one individual found himself suddenly contradicted by the entire group, and this contradiction was repeated again and again in the course of the experiment.

The group in question had, with the exception of one member, previously met with the experimenter and received instructions to respond at certain points with wrong—and unanimous—judgments. The errors of the majority were large... and of an order not encountered under control conditions. The outstanding person—the critical subject—whom we had placed in the position of a *minority of one* in the midst of a *unanimous majority*—was the object of investigation. He faced, possibly for the first time in his life, a situation in which a group unanimously contradicted the evidence of his senses...

The quantitative results are clear and unambiguous...

There was a marked movement toward the majority. One-third of all estimates in the critical group were errors identical with or in the direction of the distorted estimates of the majority. The significance of this finding becomes clear in the light of the virtual absence of errors in control groups the members of which recorded their estimates in writing...

At the same time the effect of the majority was far from complete. The preponderance of estimates in the critical group (68 per cent) was correct despite the pressure of the majority...

We found evidence of extreme individual differences. There were in the critical group subjects who remained independent without exception, and there were those who went nearly all the time with the majority...

The differences between the critical subjects in their reactions to the given conditions were equally striking. There were subjects who remained completely confident throughout. At the other extreme were those who became disoriented, doubt-ridden, and experienced a powerful impulse not to appear different from the majority."

— As described by Asch in "Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments" (a chapter in a [1983 book](#), which is adapted from the original publication of the experiment—a chapter with the same name published in the 1951 book "Groups, Leadership and Men: Research in Human Relations")

Accordingly, the bandwagon effect is sometimes limited in scope, meaning that it influences [only a proportion](#) of the people involved in a certain situation.

Reverse bandwagon effect

The *reverse bandwagon effect* (also [referred to](#) as the *snob effect* in certain contexts) is a cognitive bias that causes people to avoid doing something, because they believe that other people are doing it. For example, the reverse bandwagon effect can [cause someone](#) to avoid wearing a luxury brand of clothing, after they've seen many other people wearing that brand.

Thus, the reverse bandwagon effect influences people in an [opposite manner](#) than the regular bandwagon effect, by leading them [to engage](#) in non-conforming behavior, as opposed to the bandwagon effect, which causes people to engage in conforming behavior.

The reverse bandwagon effect can be driven by various psychological mechanisms, such as the desire to [feel unique](#) and the desire to [dissociate from others](#). For example, [one study](#) found that when people are in close proximity to others who may have bought a certain product, people's desire to be unique can cause them to avoid that product.

However, note that reverse-bandwagon behaviors, which go against what is done by others, are not always driven by the associated cognitive bias. For example, people sometimes become more likely to [support](#) a political candidate when that candidate is viewed as unlikely to win (a phenomenon [sometimes referred to](#) as the *underdog effect*), due to [sympathy](#) for [that candidate](#). Similarly, in other cases, things such as [strategic considerations](#) may drive people's reverse-bandwagon behavior.

Social norms

Understanding social norms can help you understand the bandwagon effect.

When it comes to social norms, a [distinction](#) is [often drawn](#) between two main types of [norms](#):

- **Injunctive norms**, which represent what people typically approve or disapprove of.
- **Descriptive norms**, which represent what people typically do in practice.

These norms can be *congruent*, in cases where the injunctive norms match the descriptive ones, or *incongruent*, in cases where the two types of norms don't match. For example, if people typically [disapprove of littering](#) (i.e., have an injunctive norm against it), then a congruent descriptive norm is for people to rarely litter in reality, whereas an incongruent descriptive norm is for people to often litter.

People's formulation and perception of these norms are based on various factors, such as observation, [communication](#), and preexisting personal attitudes.

In addition, the **salience** of social norms can also [influence](#) the way these norms affect people in any given situation. Specifically, in general, the more salient a norm is, meaning that people are aware of it at a given time, the [more strongly](#) this norm affects people, and this is especially important when there is a conflict between multiple different sets of norms.

Note: other distinctions are [sometimes used](#) when discussing social norms, such as the [distinction](#) between *prescriptive norms* (what *should* be done) and *proscriptive norms* (what *shouldn't* be done).

Summary and conclusions

- The *bandwagon effect* is a cognitive bias that causes people to think or act a certain way if they believe that others are doing the same.
- The bandwagon effect can influence people when it comes to things such as which political candidate to vote for, which products to buy, and which investment to put their money into.
- People experience the bandwagon effect for various reasons, such as because they want to conform with others in order to gain their approval, because they believe that relying on the opinion of others is beneficial, or because they're motivated by additional mechanisms, such as the fear of missing out.
- To reduce the bandwagon effect, you can use various debiasing techniques, such as creating distance from the bandwagon cues, slowing down your reasoning process, holding yourself accountable for your decisions, visualizing the consequences of your decisions, and considering alternative options.
- When reducing the bandwagon effect, it's often beneficial to first identify the causes of your bandwagon effect, and it's also important to remember that even though the bandwagon effect can be problematic, bandwagon cues aren't necessarily wrong, so you should generally assess them properly rather than dismiss them with no consideration.

- Dr. Itamar Shatz (Cambridge PhD)

Anti-intellectualism has little to do with intelligence.

By [Matt Huston](#)

Key points

- It's difficult to find any objective measurements that suggest Americans are lacking in IQ compared to those in other countries.
- All humans are biologically prone to intellectual laziness, emotional decision-making, and other impulses that often obstruct critical thinking.
- American institutions have failed to generate an honest appreciation of intelligence as a cultural value.

Be honest. As an observer of American society, the thought may have crossed your mind at one time or another—at least for a fleeting moment or two—that the nation's dysfunctional state of affairs is the result of widespread stupidity. The people, too often misinformed and poorly educated, are getting exactly the democracy they deserve.

Perhaps that thought arose last week as you watched the cringe-worthy presidential debate, which pundits have called "a disgrace" and "an [embarrassment](#) for the ages." Our public discourse has been in decline for so long that it was bound to come to this, right?

Effective self-government requires an intelligent and engaged public, and it seems the American electorate falls woefully short. With large segments of the population brazenly rejecting facts and science—whether the issue is [climate change](#), evolution, the [coronavirus](#), or the latest conspiracy theory—it's no surprise that social and political dysfunction are rampant.

Seen this way, it's tempting to chalk up the clown car of American democracy to the collective intellectual deficit of its population. In truth, however, there is little evidence to support the notion that the American people are stupid. Objective measurements of [intelligence](#) can be controversial, raising questions of true objectivity and cultural [bias](#), but it is difficult to find any that suggest Americans are lacking in IQ compared to those in other countries.

If this is so, it becomes all the more baffling that Americans have higher rates of belief in young-Earth creationism than most other industrialized countries. [Four in 10](#) Americans believe that humans were created in their present form about 10,000 years ago. Evolution by natural selection is a cornerstone of modern biology, but it is "controversial" in American schools. Similarly, large segments of the population still [refuse to accept](#) that human activity contributes significantly to climate change, even though there is no serious debate on the issue in the scientific community.

Nevertheless, if we examine the rejection of science closely, we find that it is not rooted in stupidity. The dad who brings his family to the [Creation Museum](#) to see cavemen mingling with dinosaurs might surprise you with his intellectual abilities, whether by reciting obscure sports statistics from [memory](#), analyzing complex problems or ideas on the job, or building an impressive addition onto his home in his spare time. And that mother who fights administrators to establish a religious club in her child's public school, propagating fundamentalist beliefs that reject science into the next generation, may have been at the top of her class back in high school.

To understand American anti-intellectualism, it's important to realize that smart people can embrace dumb ideas. On an individual or social level, this happens when the right mix of factors come together. The first factor is our own makeup—all humans are to some degree biologically prone to intellectual laziness, emotional [decision-making](#), [confirmation bias](#), and other natural impulses that often obstruct critical thinking.

But beyond the biological elements, there are also numerous environmental factors that can reinforce or weaken anti-intellectual tendencies. The extent to which one's family embraces [education](#) and critical thinking, for example, will be a major factor for many. Also, and importantly, the existence of influential cultural institutions that promote anti-intellectualism may result in a population that, regardless of its raw intellectual abilities, will seem in many ways ignorant.

To this last point, as Richard Hofstadter pointed out long ago in his Pulitzer-prize winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, the correlation between fundamentalist religion and anti-intellectualism cannot be ignored. If strong religious beliefs reject well-established scientific facts that conflict with theological doctrine, intelligent scientific inquiry will not be valued. As Hofstadter argued half a century ago, this alone helps to explain much about American anti-intellectualism. Today, while religion is generally [in decline](#) in America, the country is still the [most religious](#) in the developed world, and its fundamentalist Christian institutions are particularly powerful.

Other cultural factors can also contribute to making a society of intelligent people appear surprisingly unintelligent. The quality and reliability of journalism and other news media, for example, will be a factor in how the population thinks. And the economic security (or lack thereof) of the population is also a factor to consider. Intellectual priorities are more likely to take a back seat if one is living in constant [stress](#), in [fear](#) of poverty, without health care, or working multiple jobs just to make ends meet. And of course, evolving technology is a factor as well—consider how [social media](#) and smartphones have influenced the public dialogue in just a generation.

All of these factors and many others shape our values, as individuals and a society, with respect to critical thinking. If we begin to assess the United States in the context of some of them, leaving aside the conservative religion factor already discussed, we find a nation today that, unlike previous generations, increasingly informs itself via cable news, talk radio, and social media of dubious quality. Perhaps more importantly, we find a nation where economic insecurity and inequality are growing in prevalence, resulting in more fear and [anxiety](#).

These phenomena and others can work together to create an atmosphere that devalues critical thinking and rational discourse. When this happens, the result is anti-intellectualism as a defining [character trait](#), and this occurs regardless of the underlying intelligence of the person or society involved.

As such, if the next political debate you watch lacks thoughtful discourse but instead resembles a *Jerry Springer* episode, don't blame it on the public's intelligence. Stupidity is not what has degenerated the American social and political landscape. The failure of our institutions to generate an honest appreciation of intelligence as a cultural value has left us looking stupid.