The Gap and Motivated Reasoning

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Inspired by the paper „Motivated Reasoning and Climate Change”

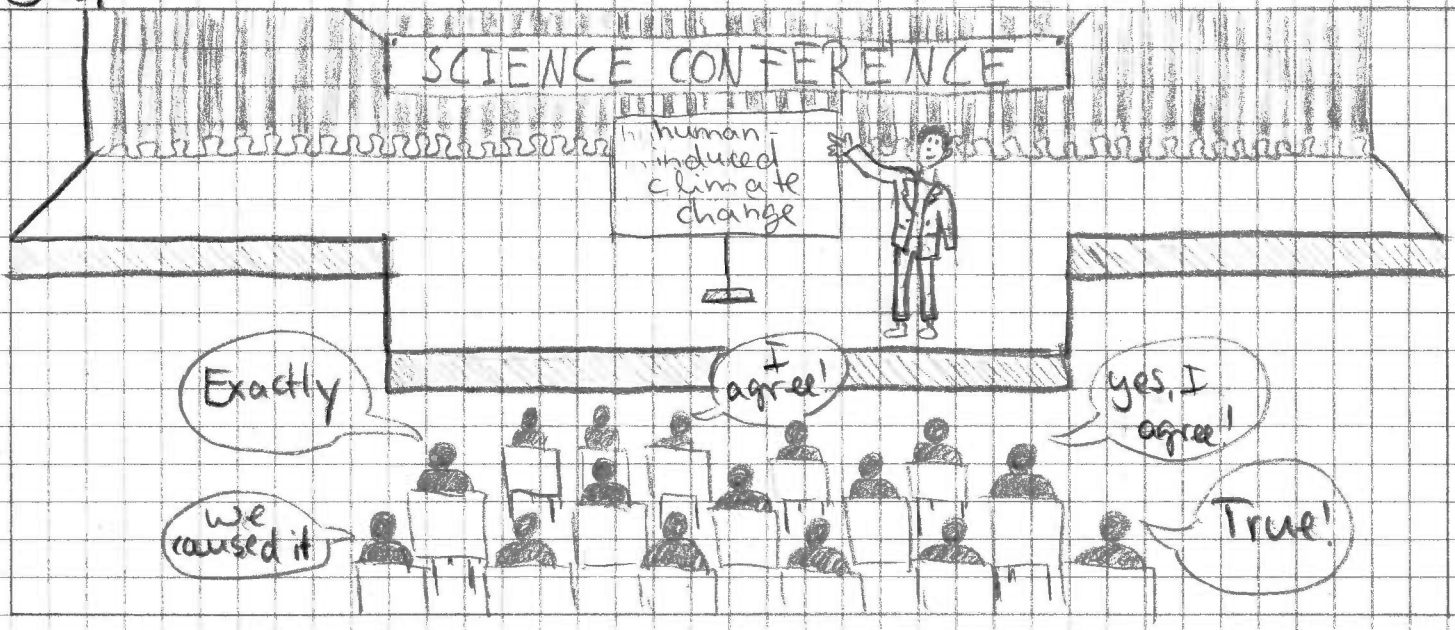
Bayes, R., & Druckman, J. N. (2021). Motivated reasoning and climate change. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, *42*, 27–35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.02.009

Link: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352154621000310

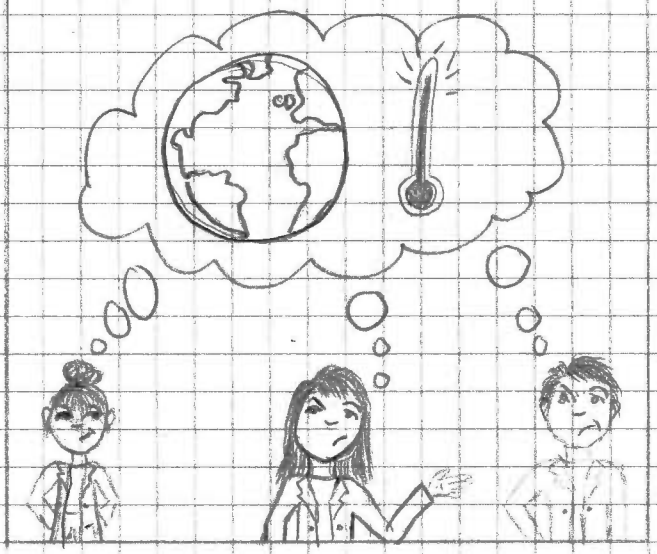
Project created for the class:
Visual Thinking and Composition, Winter 2020
Tilburg University, Department of Communication and Cognition

Instructor: Neil Cohn, neilcohn@visuallanguagelab.com, www.visuallanguagelab.com

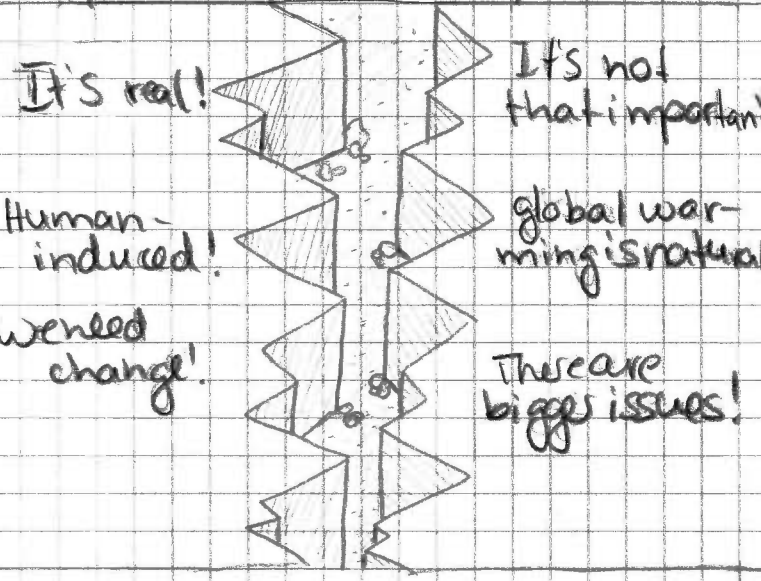
Despite scientific consensus...



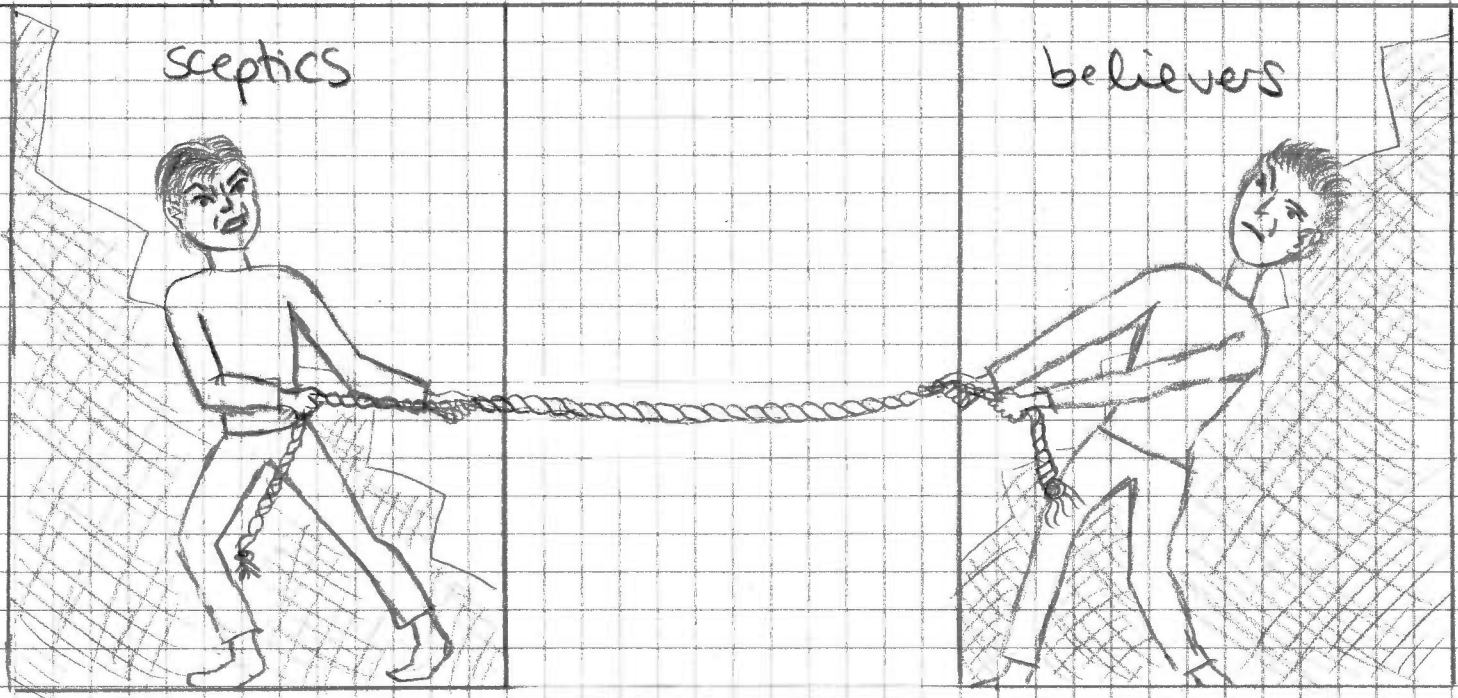
...and climate change being a scientific challenge...



...another challenge comes from politics and polarized opinions.



Polarized opinions in the U.S. are a big obstacle of public policies.



Polarization & Climate Change

1980

Democrats 59%

Republicans 37%

2000

Democrats ≈80%

Republicans ≈ 13%

League of Conservation Voters: Environmental Voting Scores
US Congress - Senate (by party)
The gap has continued to grow

2019

Democrats 95%

Republicans 16%

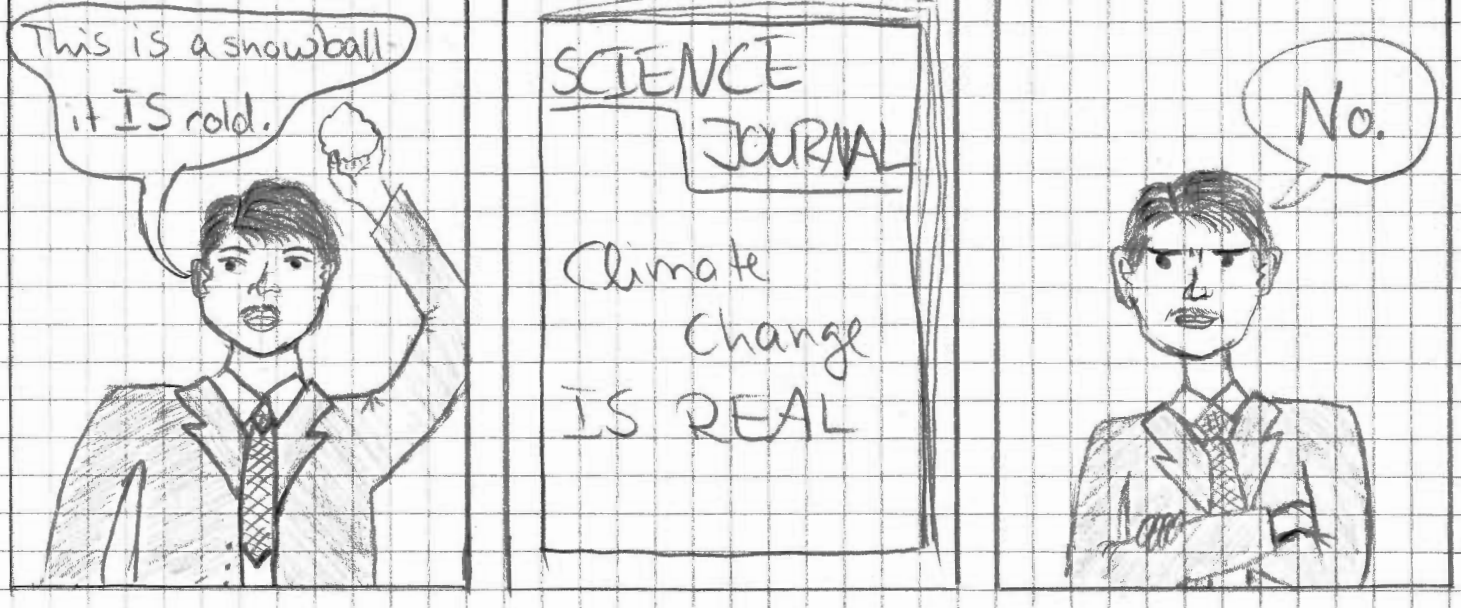
79%

79%

79%

79%

Conservatives undermine claims of climate change even though there is a consensus.



These Polarizations can be explained through Motivated Reasoning:

Motivated Reasoning:

NEW INFORMATION

hm...

FORMING OPINION

Opinions are formed according to two different types of goals: directional & non-directional

DIRECTIONAL

I am very sceptic.

scientific consensus

one other article

climate change is natural!

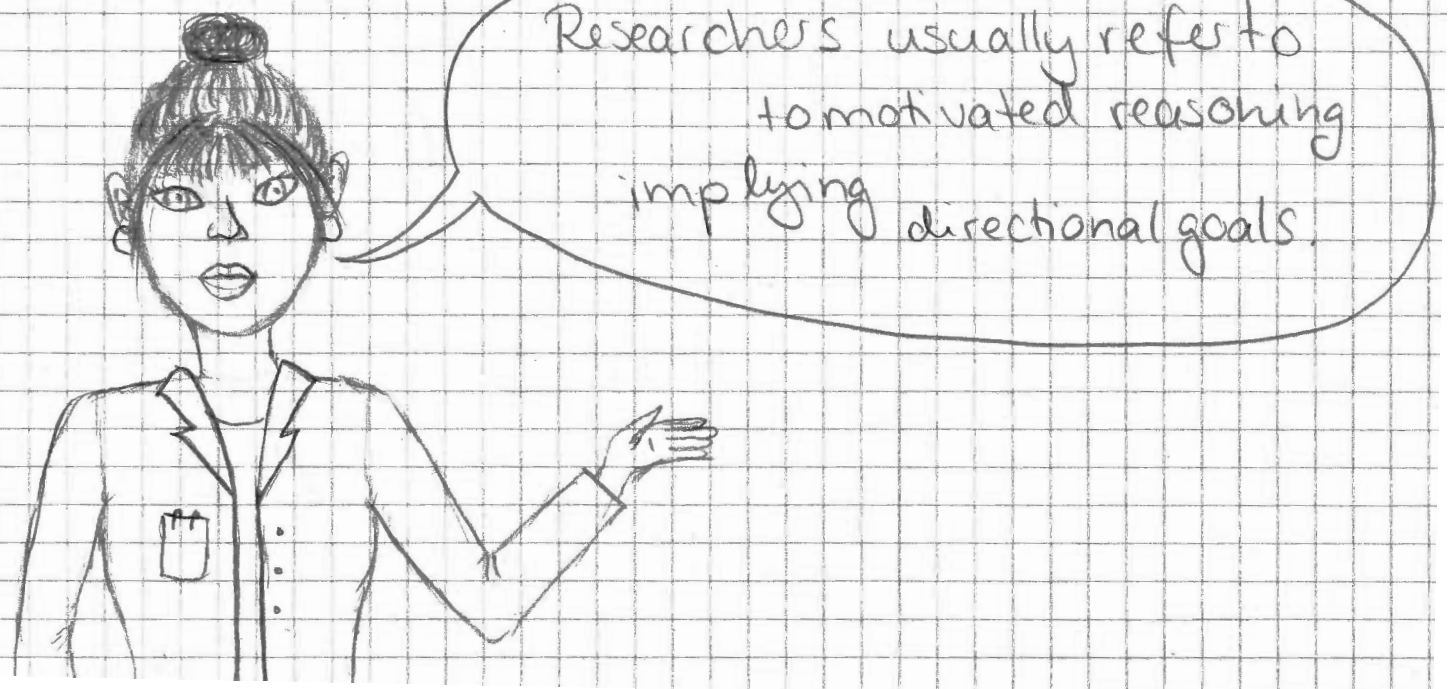
NON-DIRECTIONAL

Let's look into climate change

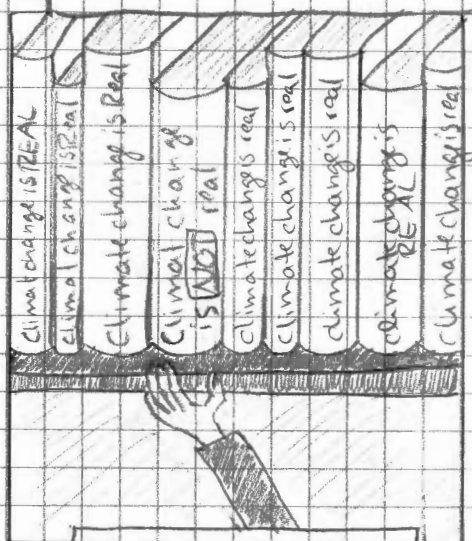
scientific consensus

one other article

probably human-induced

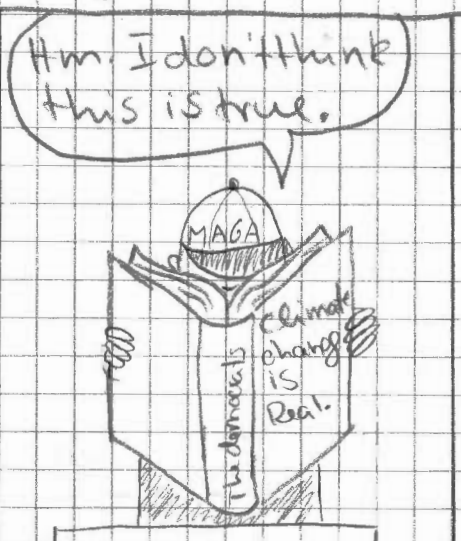


Taber and Lodge (2006) introduce three distinct processes in their analysis of motivated reasoning.



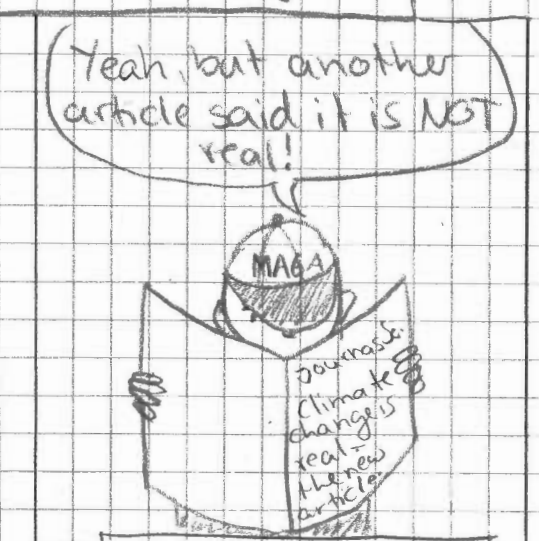
confirmation bias

People choose to look for information that is coherent with the conclusion they desire.



prior attitude effect

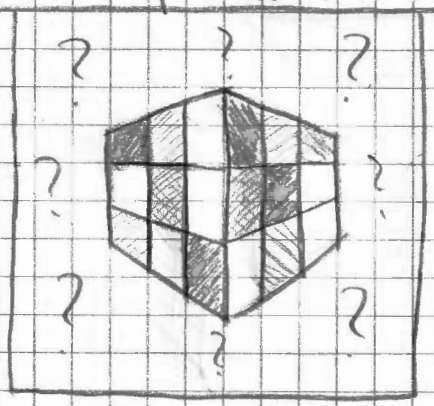
People evaluate new information based on whether it does or does not support their opinion.



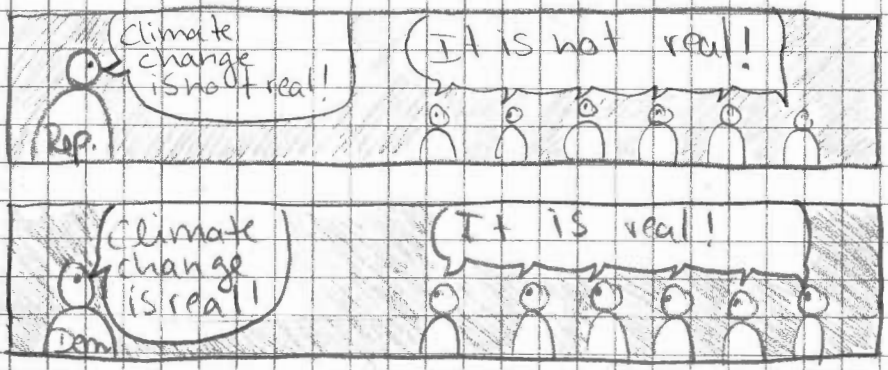
disconfirmation bias

People actively try to discredit and counterargue against information contradicting their desired conclusion.

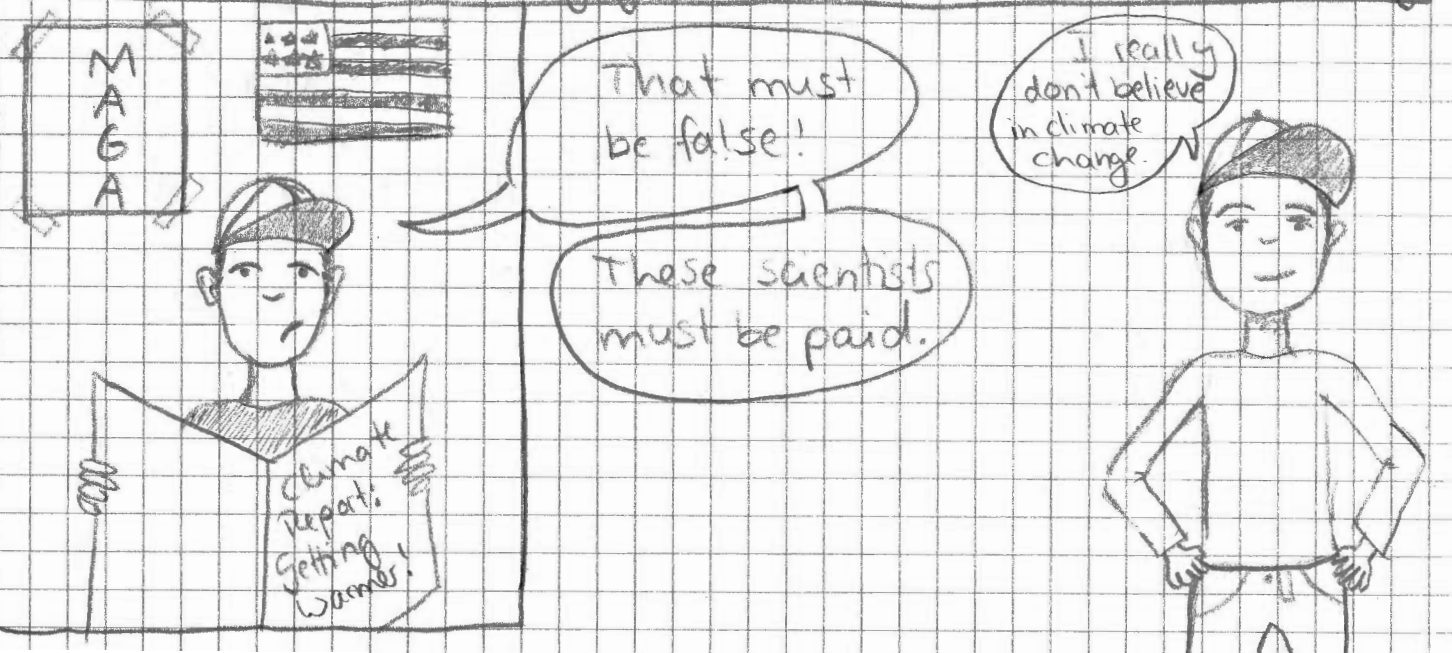
Since climate change is a complex issue...



...It is very vulnerable to elite cues and partisans follow.



Partisans will then engage in directional motivated reasoning



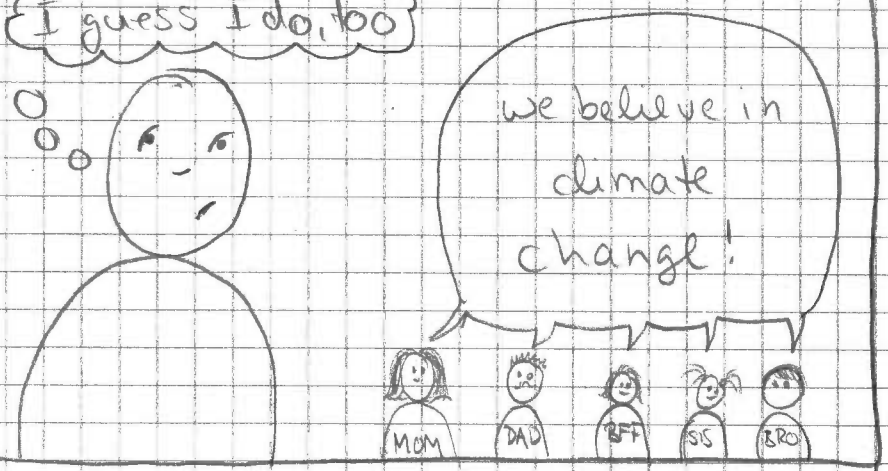
Another example:

There are five variations of motivated reasoning

① Social identity protection

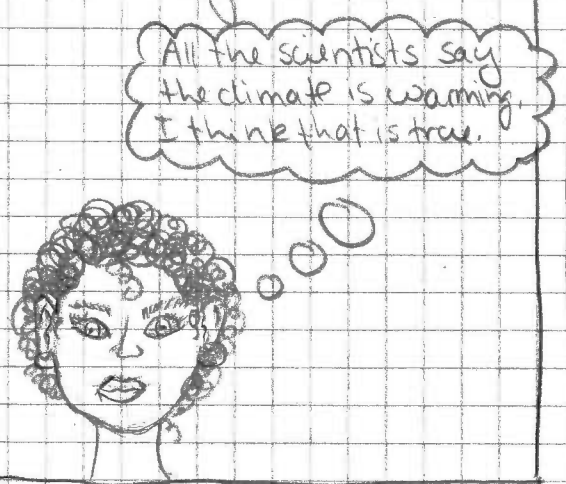
People desire to strengthen their sense of identification with social groups that are important to them.

② social consensus seeking



People adopt the view of a certain social group like family because they see informational value in their views.

③ scientific consensus seeking

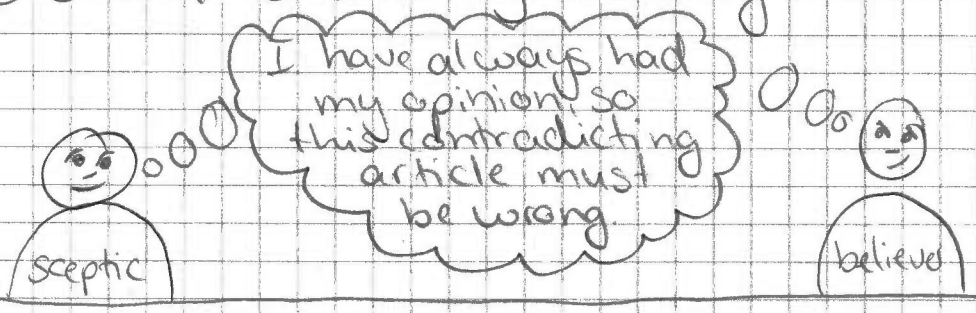


some people align their beliefs to a scientific consensus.

④ value affirmation

Some people choose to stick to moral values characteristic to a social group because they feel loyal towards said group.

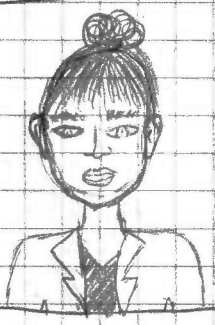
5 belief consistency seeking



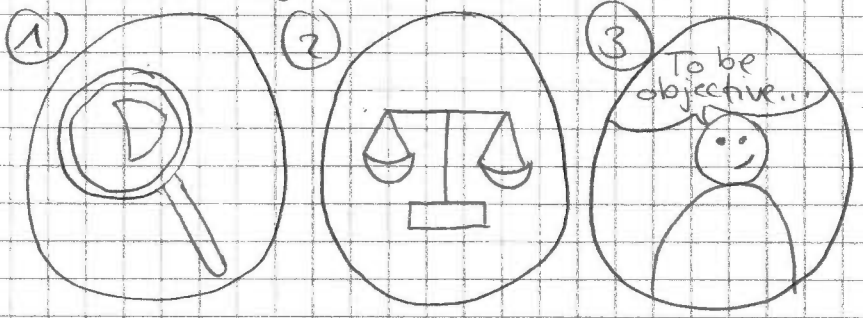
people maintain their beliefs by dismissing contradicting information! This is true for climate sceptics and believers alike.

So, the polarization can very likely be caused by directional motivated reasoning, but one non-directional goal is also possible: Accuracy.

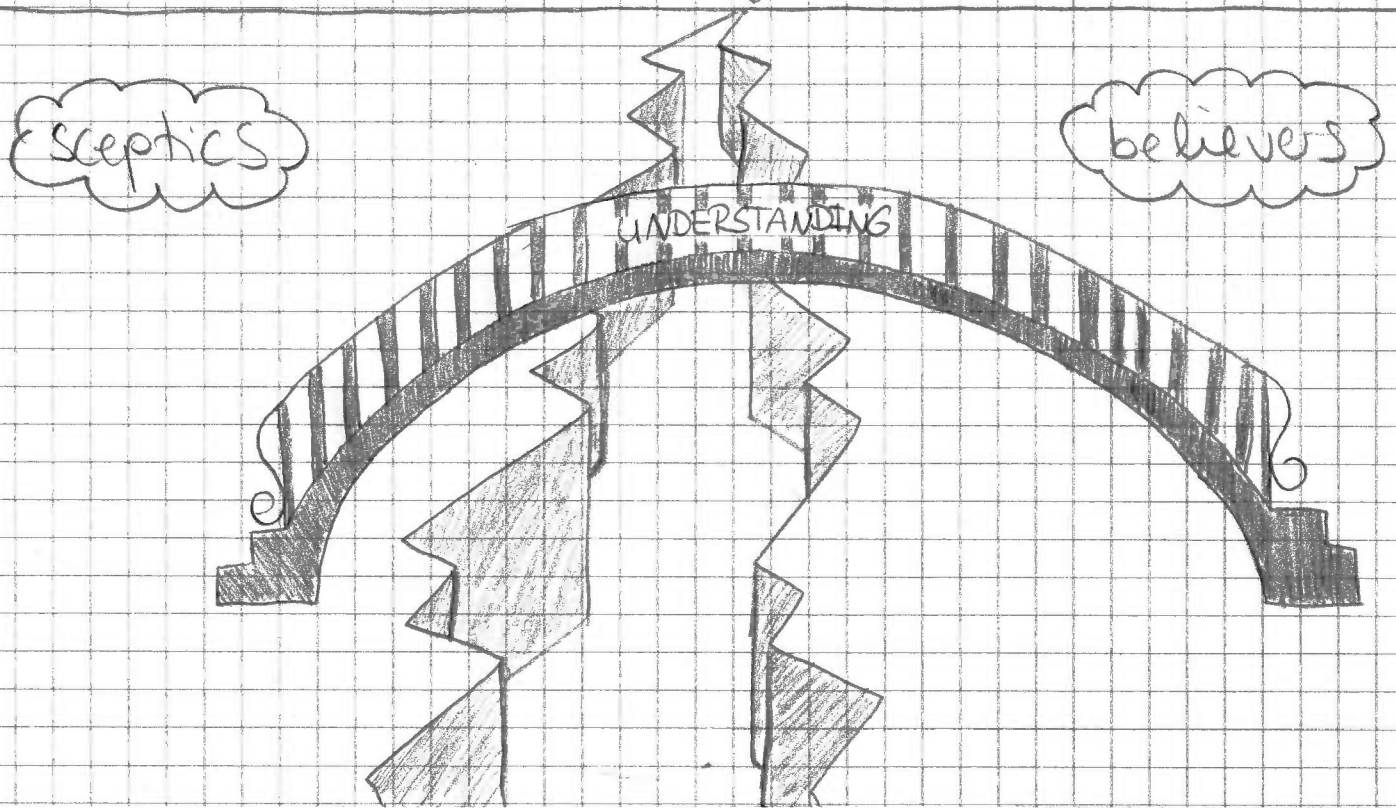
The non-directional goal of accuracy means to form the correct opinion or the otherwise best conclusion.



These are three characteristics to „Accuracy"



A generous amount of research | careful evaluation | attempt to suppress biases

However, most people trust their party leaders, meaning this is how they evaluate the credibility of sources. This also holds true for the partisans.

So... what now? To act responsibly as one we need to understand the psychological processes behind the polarization. This will help to close the gap