

The Rot of Systemic Biases

Bryan Caplan, author of *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, compared average voter beliefs to the beliefs of economic experts. He found four systemic voter biases – areas where voters as a whole tend to systematically diverge from expert knowledge.

These biases are the anti-market bias, the anti-foreign bias, the make-work bias, and the pessimism bias. Briefly, voters (and pundits and politicians) tend to distrust markets and to believe that government palliatives work better than markets to foster cooperation and improve our well-being. They tend to distrust foreign entrepreneurs and immigrants. They tend to distrust anything which makes our work easier, such as automation. They tend to believe things are worse than they are.

Mind you, we do have many problems. But the problems may not be the obvious ones; the causes are almost certainly not the obvious ones. Immigration, for example, has both benefits and negatives. A strong case can be made that benefits outweigh negatives (harms).

Complicating the issue is that most of us owe much of our early instruction to institutions which themselves exhibit systemic bias, particularly a bias which favors government solutions to all of our problems. There is also a countervailing trend; we have learned to distrust many who claim expertise, in one area or another. Valuable as this insight is, it may sometimes lead to discarding the baby with the bath water.

In the following articles, I will address these four biases, as well as a fifth: the belief that the best solution to our problems is more government intervention, rather than less. I call this the “compel something” bias.

I write about these today – ten years after the book was published – because I believe these biases played an important role in the election of the current President of the United States. They also influence some of his policy proposals, in unfortunate ways.