WHEN POLITICIANS FIGHT, FACTS TAKE BEATING

'Why does public conflict over societal risks persist in the face of compelling and widely accessible scientific evidence?' asks a new study by the Cultural Cognition Project at Yale University, which should be required reading for all members of the U.S. "do-nothing" Congress.

Psychologist Dan M. Kahan and his colleagues proved that political fighting diminishes our ability to think about evidence-based science.

Think climate change, which was well understood 20 years ago, yet conflict persists. Ditto for gun control, for which the data are compelling. Think nuclear power, genetically modified foods, national health care, commercial drones or any politically contentious topic that could be easily solved with evidence-based reasoning.

Congress is not alone. All of us are vulnerable to bias, prejudice, narrow-mindedness and tunnel vision. In short: seeing what we want to see, rather than what actually is.

This study's technical name for this phenomenon is the "Identity-Protective Cognition Thesis" or ICT. It says cultural conflict disables the faculties we use to make sense of science that would better inform decisions. The key word here is "disabling." When there's no conflict, we're fine. When there is, we're disabled.

The ICT thesis is true. We maintain our allegiances by skewing our thinking. Kahan's clever experiment yielded results so robust that no political partisan could explain them away.

During the spring of 2013, the researchers hired a third party on-line survey company to select and test a diverse sample of 1,111 adults nationwide. They were 52 percent female, 73 percent white and 11 percent African American. The average age was 48, income ranged from $40,000 to $49,000 and educational level was "some college." They were roughly split equally as Republicans, Democrats and independents. On a related question, they divided as conservatives, liberals and moderates. Here was a nationally representative cross section. (See the report at www.ssrn.com/en/, search for "Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government."

The researchers first explored each subject's motivation to lean toward certain policy positions, based on the subject's self-identified party affiliation and political outlooks. Next they measured each subject's ability to work with raw data to reach evidence-based conclusions, their "numeracy." Then, in the main part of the experiment, they asked each subject questions about two fictional scenarios, for which the correct answers could be reached by examining a simple matrix of four numbers.

One scenario was apolitical; asking if the patients who used new skin cream to treat a rash got better or worse, based on the numerical comparisons. The other scenario was highly political; asking if cities that banned the carrying of concealed handguns led to an increase or decrease in crime. The "trick" the investigators did not tell their subjects was that the same four numbers were used for both scenarios. Without "motivated reasoning," the answers should have been the same. With it, the answers should be skewed.

The results are compelling. Both conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats did far worse on tests of evidence-based thinking when the scenario was politically contentious than when it was not. The more political things became, the more the subject's mental biases kicked in to disable their reasoning skills. And the more scientifically inclined an issue was, the worse they did, perhaps because they were more facile at manipulating the numbers to match their versions of reality.
Importantly, self-identified liberals were no more open-minded than conservatives, even though that's how they're defined.

Scientists like me have long tried to explain bad policy decisions on a dearth of scientific data or the lack of voter science, technology, engineering and mathematics education. Others fault an excess of highly paid lobbyists. Kahan's study tags the ICT as a major culprit, advocating that governments must: "adopt measures that effectively shield decision-relevant science from the influences that generate this reason-disabling state."

Chief among those disabling influences is partisanship. United we stand. Divided we fall.