

Explain This: The Illusion Of Political Understanding

June 06, 2013

NPR:

Should the United States impose unilateral sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program? Should we raise the retirement age for Social Security? Should we institute a national flat tax? How about implementing merit-based pay for teachers? Or establishing a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions?

Plenty of people have strong opinions about complex policy issues like these. But few people have the detailed knowledge of policy or economics that a solid understanding of the issues seems to require. Where do these opinions come from, if not from careful analysis and deep understanding?

A variety of uncharitable answers come to mind. Perhaps people just adopt the attitudes of their local community or favorite pundits. Perhaps people believe what they *want* to believe. Or perhaps people think they *do* understand the issues, at least well enough to support their own opinions.

A recent study by psychologist Phil Fernbach of the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado and his collaborators, published this May in *Psychological Science*, provides some evidence for this final option: people overestimate how well they understand the mechanics of complex policies, and this sense of understanding helps bolster politically extreme positions.

Read the whole story: [NPR](#)