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**Daniel R. Stalder Ph.D.**  
Bias Fundamentals

# Dissonance and Political Hypocrisy

A pandemic of self-protection and self-presentation.

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I've been academically intrigued in recent months to see so many political references to "[cognitive dissonance](#)." As a social psychologist who has taught and conducted dissonance research for over 20 years, I see apparent dissonance processes unfolding in real life all the time. And certainly, the popular press caught on to "dissonance" years ago.

But lately, perhaps as another consequence of the pandemic, there seem to be even more popular press shout-outs to dissonance. There are even entire articles devoted to applying cognitive dissonance theory to political happenings and, in particular, to the perplexing remarks by politicians about [Covid-19](#) ([Aronson and Tavris, 2020](#)).

## What Is Cognitive Dissonance?



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Cognitive dissonance is a discomfort caused by inconsistency which most of us are then motivated to try to reduce. In particular, it can be a feeling of hypocrisy or a realization of having made a mistake, and it's unpleasant. Or it's supposed to be unpleasant.

How do so many politicians fall prey to it and then manage to handle it without coming clean?

Of course, some admit their mistakes and even resign. And some have switched political sides even voicing the intention to make up for their perceived mistakes ([Noor, 2020](#)). This coming-clean mode of dissonance reduction can be called behavior change, but it is relatively rare. As I've written elsewhere ([Stalder, 2018](#)), dissonance reduction typically involves a number of biases in self-protection and self-presentation. People don't easily acknowledge negative truths about themselves.

## The Cognitive Dissonance Legacy

The noticeable increase in dissonance references might reflect an increase in political hypocrisy or an increase in journalistic attempts to understand it. The term "cognitive dissonance" taps a gigantic research literature that goes back over 60 years (Festinger et al., 1956; Festinger, 1957). This research can offer insights into the growing divide between what many politicians say and what they later say or do.

reinterpretation of the situation. Loyal supporters of a mainstream political leader fall short of a cult, but when the leader makes false claims over and over, it's not hard to find similar dissonance-reducing behaviors among the followers. Partisan talk radio and news channels offer a cult-like mode of dissonance reduction that Festinger originally called social support, which has evolved into current-day echo chambers.

### Political Dissonance and Evasion

Some dissonance-reducing behaviors seem unique to politicians, such as literally running away from a reporter or claiming not to have yet read the bombshell news story. This mode of dissonance reduction may fall under what I refer to as "waiting it out." In the recent vice presidential debate, both candidates simply didn't answer certain questions.

In a form of denial, some politicians try to discredit the science or the verified news report that disproves their claims. Some may simply use a [name-calling approach](#). Many politicians also use word games to evade questions or to answer in a way that minimizes the appearance of hypocrisy. Onlookers refer to these answers with terms like gymnastics, acrobatics, and twisting oneself "into a pretzel" ([Bonn, 2019](#)).



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Even some doctors of politicians have resorted to word games. Dr. Sean Conley has admitted to [lying](#) or misleading the press in what he had said about Trump's health ([Stolberg, 2020](#)). Conley claimed he had good reason, which may reflect a mode of dissonance reduction called external justification (or [rationalization](#)). Many high-profile politicians have downplayed masks and social distancing despite the science and despite many anti-masking politicians getting sick. Such downplaying may fall under a mode of dissonance reduction called trivialization. Or if some of these politicians used to follow science, prior to following Trump, then the mode of dissonance reduction may be an attitude

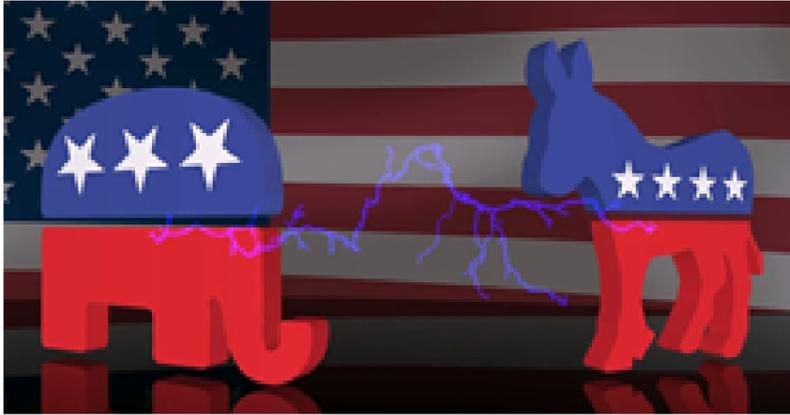
change.

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Among yet countless other high-profile examples of hypocrisy and dissonance in recent months is Republicans' move to confirm a Supreme Court nominee within months of a presidential election despite explicitly and strongly arguing against that precise behavior in 2016. Democrats seem to have fewer Covid-19 health concerns about large gatherings or protests when they support more liberal [goals](#). Trump and conservative media recently praised a drug that was created in a way (i.e., with fetal tissue) that they had previously argued against ([Mandavilli & Holt, 2020](#)). The president of Notre Dame requires students to follow Covid-19 rules that he did not follow himself at a White House Rose Garden event, an inconsistency not lost on some 200 Notre Dame students who have called for his resignation ([Taylor, 2020](#)).

acknowledge that they may be putting themselves or their party over country or over principles of fairness and safety.

### Republicans vs. Democrats



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Probably best left for another post, but briefly, who is more susceptible to hypocrisy and dissonance between Republicans and Democrats? Obviously, both parties have examples. And understandably, the party in power probably gets noticed for it more often by mainstream news. Interestingly, some Democrats are feeling dissonance over feeling empathy or compassion for Trump after he got sick because they are constantly outraged by Trump's other behaviors ([Logan, 2020](#)).

Whether one political orientation is more prone to dissonance than the other may be an open and complicated research question. Republicans (not all of them) typically have a greater need for order and a greater aversion to ambiguity and inconsistency (Jost et al., 2003). One might think they would experience less dissonance because they would work harder to avoid it.

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On the other hand, Republicans would feel greater discomfort from a smaller degree of unavoidable inconsistency. In addition, Republicans (not all of them) are typically more group-centric meaning more willing to follow each other and their leader and to criticize group members who don't (Stalder, 2009), which can lead them into more dissonance such as in supporting a leader's claims that they know to be false or dangerous.

But these Republican characteristics also provide immediate dissonance reducers in group-centric social support and in keeping their jobs by staying loyal to Trump, so any feelings of discomfort might not last long. The more politicians stick together within a party, the more the everybody-does-it defense can reduce their dissonance (Stalder, 2010).

### In Sum

Why political hypocrisy may be spiking this year undoubtedly has many answers. Political tribalism may be a major contributor ([Aronson and Tavris, 2020](#); [Feldman, 2020](#)). What dissonance theory primarily offers is a framework of modes of dissonance reduction to explain the aftereffects of hypocrisy. I've identified at least seven formal modes: attitude change, behavior change, denial, external justification, social support, trivialization, and waiting it out (running away). The verbal gymnastics to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy may not reduce the personal discomfort from dissonance, or maybe it does through a form of denial, trivialization, or waiting it out.

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Not all politicians are hypocrites, but recognizing potential modes of dissonance reduction may help us to be less misled by some politicians' face-saving claims and to see more clearly the underlying facts. It might even help us to try to convince the politician or at least ourselves to reduce dissonance in a [less biased way](#).

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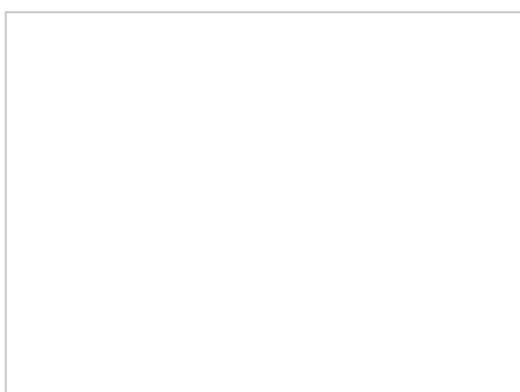
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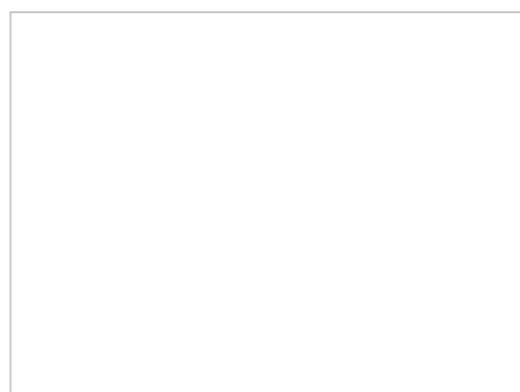
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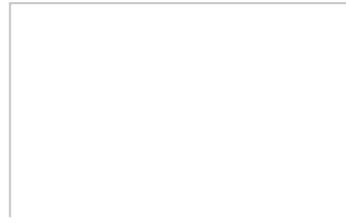
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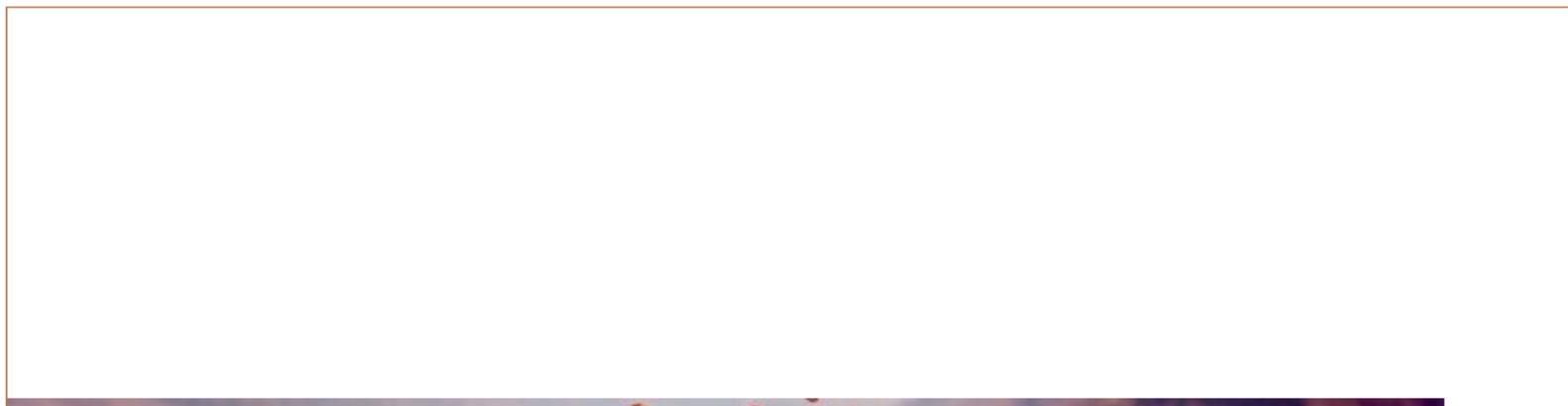
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