

Why Opportunists Have An Upper hand

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Michael Cohen, the former private lawyer to Donald Trump, is nothing less than a god-send to help us see the true color of the least ethical president of the US history. I burst into laughter when I saw the story revealed today that after meeting with evangelical Christians before winning the 2016 election, Trump remarked that “Can you believe people believe that bullshit?” Cohen also told us that it was a “cosmic joke” to believe Trump caring about working-class people, with the truth that “he couldn’t care less.”

One can’t help but think why guys like Trump are capable of going this far up in the ladder of power. My thinking is that Trump is not alone. In fact, I am willing to say that all opportunists tend to have an upper hand in the social games for power. I know it sounds too simple but we can divide opportunists into two camps: Those who are willing to change their opinions or views or positions when new evidences emerge against them; and those who have no opinions or views or positions of their own, only to pick up those that would help them achieve their goals. Trump belongs to the latter, the more dangerous type and usually with low moral value and care only about ends, not means.

Adaptability Wins

It is questionable whether it is right to call the first type an opportunistic. A better term is perhaps “adaptability” or flexibility or open-mindedness. It is high adaptability that is highly precious nowadays, when the country is deeply divided and it is so easy for everyone to live in his/her own “info world” because AI paradigm can quickly find out what you have

clicked and downloaded before and keep sending you similar info. Many people, including many scholars, have become the prisoner of their own preexisting opinions and forgotten to learn and to update with new facts /evidences. Highly adaptive humans are willing to change their minds when their opinions were proven wrong. The best way to describe these people is to call them Bayesian statisticians: Each of them has prior beliefs that are subject to update to the posterior beliefs that are directly impacting decisions. In math symbols we have

$$P(A | B) = \frac{P(B | A)P(A)}{P(B)}$$

where A is the proposition, B evidence, $P(A)$ the prior probability of A for one's beliefs about A before evidence; $P(A | B)$ posterior probability or the probability of the proposition A after taking evidence B into account. So simply put, Bayes' theorem is about how agents update their prior beliefs $P(A)$ after considering the new evidence B .

The problem today we are facing is that many, if not most, Americans have a big term $P(A)$ and so they are not open to evidence B and end up with a posterior probability $P(A | B)$ that is dominated by $P(A)$ rather than $P(B | A)$ (i.e., the *likelihood function*), or their posterior probability $P(A | B)$ is almost the same as their prior probability $P(A)$. I can fully imagine many Trump fans would simply brush away Cohen's book as "sales talks" for selling the book. The sad truth for them however is that their inflated $P(A)$ would not even be appreciated by Trump, who would say "Thank you" to their faces and then turn around saying they are stupid, just like he did with the religious group.

High adaptability wins because these people are open to evidences and are willing to change their course of behaviors if their prior beliefs were proven wrong. This makes them the change makers or entrepreneurs who are capable of reducing the mental costs of making changes, because their ultimate goal is to seek truth or evidences.

Why Nasty Opportunists Win

Now let us go back to the second type, think of it as Trump. These people can and will win because they put their end goals before means — and anything else — and are willing to do anything to reach the goals. It is the extremely high elasticity of goals that make them competitive sometimes. Trump is the living proof of the case. Like adaptationists, opportunists have a low cost of changing courses because they do not have a fixed preferences or positions other than goal preferences. Look at China, a country with billions of people with strong goal preference but weak means preferences.

Going back to the Bayes theorem, nasty opportunists have a very weak or low $P(A)$ but very strong or high sensitivity of $P(B | A)$. Like the adaptationists they have a low mental cost of making changes, as long as it helps get closer to the goals.