

**PUBLIC OPINION, THE MASS MEDIA, AND  
B.F. SKINNER**

**Public  
Opinion**



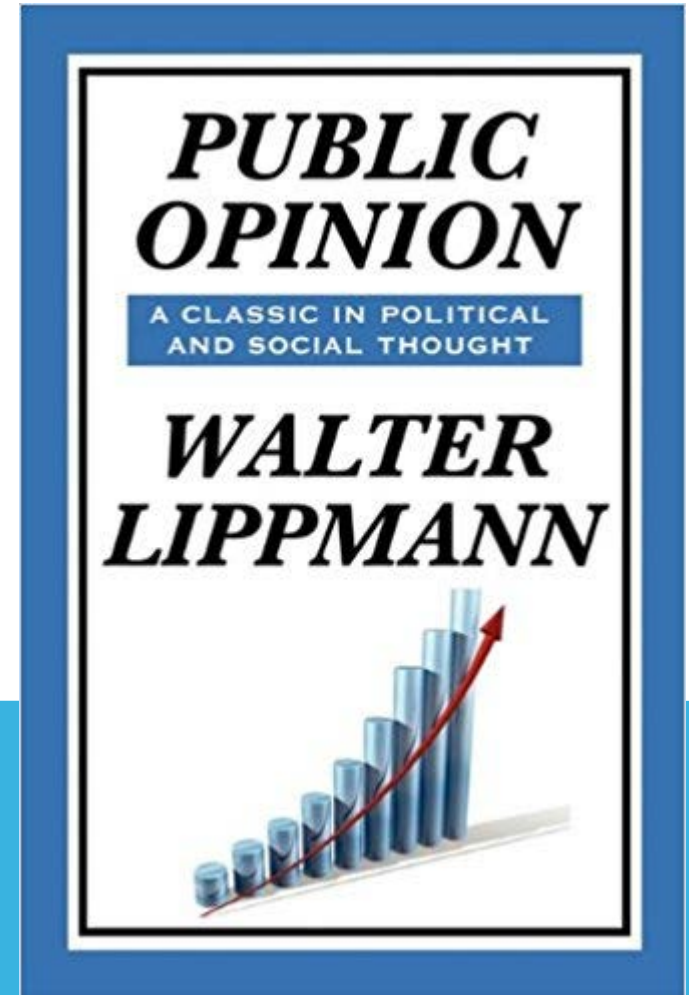
# PUBLIC OPINION, THE MASS MEDIA, AND B.F. SKINNER

## I. What is Public Opinion?



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Walter Lippman –  
“pictures in our  
heads”



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The limited and subjective nature of opinions held by individuals. Most individuals cannot act in the common interest on questions of public policy, because they neither have the time nor the information to act wisely.

P U B L I C  
L O O R U N D E V E L O P E D B R A I N S L A C K I N G I N C O G N I T I O N



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Citizens should allow policymakers great leeway because they can never be as knowledgeable as their leaders.

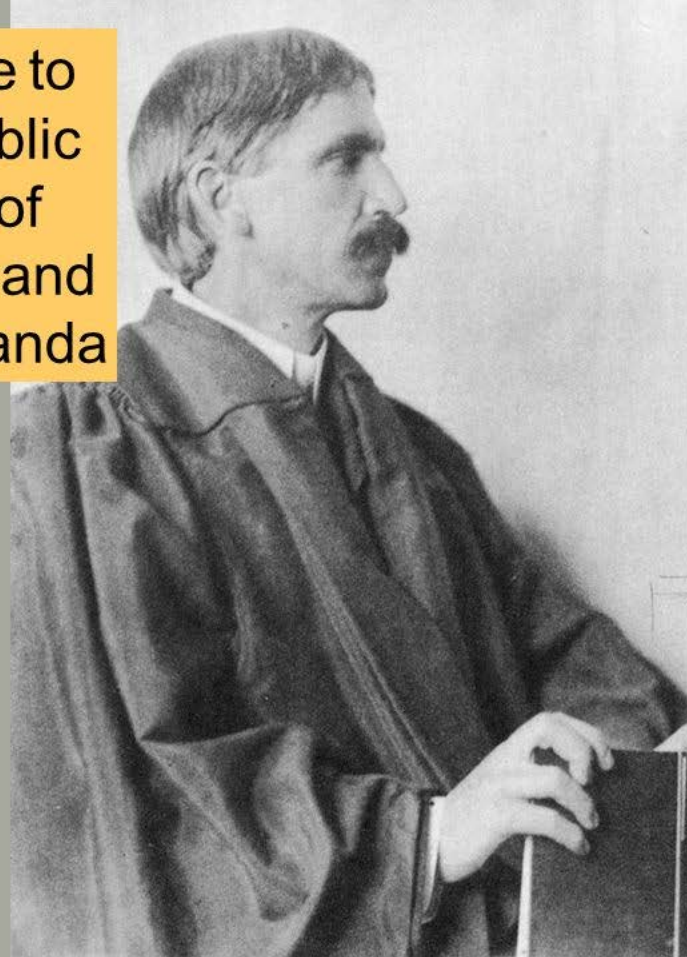


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## II. Dewey's "Publics and Issues"

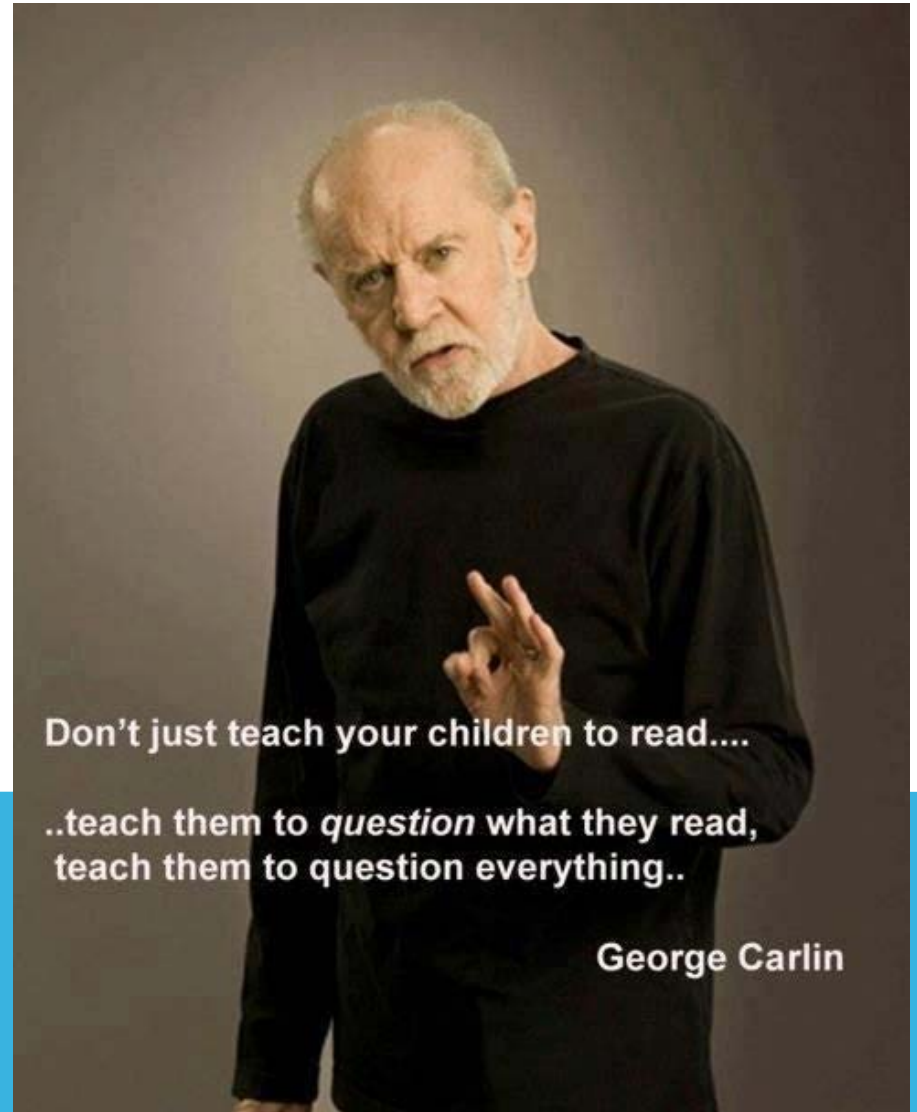
Education should strive to foster a competent "public opinion" that is worthy of democratic citizenship and not dupped by propaganda

**John Dewey**



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1. There is no  
“public  
opinion,” just  
“publics with  
opinions.”



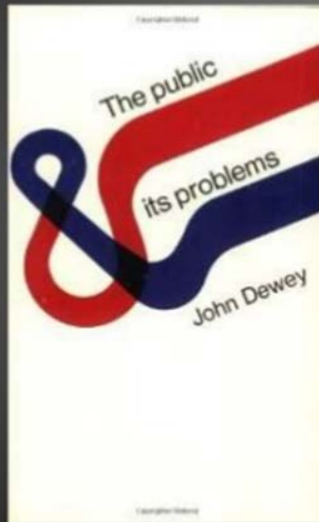
Don't just teach your children to read....

..teach them to *question* what they read,  
teach them to question everything..

George Carlin

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## “The Public & Its Problems” (1927)



- Rosen on Dewey: “A ‘public’ is a name for people who share certain problems and a common stake in their resolution. Publics come into their own when this shared stake is understood and talked about, in a fruitful way.”

**2. True “public opinions” are things of great importance to society as a whole.**

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3. Not every  
person has an  
opinion on  
*every issue.*

"I'm changing my political opinions based on your 5 million Facebook posts and forwards," said no one ever.



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## III. Attributes of Public Opinion

Three main attributes:

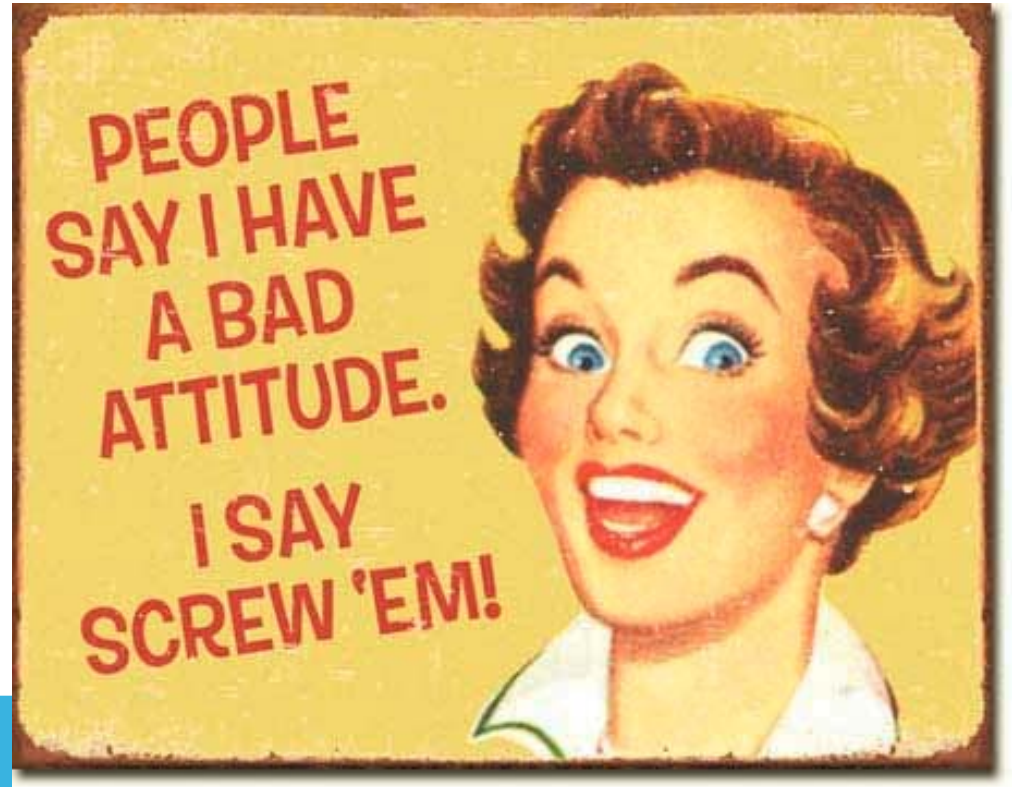


Democracy is much too important to be left to public opinion.

(Walter Lippmann)

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1. Attitudes –  
general  
orientations  
that individuals  
have toward  
life.



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John Cleese   
@JohnCleese

I would like 2016 to be the year when people remembered that science is a method of investigation, and NOT a belief system

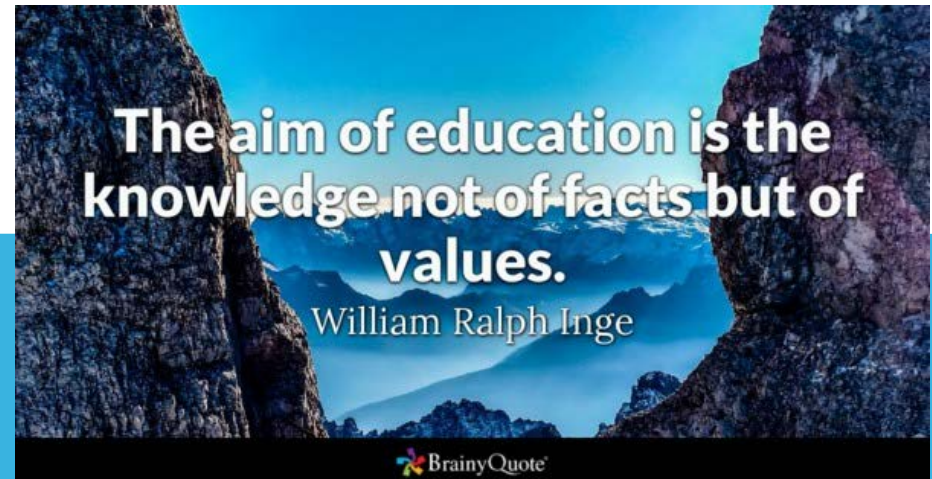
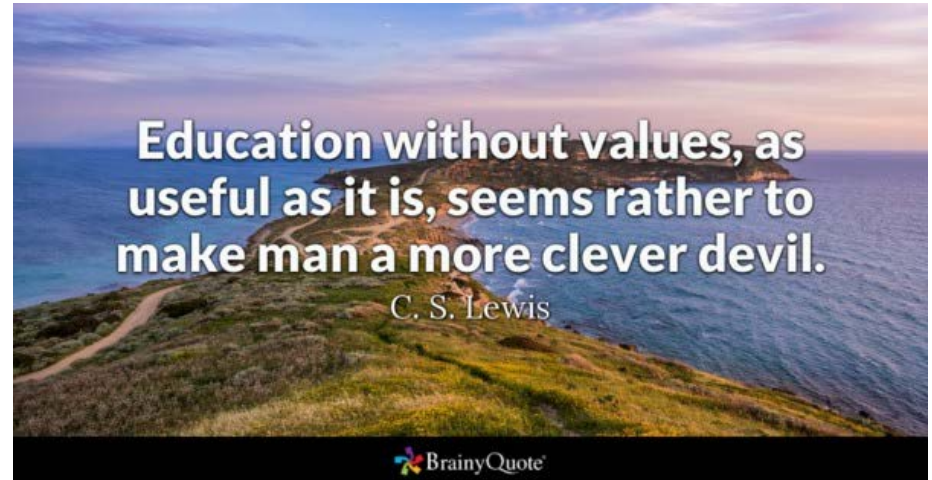
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2,571 RETWEETS 3,541 FAVORITES

**2. Beliefs –  
conscious  
feelings toward  
issues. More  
defined and  
intense than  
attitudes.**

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3. Values –  
priorities that  
individuals  
place on  
something  
desirable and  
worthy.



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**IV. Political  
Characteristics  
of Public  
Opinion**



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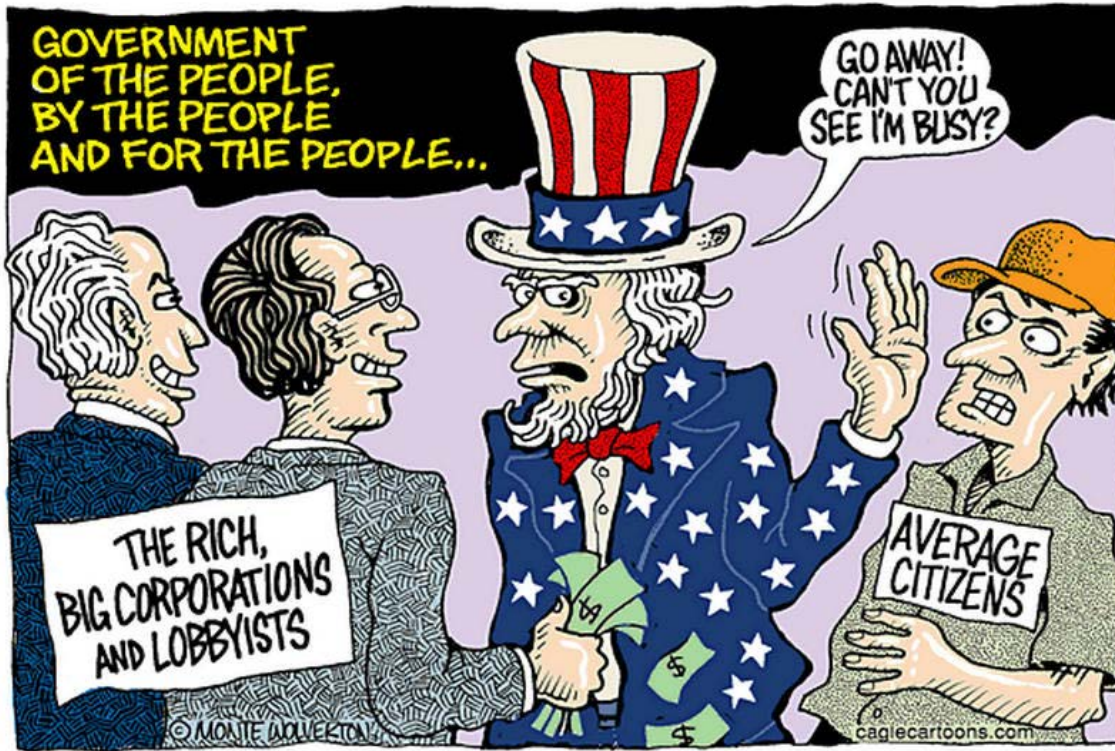
## 1. Partisan Affiliation –

The political  
party one  
identifies with.

## Political Parties in America



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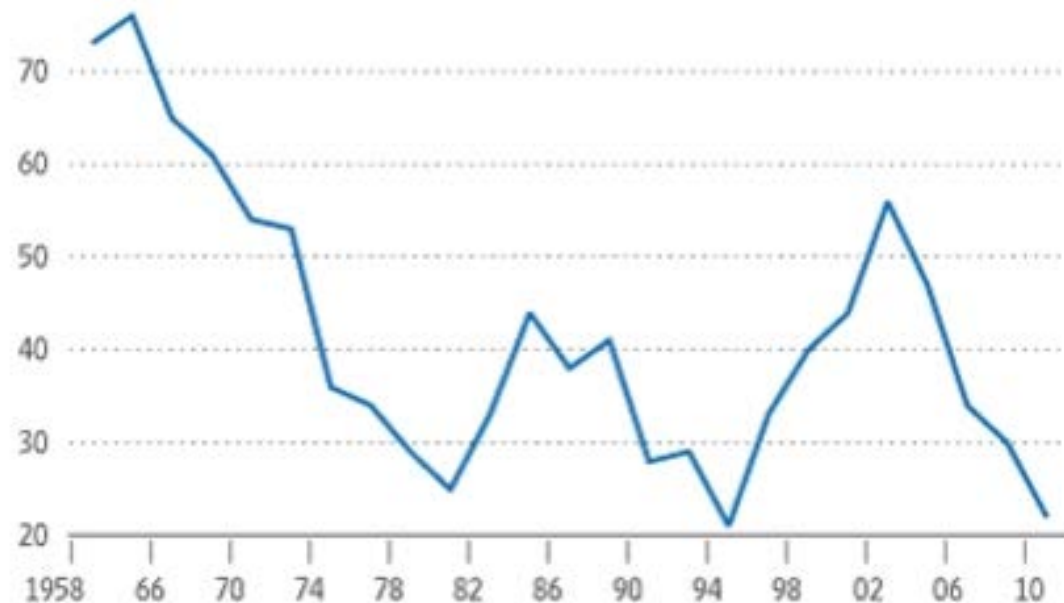
2. Political Efficacy – degree to which members of the public feel that they can have an effect or influence their government.

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**3. Political Trust**  
– degree to which citizens trust the government or believe it to be legitimate.

**Public Trust in Government, 1958 to 2010**

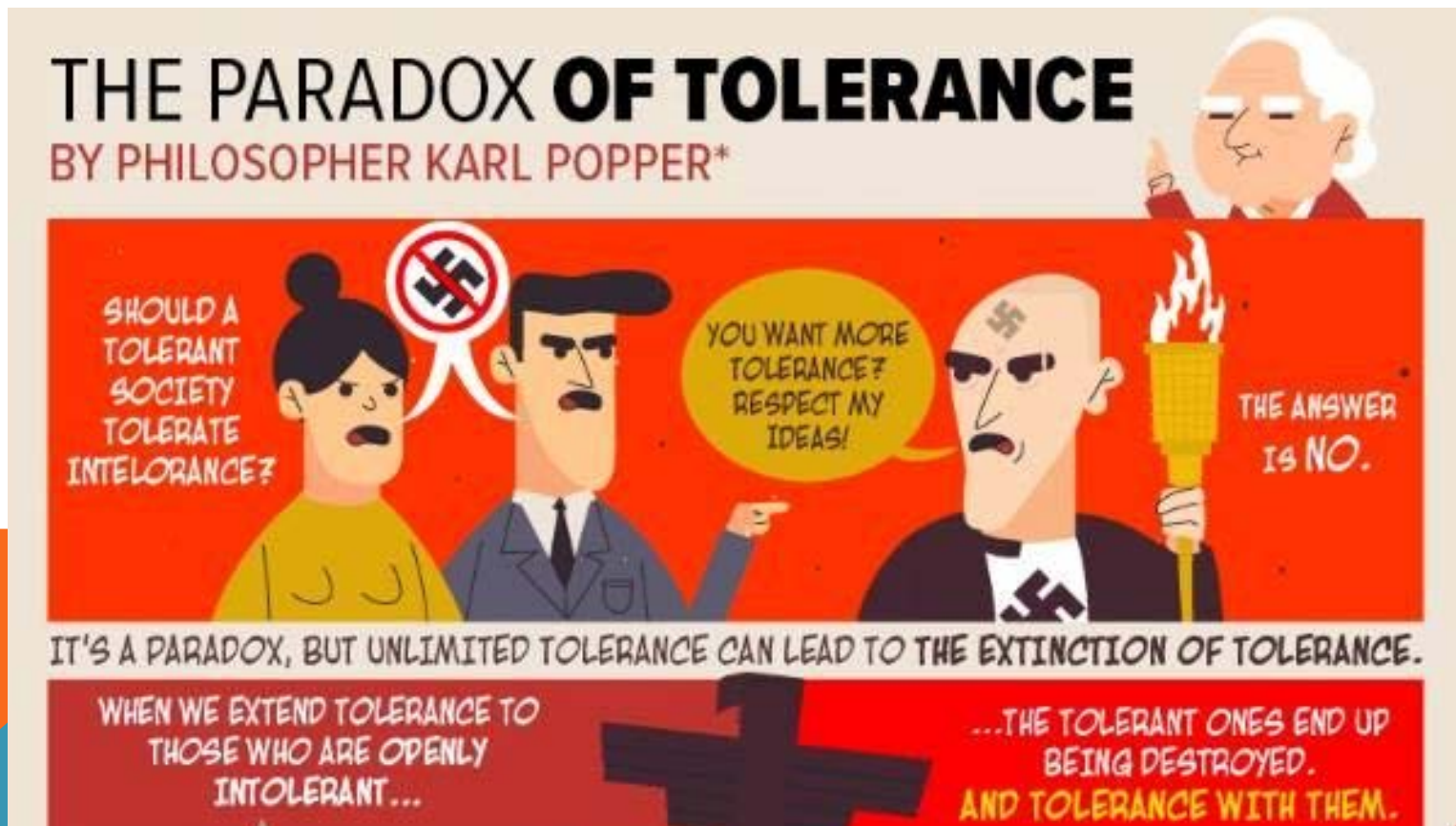
People who say they trust government just about always or most of the time



Source: Pew Research Center

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4. Tolerance – extent to which individuals are willing to allow distasteful opinions or ideas to be discussed, published, or propagated.



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**V. Sources of  
Public Opinion**



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## **1. Primary and Secondary Groups**

**a. Primary – groups in which members interact on a face-to-face basis as individuals (i.e. family, clubs, softball team).**

**b. Secondary – members need not interact on a regular basis (i.e. AFL-CIO, AARP, NAACP, NOW).**

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2. Opinion  
Leaders –  
public officials,  
religious  
leaders,  
business  
people.



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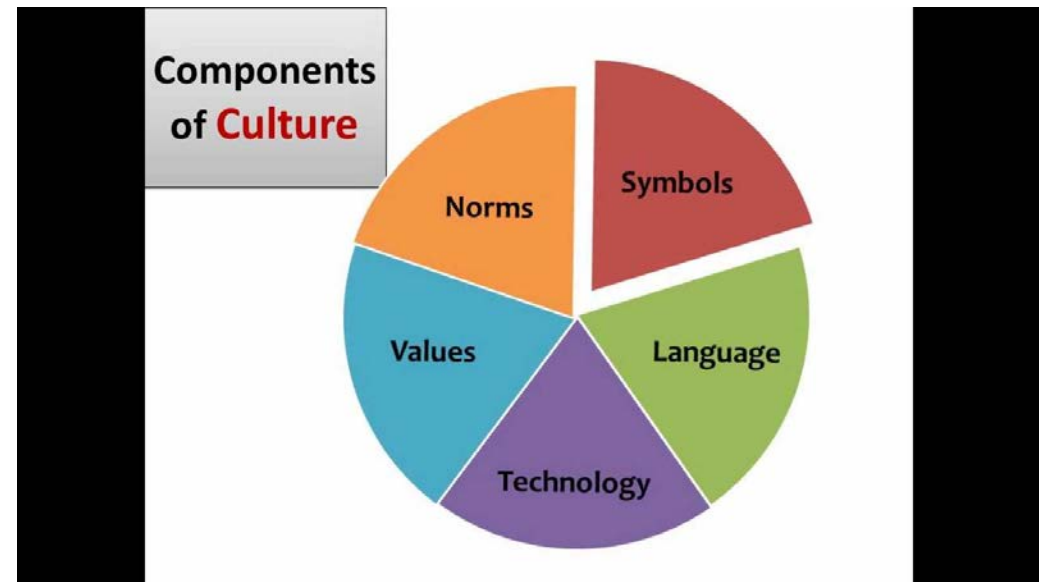


**3. Institutional Influences – family, educational system, church, workplace.**



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4. Culture – the system of attitudes, values, and knowledge that is widely shared within a society and transmitted from generation to generation.



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**VI. Effects of the  
Media on Public  
Opinion**



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1. Diffusion of Information – the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to the Constitution has protected free expression (from the government anyway).



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2. Media Influence? – “easily overrated” says Heineman. They play a “reinforcing role” by supplementing attitudes and beliefs already held. Media decisions about what *not* to cover possibly *more* important.



What is the impact of mass-media in our lives?



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**VII. Formal  
Channels for  
Public Opinion**



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1. Referendum –  
provides for  
popular votes  
on a particular  
issue.



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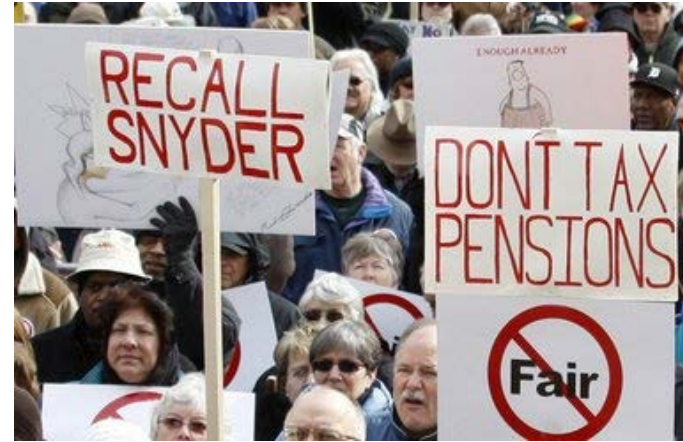
It's frustrating that  
someone can just buy  
the initiative process.  
—Rep. Louie Luchini

**2. Initiative –  
allows groups  
to propose  
legislation  
through the  
electoral  
process.**



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3. Recall – enables voters to remove elected officials.



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# **Skinner and Behavioral Conditioning**



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A theory of human nature which is *psychologically* based and focused on behavior.

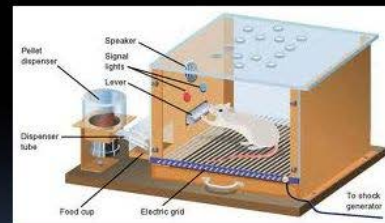


B F Skinner  
(1904-1990)

## Behavioural Psychology

Behavior is learned or modified in response to the environment.

## Operant Conditioning



## Reinforcement

Contingencies Schedules

Skinner Box

*Walden Two*

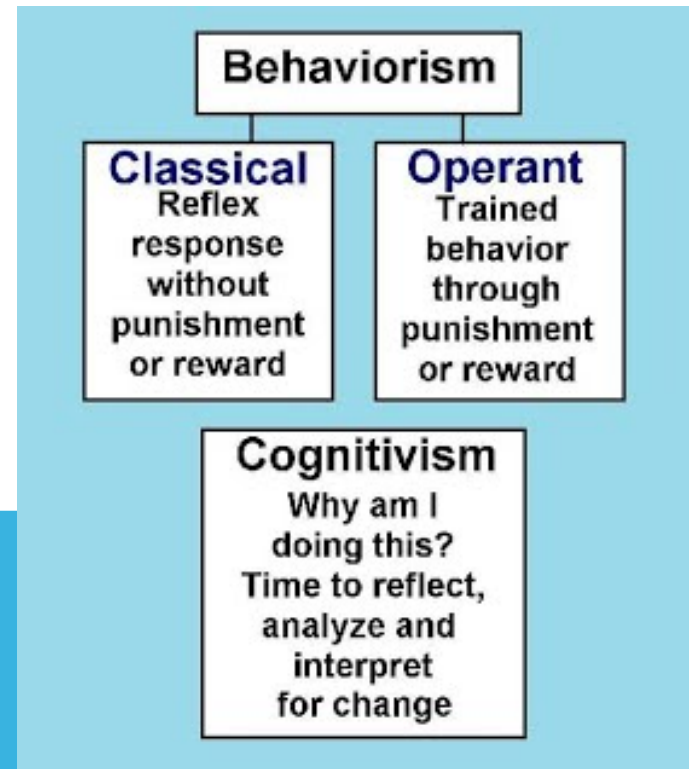


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**Behaviorism – The psychological school, concentrating on overt behavior, which influenced behavioralism in political science.**

## Behaviorism

- John Watson
- B.F. Skinner
  
- Observable behavior
- Learning by association
- Reinforcement and punishment



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**Behavioralism – The contemporary school, perhaps the dominant one in political science, which argues that political analysis should begin with the behavior of political actors.**



## **Orientations in Political Science**

- 1. Political Philosophy**
- 2. Political History**
- 3. Case Studies**
- 4. Political Institutions**
- 5. Behavioralism:  
Psychology & Surveys**
- 6. Post-Behavioralism:  
Policy Orientation**



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Where should we focus?


1. Behavior – J.B. Watson; B.F. Skinner
2. Consciousness and unconscious – Freud
3. Environment, *not* heredity (Nurture over nature, learned behavior over innate behavior).

## History of Political Science

- Traditional
  - Historical, Legalism, Philosophy, Descriptive
  
- Modern – “Behavioralism”
  - Political science as “science”
  - Facilitated by development of technology, computers

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**I. Background  
and Theoretical  
Assumptions**



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1. Only science can tell us about nature, including human nature. Science should be used to predict *and control* the world.



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## What is Science?

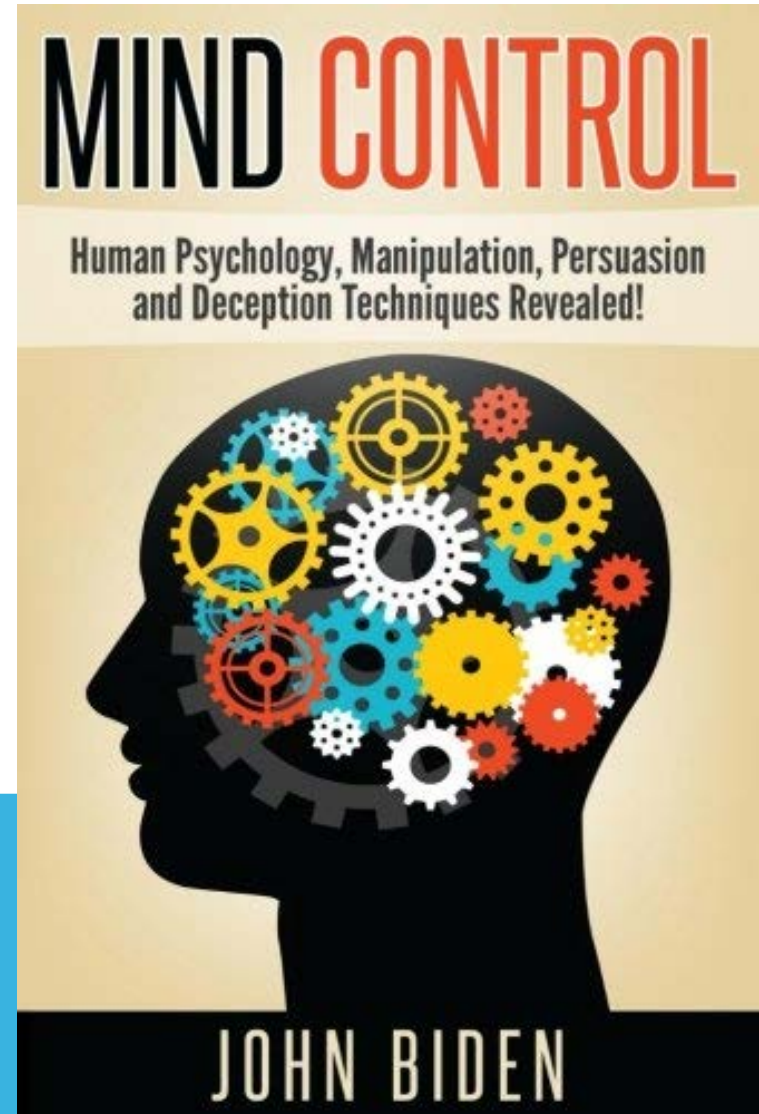
### Science is:

- ❖ a methodical, logical process for producing knowledge about natural phenomena
- ❖ a cumulative body of knowledge produced by scientists
- ❖ a process based on careful observation and hypothesis testing

**2. Science shows cumulative progress (not according to Kuhn! Remember paradigms?)**

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**3. There is no basis in science for any sort of belief, including God or religion. These are just social institutions used to manipulate human behavior.**



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## Science and Scientism

- **Science:** empirical, quantitative, mechanical, self-correcting, falsifiable.
- **Scientism** (or scientolatriy)
  - Science alone gives truth and this truth is absolute
  - Matter is the primary reality (materialism)
  - Behavior is determined by impersonal forces
  - All values are merely social conventions
  - The coming ideal society is guaranteed

**4. “Scientism” –  
not a specific  
theory itself,  
but a  
controversial  
*philosophical*  
view.**

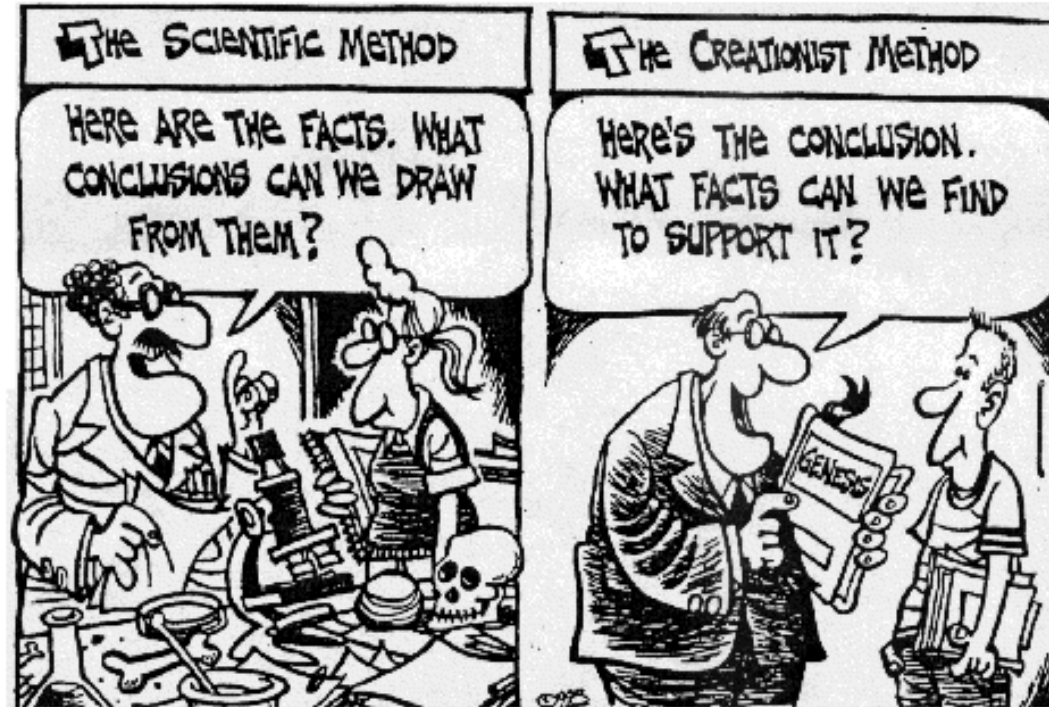
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**II. Theory of  
Human Nature**



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1. The empirical, scientific study of human *behavior* is the only way to arrive at a true theory of human nature.



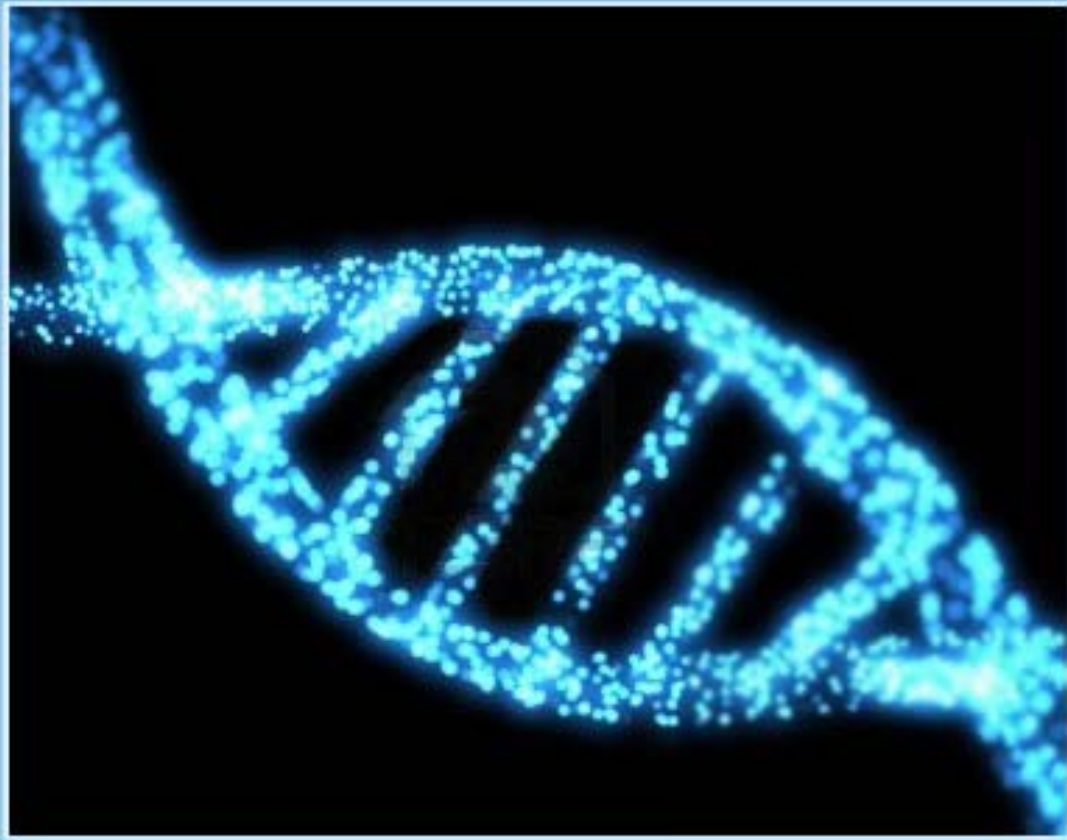
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2. Skinner rejects explanations connected to “inner mental entities.” This includes:
- a. Concepts such as beliefs, desires, emotions, intentions or decisions.
  - b. Theoretical constructs such as id, ego, and superego.

*The concept of these three was as a direct result of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory*



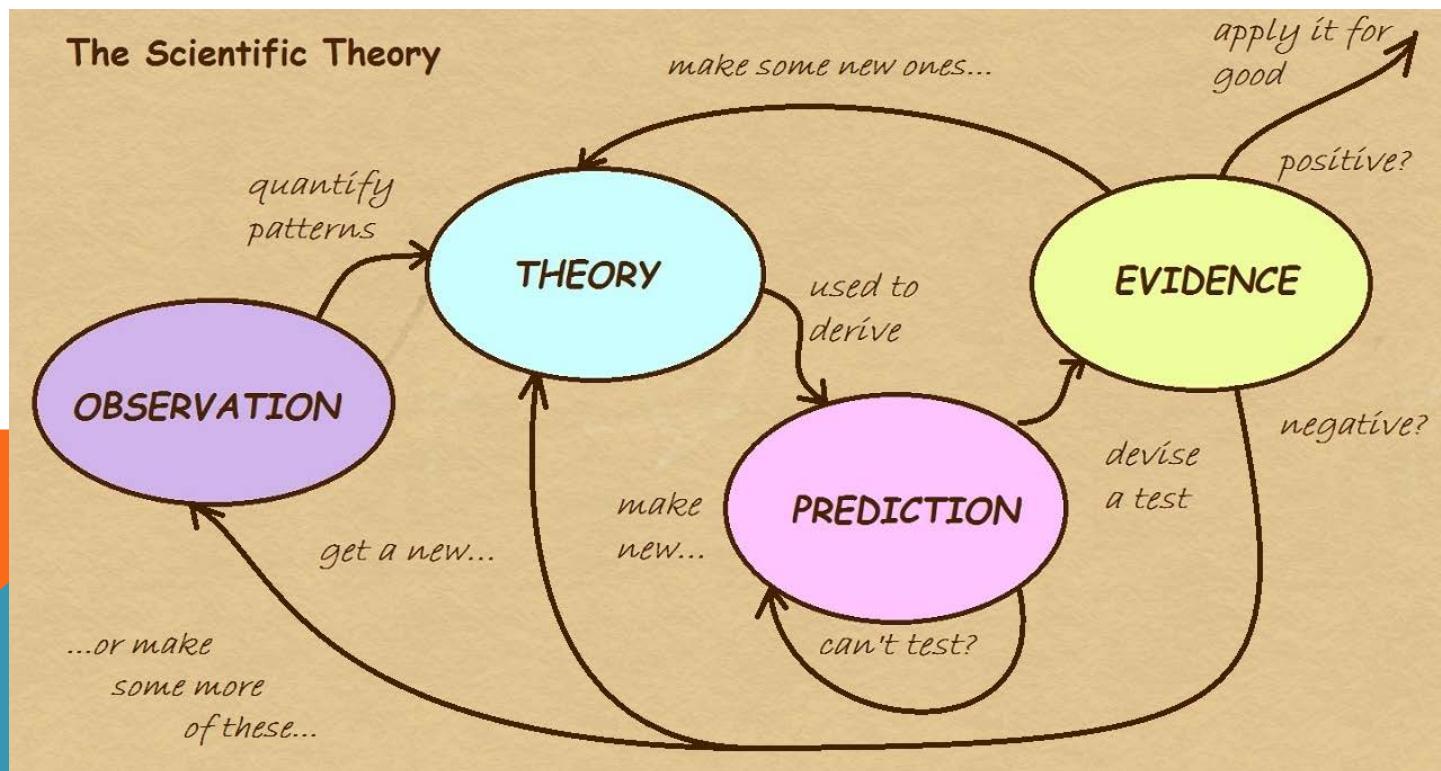
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**3. Genetic factors may have some relevance, but are essentially useless as explanatory factors since they cannot be used in experiments.**

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4. Thus, human nature is governed by scientific laws that are based primarily on environmental factors: “Our ‘independent variables’ – the causes of behavior – are the external conditions of which behavior is a function.”



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## **III. Diagnosis**



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- 1. Current social (political?) practices are based on theoretical confusion which contributes to “the unhappy condition of the world.” We believe we are free agents (thus able to control our behavior) but we’re not. We are actually “controlled” (by our environmental circumstances).**



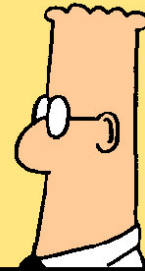
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## 2. Skinner's "universal determinism" (every event, including human choices has a set of sufficient preceding causes).

I'M USING MY NEW  
SUPERCOMPUTER TO  
CREATE A MODEL THAT  
CAN PREDICT YOUR  
ENTIRE LIFE.

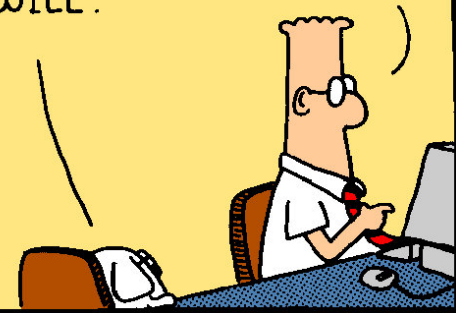


YOU SEE, EVERYTHING,  
INCLUDING YOUR BRAIN  
CHEMISTRY, IS SUBJECT  
TO PREDICTABLE PATTERNS  
OF CAUSE AND EFFECT...



THAT'S RIDI-  
CULOUS. IT  
IMPLIES THAT  
WE HAVE NO  
FREE WILL.

NEXT, YOU  
START GET-  
TING REALLY  
MAD AT ME.



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# **IV. Prescription**



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1. Simple! We should “change the social environment deliberately so that the human product will meet more acceptable specifications.”



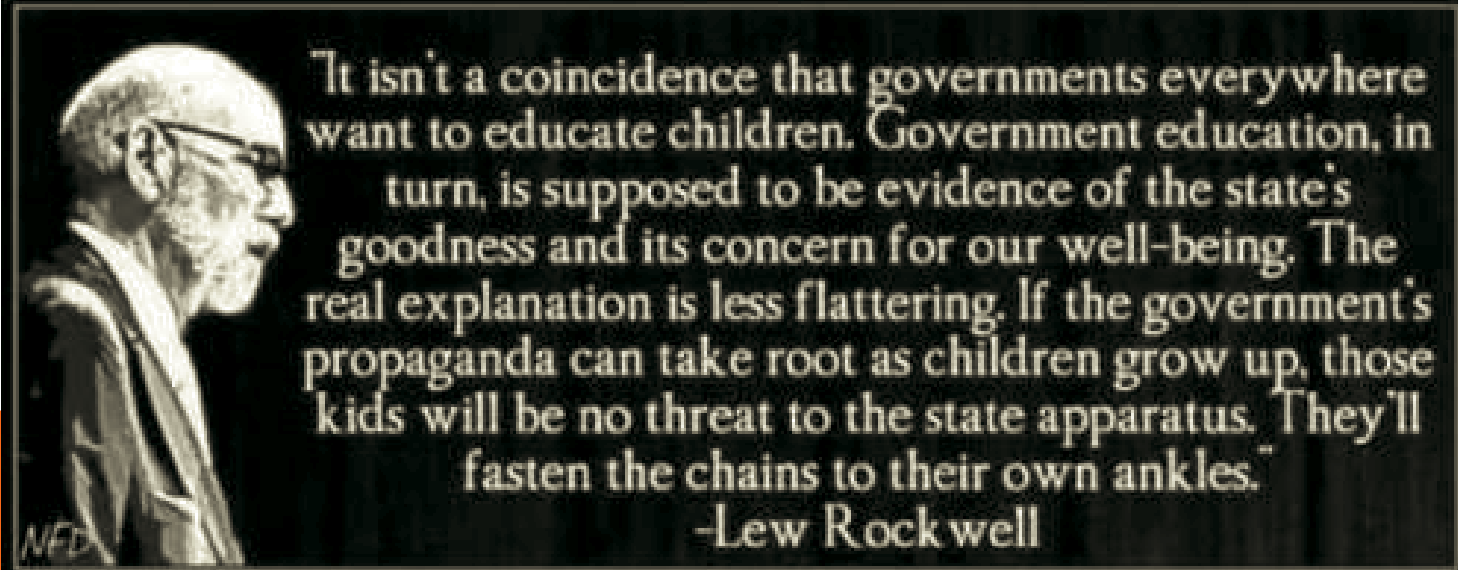
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2. How? First, give up the “illusion” of human freedom and create a happier life by conditioning everyone’s behavior in appropriate ways.

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3. Next, rely on education and positive inducements (“reinforcement”).



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**V. Critical  
Discussion**



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1. Similar objections in Plato: who will decide what is “appropriate”?

Mommy...

is it just me or does everyone seem  
brainwashed, ignorant and closeminded  
yet still somehow manage to believe  
they are educated enough to offer  
an opinion on shit they know nothing  
about because TV told them it's so?



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2. Designing  
cultures”??  
“the human  
product”??  
Hmmmmm.....

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## 3. Is individual freedom really a myth?



“Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning.”

— POPE FRANCIS

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4. Kant's critique: there are deep problems (factual, conceptual, ethical) with using a purely scientific approach to studying people.



*"I think it's an exaggeration, but that there's a lot of truth in saying that when you go to school, the trauma is that you must stop learning and you must now accept being taught."*

— Seymour Papert