

How to elect the right leader by getting rid of our cognitive biases

July 14 2020, by Fun Man Fung



A regional election commission member in Banyuwangi, East Java, is tested for COVID-19. Indonesia plans to hold its biggest regional election in December this year. Credit: Budi Candra Setya/wsJ/Antara Foto

Many countries are still holding elections despite the COVID-19 pandemic. [Singapore](#) just concluded its general election on Friday. Singapore's neighbour, Indonesia, plans to hold its biggest [regional election in December this year](#) by having simultaneous polls in 270 districts. The United States is also on track to hold its presidential election in November this year, with [superstar singer Kanye West](#)

announcing he'll be running for the top position.

At these decisive moments, we should recognise our [cognitive biases](#), or [systematic errors in thinking](#), to prevent us from [making poor decisions](#). Cognitive biases can cloud our judgment when making [decisions about a candidate](#).

4 common biases

Four biases are frequently encountered when we are trying to choose the right person.

1. Halo and horns effect

How often do you "rave" about the leader in your area just because they did something good once, or maybe instantaneously "hate" them just because they did something wrong one time?

"Stamping" someone as good or bad just because of our first encounter with the person is called the halo and horns effect. It's dangerous as it stops us from judging someone fully.

For example, a hiring manager may see someone as a "poor" candidate because he/she did not perform well in his/her studies. But the person may have honed his/her skills and abilities through experience by carrying out projects. The assessor has missed this by only looking at his/her final certifications.

As a consequence, they may have chosen the less ideal person instead!

2. Association bias

"That person has a kind face—she must be a good person!"

You hear that sentence quite often, don't you? Although it may be true based on "your experience," it may also be false!

By using associations to judge a person, we have fallen into the trap of *association bias*. Making such associations could blind us to seeing the person's true colours.

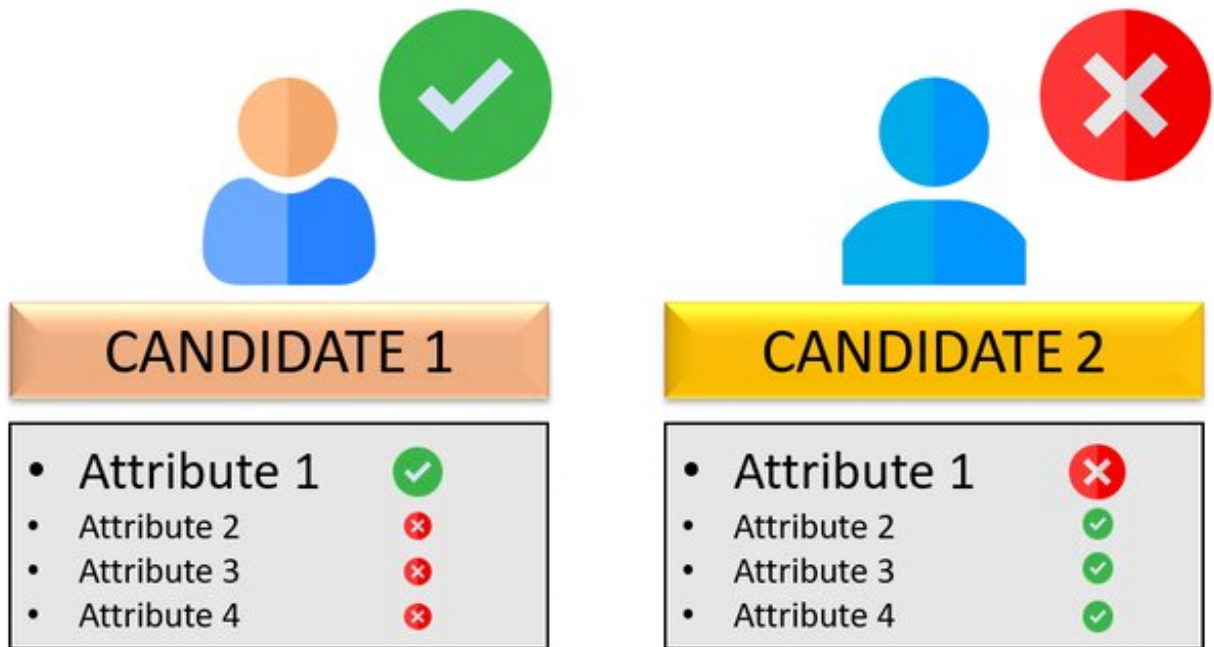
For example, person B may have a face that you have associated with a "bad" person because prior experiences with people with a similar look left a poor taste. Thus, you assumed person B could not be a good partner and "excluded" that person from your list of potential partners. However, some time later person B became known for his involvement in a new development.

Thus, this [bias](#) may make us reject someone whom we could benefit from partnering with.

3. Status quo bias

"Everything is good now—why is there a need for a change?"

We all may have asked the same question every time changes are introduced. People always want everything to remain as it is because they are used to it. The same people reject new positive changes if they seem unfavourable on the surface; for example, price increases.



Candidate 1 is approved because of their excellent attribute 1, but candidate 2 is rejected because of their bad attribute 1. Credit: Edwin Setiadi Sugeng/National University of Singapore

But what if those changes will bring good in the long term?

In such a scenario, we may have fallen for the *status quo bias*. The bias may have prevented us from accepting any changes because of our comfort with the current situation, although change may have been brought in for our own good.

One simple example would be when the price of our favourite drink increases. A typical reaction would be to complain when the [price increases](#), but one may not realise that the portion has been reduced at the current price compared to a similar drink that is more affordable.

4. Disinformation

During election campaigns, we may read articles that seem to denounce our favourite politician and, at the same time, "praise" the politician we deplore the most.

Do not be quick to get angry. Such vitriolic articles may indeed have been designed to attack someone—and this is called *disinformation*.

But, remember, this also implies that the converse may be true—the article flattering our favourite politician and disparaging the other may also be disinformation.

Tips to overcome biases

With the biases seemingly so banal, what are some ways we can prevent ourselves from falling into these traps? Here are two tips:

1. Always, always, do more research

By doing more research, we will uncover statements not only in favour of the person we are going to choose and/or work with, but also statements critical of the person.

This will help us to judge a person more comprehensively and, in turn, will lead us to make a more informed choice!

Doing more research may also save us from status quo bias. As we go online or browse some books, we will understand better the rationale for a change of policy. By then, we will have a sounder judgment on the necessity of such policy—rather than opposing the policy purely because we do not want changes to happen!

On top of that, further research will stop us from falling into the "disinformation" trap. When we read different sources, we will know what the actual event was, and thus we will be able to judge whether a particular article is indeed true.

2. Put aside associations

Our past encounters can form positive and negative associations with [different people](#) in our memories. This "database" will then be subconsciously accessed every time we must select someone. Although our "database" may be right, it is important to put this aside when judging people.

Instead, as mentioned earlier, do more research, get to know the person better, and we will make a more rational decision!

Elections play an important role in shaping the future of a country. Thus, it is imperative that we do more research and stop making decisions on a person based on "gut feeling." This will help us make sounder, and therefore better, decisions for our country!

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