

# A neuroscientist explains why stupidity is an existential threat to America

*Opinion by Bobby Azarian, Raw Story*•5h



Congresswoman Lauren Boebert speaking with attendees at the 2021 AmericaFest at the Phoenix Convention Center.© provided by RawStory

**I**t may sound like an insensitive statement, but the cold hard truth is that there are a lot of stupid people in the world, and their stupidity presents a constant danger to others. Some of these people are in positions of power, and some of them have been elected to run our country. A far greater number of them do not have positions of power, but they still have the power to vote, and the power to spread their ideas. We may have heard of “collective intelligence,” but there is also “collective stupidity,” and it is a force with equal influence on the world. It would not be a stretch to say that at this point in time, stupidity presents an existential threat to America because, in some circles, it is being celebrated.

Although the term "stupidity" may seem derogatory or insulting, it is actually a scientific concept that refers to a specific type of cognitive failure. It is important to realize that stupidity is not simply *a lack of intelligence or knowledge*, but rather a failure to use one's cognitive abilities effectively. This means that you can be "smart" while having a low IQ, or no expertise in anything. It is often said that "you can't fix stupid," but that is not exactly true. By becoming aware of the limitations of our natural intelligence or our ignorance, we can adjust our reasoning, behavior, and decision-making to account for our intellectual shortcomings.

To demonstrate that stupidity does not mean having a low IQ, consider the case of Richard Branson, the billionaire CEO of Virgin Airlines, who is one of the world's most successful businessmen. Branson has said that he was seen as [the dumbest person in school](#), and has admitted to having dyslexia, a learning disability that affects one's ability to read and correctly interpret written language. But it wasn't just reading comprehension that was the problem — "Math just didn't make sense to me," Branson has said. "I would certainly have failed an IQ test."

So, what is responsible for his enormous success, both financially and in terms of being a prolific innovator? Branson attributes his success to surrounding himself with highly knowledgeable and extremely competent people. Branson's smarts come from his ability to recognize his own limitations, and to know when to defer to others on topics or tasks where he lacks sufficient knowledge or skill.

This means you don't have to be traditionally intelligent or particularly knowledgeable to be successful in life, make good decisions, have good judgment, and be a positive influence on the world. Stupidity is a consequence of *a failure to be aware of one's own limitations*, and this type of cognitive failure has a scientific name: the Dunning-Kruger effect.

[The Dunning-Kruger](#) effect is a well-known psychological phenomenon that describes the tendency for individuals to overestimate their level of intelligence,

knowledge, or competence in a particular area. They may also simultaneously misjudge the intelligence, expertise, or competence of others. In other words, they are ignorant of their own ignorance. The effect has been widely written about, and investigated empirically, with hundreds of studies published in peer-reviewed journals confirming and analyzing the phenomenon, particularly in relation to the dangers it poses in certain contexts.

It is easy to think of examples in which failing to recognize one's own ignorance can become dangerous. Take for example when people with no medical training try to provide medical advice. It doesn't take much Internet searching to find some nutritionist from the "alternative medicine" world who is claiming that some herbal ingredient has the power to cure cancer. Some of these people are scam artists, but many of them truly believe that they have a superior understanding of health and physiology. There are many people who trust these self-proclaimed experts, and there is no doubt that some have paid their lives for it.

What's particularly disturbing about the Dunning-Kruger effect is that people are attracted to confident leaders, so politicians are incentivized to be overconfident in their beliefs and opinions, and to overstate their expertise. For example, Donald Trump — despite not having any real understanding of what causes cancer — suggested that [the noise from wind turbines is causing cancer](#) (a claim that is not supported by any empirical studies). It is well documented that on topics ranging from pandemics to climate change, Trump routinely dismissed the opinions of the professionals who have dedicated their lives to understanding those phenomena, because he thought that he knew better. It's bad enough that politicians like Donald Trump and Marjorie Taylor Greene don't recognize their own ignorance and fail to exercise the appropriate amount of caution when making claims that can affect public health and safety — but what is really disturbing is that they are being celebrated for their over-confidence (i.e., stupidity).

It is less surprising that politicians who regularly exhibit the Dunning-Kruger effect are being elected to office when one realizes that they are being voted in by people who also display the Dunning-Kruger effect. A [2008 study](#) by the political scientist Ian Anson surveyed over 2000 Americans in an attempt to see whether or not the effect was playing a role in one's ability to overestimate their political knowledge. The results clearly showed that the people who scored lowest on political knowledge were the very same people who were the most likely to overestimate their performance. While this is shocking, it also makes perfect sense: the less we know about something, the less of an ability we have to assess how much we don't know. It is only when we try to become an expert on some complex topic that we truly realize how complicated it is, and how much more there is to learn about it.

This new theory of stupidity I have proposed here — that stupidity is not a lack of intelligence or knowledge, but a lack of awareness of the limits of one's intelligence or knowledge — is more important right now than ever before, and I'll tell you why. The same study by Anson mentioned above showed that when cues were given to make the participants "engage in partisan thought," the Dunning-Kruger effect became more pronounced. In other words, if someone is reminded of the Republican-Democrat divide, they become even more overconfident in their uninformed positions. This finding suggests that in today's unprecedentedly divided political climate, we are all more likely to have an inflated sense of confidence in our unsupported beliefs. What's more, those who actually have the greatest ignorance will assume they have the least!

What we are dealing with here is an epidemic of stupidity that will only get worse as divisions continue to increase. This should motivate all of us to do what we can to ease the political division. When we can clearly see the social factors that are causing people to become increasingly stupid, our anger and hatred toward them should dissipate. We do not have much control over our level of intelligence or ignorance, or our ignorance of our ignorance.

But this does not mean that we should accept stupidity as the result of deterministic forces that are beyond our control. After gaining a deeper awareness of our own cognitive limitations and limited knowledge base, we should do what we can to instill this higher awareness in others. We must not just educate the public and our youth; we must teach them to become aware of their own ignorance, and give them the skills they need to search for more knowledge, and to detect when they or others are overestimating their knowledge or competency.

We have good reason to be optimistic that this is possible. A [2009 study](#) showed that incompetent students increased their ability to estimate their class rank after being tutored in the skills they lacked. This suggests that we can learn a type of “meta-awareness” that gives us the power to more accurately assess ourselves and our own limitations. Once we can do that, then we can know when we need to do more research on a given topic, or to defer to experts. We can also get better at distinguishing between true experts and those who only claim to be experts (but are really just demonstrating the Dunning-Kruger effect).

We are all victims of the Dunning-Kruger effect to some degree. An inability to accurately assess our own competency and wisdom is something we see in both liberals and conservatives. While being more educated typically decreases our Dunning-Kruger tendencies, it does not eliminate them entirely. That takes constant cognitive effort in the form of self-awareness, continual curiosity, and a healthy amount of skepticism. By cultivating this type of awareness in ourselves, and making an effort to spread it to others, we can fight back against the stupidity crisis that threatens our nation.

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