

# The Choice of Ideology and Everyday Decisions

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*Individuals strive to make decisions that are consistent with not only their consumer preferences but also their psychological needs. However, they are confronted with complex, ambiguous or even false information. Ideologies and belief systems provide guidance when processing and evaluating information and give a coherent and comprehensible interpretation of reality. The first question is: why is an individual attracted to a particular ideology? Individuals choose ideologies that resonate with their subjective psychological needs and preferences. Second, how do individuals search for ideologies and find out which suit them best? We model an individual's sequential information search for the best matching ideologies by applying Bayesian learning and utility optimization. Additional information enhances utility by reducing uncertainty. As a search is costly, the process may stop once an individual adopts an ideology even if the information set remains incomplete. Third, once they have chosen a particular ideology, individuals adhere to its rules and norms when making everyday decisions. Consumers not only physically consume, but they also act in accordance with their psychological needs.*

*Keywords: ideology, imperfect information, Bayesian learning, matching, psychological needs*

## **INTRODUCTION**

All human beings seek to understand and actively shape their environment, make consistent decisions, and live a meaningful life (e.g., Baumeister, 1991). In doing so, they are constantly confronted with complexity, such as ambiguous information, unpredictable circumstances, unstable socioeconomic and political conditions, and threatening, and uncontrollable events, such as terror attacks, natural disasters, or pandemics, amidst which they have to make choices that are consistent with their needs, preferences, and values. In order to understand or even reduce complexity and make decisions, individuals need information. However, information can be ambiguous, unreliable, incomplete, or false. Individuals are confronted with a vast amount of information every day that they have to process, understand, and verify. But how do they know what is true and reliable, and what is false and can lead to bad decisions?

Theories of human information processing systems usually focus on selective attention or memory storage capabilities, that is, how we focus on some stimuli while ignoring others and how these stimuli are

processed and stored (Broadbent, 1958; Cowan, 1988; Newell & Simon, 1972; Simon, 1979). Others are particularly interested in the operation of the sensory systems, that is, how our senses provide the brain information about our environment, how the brain interprets this information, aligning it with the information and events already processed and stored in the memory, and how the data is then transformed into perceptual experiences (Lindsay & Norman, 2013). Cognitive psychologists investigate the role of consciousness in information-processing (Velmans, 1991), while social scientists study the strategies individuals use (e.g., stereotypes, heuristics) to process and evaluate information in a fast and cost-efficient way (Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987; Gigerenzer et al., 2011).

Social scientists specifically seek to explain how human beings make decisions when information is incomplete and unreliable, time is limited, and the future unpredictable. These constraints have given rise to an analysis of different modes of information processing, such as the systematic and heuristic approach (see also the Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986)) (Chaiken, 1980, 1987). The systematic processing implies the consideration and evaluation of all available information, and the formation of a judgement based on these elaborations. In a heuristic mode, people only consider a few information cues and base their judgement or decision on these cues (or sometimes just one cue). Such cues can be the source of a message, such as a family member, or the length of the message (Todorov & Henderson, 2002). In other words, individuals use simple decision rules, such as “Scientists can be trusted in regard to vaccines” to arrive at a conclusion, instead of processing all relevant information they can find in regard to vaccines on their own. Heuristics are hence cost-efficient tools that help individuals to reduce complexity and make decisions without having to process information in-depth.

Another “tool” that helps individuals to process and evaluate information to reduce complexity and make decisions is ideologies. Although it may appear that ideologies, or more generally belief systems, serve as some sort of heuristic, we regard ideologies in a more holistic approach. Ideologies<sup>1</sup> provide a mental framework that is not only capable of helping individuals to cope with uncertain states of the world and incomplete information to make decisions (Khalil, 2011), but also consists of “social representations that define the social identity of a group” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 116). From an economic perspective, belief systems can be understood as “implicit, non-formal institutions” (Khalil, 2011, p. 642) that help individuals to cope with imperfect and limited information that, from a cognitive perspective, generates coherence in life. At the most basic level, coherence emerges when reliable patterns exist in the environment that help individuals to understand and evaluate incoming stimuli (such as information). Coherence, or meaning, connects ideas, things, and information in a predictable and consistent way and can be thus defined as a collective, organized network of (reliable and relatively stable) patterns (Baumeister, 1991; MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014). Ideologies provide such mental meaning-making systems - a predictable, reliable, and relatively stable mental representation of reality that helps individuals to reduce complexity, understand their environment, integrate their own self into this environment (own social role), and make decisions. However, individuals are not passive receivers of beliefs or ideas they are exposed to; rather they are attracted to belief systems that resonate with their own psychological needs, values, and preferences.

Therefore, in this paper, we suggest an approach which is based on interdisciplinary reading and thinking and combines insights and concepts from social psychology, political science, and economic choice. We discuss the fundamental human condition of imperfect information which defines a role for belief systems and ideologies, the way individuals find their particular ideology, and how ideologies affect their everyday decision making.

For this purpose, we develop the following reasoning: individuals live under conditions of imperfect information, unpredictability, and uncertainty about their environment, amidst which they have to make everyday decisions. To reduce this complexity and understand their social environment as well as their own social role in it, individuals search for guidance in information-processing. Ideologies and their mental meaning-making systems offer such guidance as it helps individuals to evaluate incoming stimuli, understand social reality, identify with a certain (ideological) group, and address life’s problems. Ideologies also provide interpretations of how the world is and how it should be, by making assumptions and generating narratives about human existence, social order, historical events, potential threats, and future ideals. “To the extent that different ideologies represent socially shared but competing philosophies of life

and how it should be lived (and how society should be governed), it stands to reason that different ideologies should both elicit and express at least somewhat different social, cognitive, and motivational styles or tendencies on the part of their adherents” (Jost et al., 2009, p. 309). This means that individuals do not adopt an ideology randomly; instead, they choose the belief system that most closely resonates with their underlying need system. While Jost (2021) and Jost et al. (2009) emphasize this idea in social psychology, Gries et al. (2022) extend it further and develop a formal economic choice model. In this approach they argue that individuals choose and follow those ideologies that “best” match their underlying needs and preferences.

In this paper, we depart from this fundamental idea and focus (i) on the process of finding and adopting this ideology, and (ii) on applying ideologies to everyday decisions. Thus, in the following section, we answer the first question: How can an individual know which ideology best matches their needs and preferences? We suggest a sequential procedure of Bayesian information search and learning about ideologies to find out how they appeal to a given individual. The starting point for this learning process is the individual’s social environment, e.g., family. Their education and social relations provide them with an initial idea about a potential match with various ideologies, such that there is a prior idea of a goodness of match. However, more information can improve the choice, so individuals need to collect more (costly) information in order to determine their true match with an ideology. As we assume that information is collected sequentially, this process may extend over a longer period. The more information individuals collect, the better they are able to determine the expected ideological match. At some point the search process terminates, once the marginal benefits of information become lower than marginal information costs. Furthermore, individuals do not necessarily choose one ideology and completely adhere to all its rules and norms. Instead, they select a mixture of ideologies and apply the rules of that ideology that are appropriate in a particular situation (Kay & Eibach, 2012). This implies that some individuals may adopt a balanced combination of a multitude of ideologies, while others are attracted to only a few ideologies or even one particular ideology. Once a choice has been made, the individual will rely on the ideologies that generate a coherent mental representation of reality, to process information and make consistent decisions (through the lens of this ideological reality).<sup>2</sup>

This leads to the second question which is answered in the subsequent section. How do ideologies - once chosen - determine everyday decision making? We have argued that ideologies are a way to reduce complexity to make “good” decisions at low costs. Thus, ideologies and their rules are an element in standard decision making. Following the rules, norms, and values imposed by a particular ideology not only helps individuals to make consistent decisions and understand the social environment, but it also generates meaningful and reliable patterns of social reality. Thus, we include ideological rules in a formal model in which ideologies guide everyday (economic) decision-making. The rule guides the individual to make decisions consistent with their psychological needs. We explain, for example, why individuals who adopt ecological beliefs are willing to pay a higher price for organic products.

## CHOOSING AN IDEOLOGY

In this section we introduce a theoretical model to expound how individuals search for ideologies that resonate with their underlying need structure. We assume individuals are aware of their psychological and physiological (consumption) needs. They search for viable means to reconcile psychological needs and consumption preferences. Belief systems that are present in the cultural environment offer readily available mental meaning-making systems that serve psychological needs. Individuals are able to enhance their subjective utility if they find belief systems that allow them to match their psychological needs and that serve their consumption preferences. Hence, we include both the match value  $M_K$ , that indicates the extent of a match between the individual’s needs and a particular ideology  $K$ , and the level of consumption  $C$  in individual’s utility function  $U$ . As the method of deriving this match value has been elaborated in Gries et al. (2022), we can directly focus on the choice process. For simplification, we reduce the formal analysis to two available belief systems which we denote by ideology  $A$  and ideology  $B$ . We assume that the utility is generated by the match values of ideology  $A$  or  $B$  and consumption  $C$ , so that  $U = U(M_A, M_B, C)$ .

That is, unlike in Gries et al. (2022) the individual cannot pick an ideology from a list, get to know the match value and obtain the corresponding final utility; instead, they engage in a sequential process of search, learning, and adopting the ideology. To reveal which ideologies, match their needs, individuals search for information about particular ideologies and process this information by using Bayesian learning. As searching for information involves cost, an optimal choice that includes a given budget and consumption will normally allocate limited resources to the information search. Thus, the costly search for information implies that an individual's information set remains incomplete. This means that after an optimal search process the individual adopts the ideologies that best match their needs and preferences, even if the state of information is incomplete or even low. The next section involves modelling this process with an optimal decision as a result.

### Information Search and Bayesian Learning

In this section we describe the process of information acquisition in terms of Bayesian learning, which yields a conditional expected match value for each considered belief system and the corresponding uncertainties for these match values. For an individual the real match value  $M_K$  between the ideology  $K$  and the individual's needs is unknown. It can be revealed by collecting information. This means that individuals receive subjective signals about a potential match. Information is imperfect and the signals can vary at each step of the information acquisition. Therefore, we model the match value  $M_K$  as a stochastic variable with mean  $\mu_K$  and variance  $\sigma_K^2$ . While these parameters are unknown, individuals can collect information and apply Bayesian learning to reveal the expected match values conditional on the received information.

Before individuals start to search for information about a particular ideology, they have to form a prior belief about the corresponding match value, i.e., how well the particular ideology can address their needs. We assume that individuals' prior beliefs about each match value  $M_K$  before receiving any information are normally distributed, i.e.,  $M_K \sim N(\mu_{K,0}, \sigma_{K,0}^2)$ , where  $\mu_{K,0}$  is the initial guess of the expected match value and  $\sigma_{K,0}^2$  represents the initial belief of uncertainty. Thus, individuals search for information about belief systems that they come across in their environment. They must have an initial idea about their subjective ideological match.<sup>3</sup>

The individual's initial information set about a belief system  $K$  is  $I_{K,0} = \{\mu_{K,0}, \sigma_{K,0}^2\}$ . However, they are able to collect information and update these initial beliefs sequentially. We denote by  $t_{info}$  the number of search steps an individual makes to acquire information. Here we assume that each search step reveals information about all considered belief systems. In each search period, individuals receive a noisy signal  $m_{K,t_{info}}$  about each potential match value. This signal is defined as

$$m_{K,t_{info}} = M_K + \varepsilon_{K,t_{info}} \text{ with } \varepsilon_{K,t_{info}} \sim N(0, \eta_K^2), \quad (1)$$

where  $\eta_K^2$  is the variance of the noise, so a measure of the signal's precision. Thus, the signal reveals the real match value  $M_K$  with some error  $\varepsilon_{K,t_{info}}$ . The lower the variance  $\eta_K^2$ , the more precise the signal. While this is the ideal case, modeling the signal in general opens up another interesting discussion. In reality, we know that receiving and reading signals is subject to the sender and the receiver. Thus, the signals can be distorted by both senders and receivers. Especially on social media we can observe that false messages are more likely to be spread than the truth (Vosoughi et al. 2018). This can be included in our model, e.g., with a large signal variance  $\eta_K^2$  as false news indicate different match values than the truth. In this case, more search steps are necessary to reach low uncertainty. However, this raises cost. When the budget is exhausted, the search stops while the choice of ideologies may be influenced by false messages, such as "fake news." We can even think of additional noisy signals that are sent by a propaganda apparatus that may even lead to a shift in the perceived mean.

However, we start with the introduced ideal case and return to the formal model. The distribution corresponds to the likelihood function of the Bayesian formula. We choose a normal distribution as prior

and signal because it is a conjugate distribution which implies that the posterior is also normally distributed. Therefore, we can use the obtained posterior normal distribution as a new prior in a next Bayesian learning process. The posterior distribution is given by

$$M_K | I_{i,1} \sim N(\mu_{K,1}, \sigma_{K,1}^2) \quad (2)$$

with

$$\mu_{K,1} = \frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2}{\sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2} m_{K,0} + \frac{\eta_K^2}{\sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2} \mu_{K,0} \text{ and } \sigma_{K,1}^2 = \left( \frac{1}{\sigma_{K,0}^2} + \frac{1}{\eta_K^2} \right)^{-1}. \quad (3)$$

The posterior expected value  $\mu_{K,1}$  is a weighted sum of the prior and the signal. A more precise signal (low variance  $\eta_K^2$ ) leads to a higher weight of  $m_{K,0}$  which means that the received information  $m_{K,0}$  has a greater impact on the updated expected value  $\mu_{K,1}$  than the prior belief  $\mu_{K,0}$ . If the prior beliefs are strong (low variance  $\sigma_{K,0}^2$ ) the signal  $m_{K,0}$  has a low impact on the updated expected match value. Thus, strong believers are less sensitive to new information than people who are very uncertain about their prior beliefs (high  $\sigma_{K,0}^2$ ).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, this first step of information search and updating has not only improved the individual's idea of the expected match value  $\mu_{K,1}$  for each ideology, but also from  $\sigma_{K,1}^2$  we see that uncertainty decreases after obtaining the signal. This updating procedure can be repeated if an individual makes several attempts to collect information. If  $t_{Info}$  is this number of received signals which is equal to the number of search or time steps, then

$$M_K | I_{K,t_{Info}} \sim N(\mu_{K,t_{Info}}, \sigma_{K,t_{Info}}^2) \quad (4)$$

with

$$\mu_{K,t_{Info}} = \frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2}{t_{Info} \sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2} \sum_{s=0}^{t_{Info}-1} m_{K,s} + \frac{\eta_K^2}{t_{Info} \sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2} \mu_{K,0} \text{ "and"} \quad (5)$$

$$\sigma_{K,t_{Info}}^2 = \left( \frac{1}{\sigma_{K,0}^2} + t_{Info} \frac{1}{\eta_K^2} \right)^{-1} = \frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2 \eta_K^2}{t_{Info} \sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2}, \text{ with } \frac{\partial \sigma_{K,t_{Info}}^2}{\partial \eta_K^2} > 0. \quad (6)$$

These two equations illustrate the learning process. The conditional expected match value depends on the information, which is represented by the sum of signals, and on the number of time steps  $t_{Info}$  to collect this information. Each new piece of information brings the individual closer to the true match values  $M_K$  of each belief system  $K$ . We can see this from equation (5) when we look at the difference of the updated expected match values in one step of information acquisition,

$$\mu_{K,t_{Info}+1} - \mu_{K,t_{Info}} = \frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2}{(t_{Info}+1)\sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2} (m_{K,t_{Info}} - \mu_{K,t_{Info}}). \quad (7)$$

The conditional expected match value can be adjusted in either direction, depending on the sign of  $(m_{K,t_{Info}} - \mu_{K,t_{Info}})$ . If the new signal  $m_{K,t_{Info}}$  is greater than the currently expected match  $\mu_{K,t_{Info}}$ , the expected match value is increased; if not, it is decreased. To what extent it is increased or decreased depends on the factor  $\frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2}{(t_{Info}+1)\sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2}$  which is decreasing with time  $t_{Info}$ . Thus, the more information is already available (the greater  $t_{Info}$ ), the smaller the adjustment of the expected match value in the updating process.

Furthermore, each search step reduces uncertainty, which we can derive from equation (6) when we look at the difference of the variance in one step,

$$\sigma_{K,t_{Info}+1}^2 - \sigma_{K,t_{Info}}^2 = -\frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2}{(t_{Info}+1)\sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2} \sigma_{K,t_{Info}}^2 < 0, \quad (8)$$

which is also decreasing when more information is already available. Therefore, the more information has been already accumulated about a particular ideology, the less additional information will reduce uncertainty. We have a decreasing marginal effect of information on uncertainty. In the following we will include this Bayesian learning process in the optimization procedure.

### Defining the Optimization Problem

We know from the discussion above that individuals strive to find an ideology that best matches their underlying psychological needs, and that different ideologies express different social, cognitive, and motivational styles. However, individuals may have a variety of needs that initially appear contradictory and cannot be satisfied by only one belief system. This means that individuals can be drawn to different ideologies and hence adopt a mixture of various belief systems to serve their underlying need structure. In practice, they adopt certain beliefs and narratives of belief system  $A$  to serve some of their needs, but also agree with the beliefs and values of belief system  $B$ , because these address some of their other needs. Therefore, belief systems can be mixed and an individual fraction  $\alpha$  (respectively  $1 - \alpha$ ) of each belief system can be chosen so that  $U = U(\alpha M_A, (1 - \alpha)M_B, C)$  where  $\alpha \in [0,1]$ .

In the following sections we introduce a sequential optimization strategy that includes the determination of the optimal extent  $\alpha$  given the current set of information. Thus, new information may cause a variation in commitment to particular belief systems. Note that the extreme cases  $\alpha = 0$  and  $\alpha = 1$  are possible if the individual fully adopts only one belief system. Someone who is very passionate about ideology  $A$  chooses  $\alpha$  close to 1. To set up the decision problem in the simplest way we consider an interrelated constraint, a budget constraint, and a time constraint.

Consumption is defined as the amount  $c$  of consumption goods and the duration of consumption time  $t_C$ , so that  $C = ct_C$ . Income  $y$  is generated by the given time allocated to work, which is working time  $t_L$ , and hourly wage rate  $w$ , so that  $y = t_L w$ . All income is spent on consumption at the given price  $p$  of the consumption good. Thus, the income budget constraint is  $t_L w = y = pc$ . Rearranging, we obtain  $c = t_L \frac{w}{p}$  and consequently, consumption is equal to

$$C = t_L \frac{w}{p} t_C. \quad (9)$$

Furthermore, individuals have a time budget that they can split into time spent on information search  $t_{Info}$ , time for consumption  $t_C$ , and time for working  $t_L$ . The disposable time  $T$  is already reduced by an institutionally given amount of time for labor  $t_L$ . Thus, the time constraint for the disposable time is

$$T = t_{Info} + t_C. \quad (10)$$

The objective is to maximize utility given the income budget constraint. To consider uncertainty we assume an exponential utility function which implies constant absolute risk aversion (CARA),

$$U = 1 - \exp(-R(\alpha M_A + (1 - \alpha)M_B + C)). \quad (11)$$

The parameter  $R > 0$  is the coefficient of risk aversion. The match values  $M_K$  are stochastic variables with expected values  $\mu_K$  and variance  $\sigma_K^2$  for belief system  $K \in \{A, B\}$ . Therefore, the exponential expected utility for two belief systems and consumption is

$$E[U] = 1 - \exp(-R(\alpha\mu_A - \alpha^2 \frac{1}{2}R\sigma_A^2 + (1 - \alpha)\mu_B - (1 - \alpha)^2 \frac{1}{2}R\sigma_B^2 + C)). \quad (12)$$

However, consumers do not know the true expected match values or variances. They only know the conditional distribution of the match values given the information set  $I_{K,t_{Info}}$ . Thus, after  $t_{Info}$  search steps the individual can determine the conditional expected utility

$$E[U|I_{t_{Info}}] = 1 - \exp(-R(\alpha\mu_{A,t_{Info}} - \alpha^2 \frac{1}{2}R\sigma_{A,t_{Info}}^2 + (1 - \alpha)\mu_{B,t_{Info}} - (1 - \alpha)^2 \frac{1}{2}R\sigma_{B,t_{Info}}^2 + C)), \quad (13)$$

where  $I_{t_{Info}} = I_{A,t_{Info}} \cup I_{B,t_{Info}}$  is the accumulated information set for both belief systems  $A$  and  $B$ . We can see that for a risk-averse consumer ( $R > 0$ ) the expected utility increases if the match values increase or if the variances, or uncertainties, decrease. We observe that  $E[U|I_{t_{Info}}]$  maximized if the reduced objective function

$$E[u|I_{t_{Info}}] = \alpha\mu_{A,t_{Info}} - \frac{\alpha^2}{2}R\sigma_{A,t_{Info}}^2 + (1 - \alpha)\mu_{B,t_{Info}} - \frac{(1-\alpha)^2}{2}R\sigma_{B,t_{Info}}^2 + C \quad (14)$$

is maximized.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in the following analysis we work with this simpler conditional expected utility function.

After receiving  $t_{Info}$  signals, respectively conducting  $t_{Info}$  search steps, the individual can determine the optimal fraction  $\alpha$  by solving the maximization problem

$$\max_{\alpha} E[u|I_{t_{Info}}] = \alpha\mu_{A,t_{Info}} - \frac{\alpha^2}{2}R\sigma_{A,t_{Info}}^2 + (1 - \alpha)\mu_{B,t_{Info}} - \frac{(1-\alpha)^2}{2}R\sigma_{B,t_{Info}}^2 + t_L \frac{w}{p}(T - t_{Info}), \quad (15)$$

which yields the optimal fraction  $\alpha^*$  and optimal expected utility  $E_{\alpha^*}[u|I_{t_{Info}}]$ . This means that after observing information set  $I_{t_{Info}}$  the optimal choice is to adhere to ideology  $A$  at the extent  $\alpha^*$  and ideology  $B$  at the extent  $1 - \alpha^*$ . Here we include the time constraint (10) in (9) and we see that consumption ( $C = t_L \frac{w}{p}(T - t_{Info})$ ) is reduced with every search step which represents the search costs. Marginal costs are constantly equal to  $t_L \frac{w}{p}$ . This brings us to a standard optimization problem, which is analyzed in the next subsection. Now the question is: Is it possible for the individual to determine the optimal number of search steps  $t_{Info}$ ?

### Sequential Search Optimization

We can only determine the particular solution that relates to a particular sequence of signals. Therefore, in this section, we describe the information search process sequentially and illustrate this process with a numerical example.

#### Sequential Choice

Remember that adopting an ideology requires a longer search and trial period. For example, young adults' search for orientation can be described as a longer process of searching and experimenting. Trial and experimenting in our model means that after conducting a couple of search steps the individual has adopted a belief system  $K$  at the extent  $\alpha$  and while new information is received  $\alpha$  may be adjusted. Thus, trial does not mean fully adopting an ideology and fully dismissing it, but the extent of adoption can be changed. It is indeed a chronological sequence of experiential steps until the match with an own ideological view, which can emerge from a mixture of several belief systems, crystallizes.

Consequently, the individual's decision problem is not only a choice of the best ideological option but also an optimal stopping problem. This can be formalized by the functional equation of dynamic programming<sup>6</sup>

$$V(I_{t_{info}}) = \max\{E_{\alpha^*}[u|I_{t_{info}}], V^{ant}(I_{t_{info}+1})\} \quad (16)$$

where  $E_{\alpha^*}[u|I_{t_{info}}]$  is the currently expected utility from stopping (the solution of (15)) and the value from continuation  $V^{ant}(I_{t_{info}+1})$  is the anticipated utility after an additional piece of information. Note that the individual cannot know  $E_{\alpha^*}[u|I_{t_{info}+1}]$  without conducting  $t_{info} + 1$  information steps. Therefore, a value  $V^{ant}(I_{t_{info}+1})$  has to be anticipated. The acquisition of information is stopped after  $t_{info}^*$  steps when the individual, for the first time, does not expect the utility to increase after additional information, formally,

$$t_{info}^* = \min\{t_{info} \in \{0, \dots, T\}: V(I_{t_{info}}) = E_{\alpha^*}[u|I_{t_{info}}]\}. \quad (17)$$

Thus, the individual has to solve the dynamic problem and determine  $t_{info}^*$ . As we can see from (7), additional information can both increase or decrease the expected match value. Therefore, even if the individual comes closer to the true match value with additional information, the expected match value can decrease which can also decrease the part of expected utility, which is derived by the match, i.e.,

$$E[\tilde{u}|I_{t_{info}}] := \alpha\mu_{A,t_{info}} - \frac{\alpha^2}{2}R\sigma_{A,t_{info}}^2 + (1-\alpha)\mu_{B,t_{info}} - \frac{(1-\alpha)^2}{2}R\sigma_{B,t_{info}}^2. \quad (18)$$

We call  $E[\tilde{u}|I_{t_{info}}]$  the “match utility.” Such a decrease in expected match values can also imply a decrease in  $V^{ant}(I_{t_{info}+1})$  and the process of information acquisition stops even though later signals may indicate that the match value, and expected utility, are indeed high. Therefore, we want to make sure that additional information increases the expected utility. We assume that consumers are risk-averse with a risk aversion parameter  $R$  that is sufficiently high, such that we obtain the standard positive marginal expected utility with respect to search steps  $t_{info}$ , as well as decreasing marginal expected utility. We define the difference in optimal match utilities between two search steps as

$$\Delta_{t_{info}} := E_{\alpha_{t_{info}+1}^*}[\tilde{u}|I_{t_{info}+1}] - E_{\alpha_{t_{info}}^*}[\tilde{u}|I_{t_{info}}]. \quad (19)$$

We assume that  $R$  is large enough so that

$$\Delta_{t_{info}} > 0 \text{ and } \Delta_{t_{info}} > \Delta_{t_{info}+1} \text{ for all } t_{info} \in \{0, \dots, T\}. \quad (20)$$

An explicit derivation is found in the Appendix. This assumption implies that additional search steps, and hence additional information about a certain ideology, always increase the part of the expected conditional utility that is generated by a match,  $E[\tilde{u}|I_{t_{info}}]$ . In other words, the more information an individual has about an ideology, the better they can reveal how well this ideology can address their needs and hence improve their utility. Risk aversion is assumed to be large enough to compensate for possible decreases in utility by low signals. A large parameter  $R$  implies that the reduction in uncertainty dominates. In other words, the most important effect of information is the reduction in uncertainty (see (8)). With information, certainty about the real match value increases, which reduces the probability of making a wrong decision.

Now we can go back to the Bayesian learning procedure and formulate the sequential information acquisition process. The individual starts with some prior beliefs about the potential matches of various belief systems and collects information to update their beliefs in a Bayesian manner. However, this kind of information acquisition is costly and reduces consumption and respective utilities. Therefore, individuals have to decide first if they should start the Bayesian updating process at all, and second when to stop.

Before the Bayesian learning process can be started, individuals form a prior belief about the match value  $\mu_{K,0}$  for each belief system  $K$  with prior variance  $\sigma_{K,0}^2$ . Again, this indicates how certain the individual



is about their prior belief. First of all, individuals have to determine the allocation of belief systems that gives maximum expected utility from these prior beliefs. That is, given the prior belief, they determine the optimal mixture of ideologies before information is collected. This means that they have to solve the prior maximization problem

$$\max_{\alpha} E[u|I_0] = \alpha\mu_{A,0} - \alpha^2 \frac{1}{2} R\sigma_{A,0}^2 + (1 - \alpha)\mu_{B,0} - (1 - \alpha)^2 \frac{1}{2} R\sigma_{B,0}^2 + t_L \frac{w}{p} T \quad (21)$$

which gives an optimal  $\alpha_0^*$  as result and we denote the optimal expected conditional utility by  $E_{\alpha_0^*}[u|I_0]$ . Thus, without the search the allocation of belief systems that is determined by  $\alpha_0^*$  is the optimal choice. This result can be used as a reference point for deciding about the start of the updating process. Note that we have  $C = t_L \frac{w}{p} T$  as no time is spent for information acquisition, but all time could be used for consumption.

Next, consumers have to decide whether or not they should start the search by comparing the prior expected conditional utility  $E_{\alpha_0^*}[u|I_0]$  to the anticipated expected conditional utility of the first search step  $V^{ant}(I_{t_1})$ . How can this expected conditional utility be anticipated? First, individuals know that a search increases utility as it reduces uncertainty, but they do not know the magnitude of this reduction without conducting the first search step. Second, while consumers cannot predict the first signal, acquiring the first piece of information includes search costs. Thus, they have to anticipate the utility of this first search step and only start the search if this anticipated utility exceeds the prior utility.

To anticipate the reduction in uncertainty the individual needs to know the precision of the information signal indicated by the variance of the signals' noise  $\eta_K^2$ . However, with no experience with information signals, this is unknown for the first search step. Therefore, they have to make an initial guess  $\tilde{\eta}_K^2$  for  $\eta_K^2$  for each belief system  $K$ . This guess  $\tilde{\eta}_K^2$  depends on the subjective perception of the individual and represents a guess of the usefulness and also the accuracy of a first piece of information. Furthermore,  $\tilde{\eta}_K^2$  shows how confident the consumer is about processing the information. One expects that highly educated individuals anticipate a low  $\tilde{\eta}_K^2$  as they believe they are able to better collect and understand information. Using this guess  $\tilde{\eta}_K^2$  the anticipated variance for the first search step can be determined as

$$\sigma_{K,ant}^2 = \frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2 \tilde{\eta}_K^2}{\sigma_{K,0}^2 + \tilde{\eta}_K^2} \quad (22)$$

The second unknown variable for a search step is the signal. The best guess for the first signal is an individual's prior belief  $\mu_{K,0}$ . Without more information the prior belief is already the best guess, so the individual cannot expect something different without new information. This implies that there is no update for the expected match value for this first search decision.

With these guesses about the first signal and its variance, the anticipated expected conditional utility for the first search step  $V^{ant}(I_1)$  can be found solving the maximization problem

$$\max_{\alpha} E[u|I_{0,ant}] = \alpha\mu_{A,0} - \alpha^2 \frac{1}{2} R\sigma_{A,ant}^2 + (1 - \alpha)\mu_{B,0} - (1 - \alpha)^2 \frac{1}{2} R\sigma_{B,ant}^2 + t_L \frac{w}{p} (T - 1), \quad (23)$$

which gives  $\alpha_{1,ant}^*$  as result. This time we have  $C = t_L \frac{w}{p} (T - 1)$  as one time step has been used for information acquisition. Now the individual can determine  $V(I_0) = \max\{E_{\alpha_0^*}[u|I_0], V^{ant}(I_1)\}$  and make a decision. From assumption (20) we know that additional information increases match utility, but this has to compensate for the reduction in consumption from searching. Therefore, the information search process is only started if  $V(I_0) = V^{ant}(I_1)$ . However, as the decision depends on the subjectively anticipated value  $\tilde{\eta}_K^2$ , it is possible that the individual will not start the sequential search. Subjectively they do not anticipate an increase in utility, even if the true signals indicated such an improvement. The choice of  $\tilde{\eta}_K$  can prevent

a search and the individual does not collect any information. They never know whether utility could have been increased with new information. Hence, if  $V(I_0) = E_{\alpha_0^*}[u|I_0]$ , the individual does not search for information and chooses  $\alpha_0^*$ .

Now we have to consider further search steps. After each search step, consumers have to decide whether to continue searching for more information or whether their information set already yields optimal utility. Again, they need to anticipate the expected gain in utility from continuing the search. However, with the experience of the first search step, they learn how precise the signal is. We assume that their subjective estimate is equal to the true precision of the signal  $\eta_K^2$ . An example illustrates this point. Once an individual starts collecting information, they observe that the signal is rather diffuse, vague, or ambiguous. So, we assume that this observation is correct and thus the signal is not precise and hence  $\eta_K^2$  is large. By contrast, the information signal may be very clear, consistent, focused, and to the point. This would be indicated by a small  $\eta_K^2$ . With this assumption, we describe the ideal case in which the perceived signal represents the true message of the ideology. However, as already mentioned above, in a world of “fake news” and disinformation we can imagine how a perceived reality via the signal can deviate from reality. But this kind of discussion must be left for future research.

Thus, effects on uncertainty as a result of the next and all subsequent search steps can be determined  $\sigma_{K,t_{Info}}^2 = \frac{\sigma_{K,0}^2 \eta_K^2}{t_{Info} \sigma_{K,0}^2 + \eta_K^2}$  (see also (6)). However, individuals still do not know the signal of the following search step and they also cannot know the expected match value or utility resulting from another step. They again have to anticipate the signal for a further search step. The best guess for this signal  $m_{K,t_{Info}}$  is the current expected match value  $\mu_{K,t_{Info}}$ , which implies that there is no systematic update with respect to the anticipated signal (see (7)). Therefore, individuals have to solve the following maximization problem for anticipated utility in the next  $t_{Info} + 1$  period,

$$\max_{\alpha} \alpha \mu_{A,t_{Info}} - \alpha^2 \frac{1}{2} R \sigma_{A,t_{Info}+1}^2 + (1 - \alpha) \mu_{B,t_{Info}} - (1 - \alpha)^2 \frac{1}{2} R \sigma_{B,t_{Info}+1}^2 + t_L \frac{w}{p} (T - t_{Info} - 1) \quad (24)$$

which results in maximum anticipated utility  $V^{ant}(I_{t_{Info}+1})$ . This can be compared to the current maximum utility  $E_{\alpha_{t_{Info}}^*}[u|I_{t_{Info}}]$  to determine  $V(I_{t_{Info}})$  and make a decision. If  $V(I_{t_{Info}}) = V^{ant}(I_{t_{Info}+1})$ , an increase in utility is anticipated and the information search continues. The search ends if  $V(I_{t_{Info}}) = E_{\alpha_{t_{Info}}^*}[u|I_{t_{Info}}]$ . At this point, the optimal number of information search steps  $t_{Info}^*$  is found.

**Proposition 1.** Let assumption (20) hold. The dynamic maximization problem has a solution  $t_{Info}^*$  with corresponding fraction  $\alpha_{t_{Info}^*}$ . Consequently, the belief systems that are chosen with the incomplete information set  $I_{t_{Info}^*}$  lead to optimal expected conditional utility.

*Proof.* In each step, we can solve (15). Assumption (20) ensures that additional information search steps increase expected utility at a decreasing rate. The process ends when the anticipated match utility does not compensate for the reduction in consumption of an additional search step, or when the maximum number of search steps  $t_{Info} = T$  is reached.

Note that we find such a solution for many sequences of the stochastic time path of the signal that fulfills condition (20). This means that  $(\alpha^*, t_{Info}^*)$  relates to one particular sequence. If there is another sequence that satisfies the condition, we find another solution  $(\tilde{\alpha}^*, \tilde{t}_{Info}^*)$ . The history of that random sequence matters; another history, another outcome.

However, with this Proposition, we formally derive that there exists an optimal search time and an optimal allocation of the considered ideologies. Individuals acquire costly information about various ideologies that are available in the socio-cultural environment. At a certain point, they realize that the marginal benefit of more information becomes equal to the marginal costs of acquiring them. At that point, they stop the search and choose the belief system that best matches their needs. Further, as  $\alpha^*$  is between zero and one, the ideological choice can be either a corner solution ( $\alpha^* = 0, \alpha^* = 1$ ), which means that

only belief system  $A$  or  $B$  is fully adopted or an inner solution, which means that the individual is attracted to belief system  $A$  to the extent  $\alpha^*$  and attracted to belief system  $B$  to the extent  $1 - \alpha^*$ . In the latter case, the individual adopts an ideological mix of beliefs and narratives from both ideologies  $A$  and  $B$ .

### Numerical Examples

As we cannot explicitly determine the solution for the sequential search problem, we analyze some numerical examples of the information search process and illustrate the sequential decision path on the surface of expected conditional utility. From these examples, we see that the decision process depends on the specific sequence of received stochastic signals.

Suppose that an individual considers two ideologies that - without further information - seem very similar. Therefore, the individual has very close prior beliefs, namely  $\mu_{A,0} = 5, \mu_{B,0} = 5.2, \sigma_{A,0}^2 = 0.6$  and  $\sigma_{B,0}^2 = 0.8$ . We study examples of two different scenarios that could arise from this starting point.

In the *first scenario* both ideologies have the same true match value. Thus, the information search process should reveal that a balanced combination of both ideologies is optimal ( $\alpha^* = 0.5$ ). Further, in this scenario, we want to illustrate that even if the search process starts with fairly close prior beliefs and the true match values are identical, different sequences of stochastic signals already generate variations in the number of optimally conducted search steps  $t_{info}^*$  as well as variations in  $\alpha^*$ . Different sequential search procedures do not lead to identical solutions.

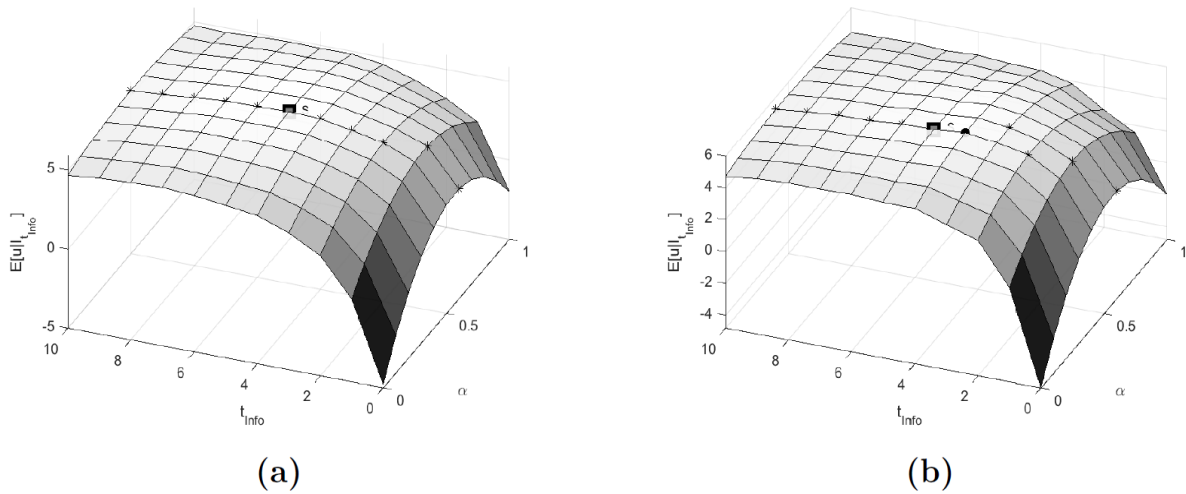
In the *second scenario*, one ideology has a greater true match value than the other. In this scenario, we want to illustrate that - even if the true match value for  $A$  is lower than that for  $B$  the individual may still combine the two ideologies. The optimal but still limited information set cannot yet fully reveal this difference. In this case, the information search process reveals step by step which ideology may turn out to be the better one. Due to search costs, the process stops at an optimal number of steps. As we still do not have full information when this search process stops, it may turn out that a combination of both belief systems is better than only choosing that with the true highest expected match value.

The *first scenario* is discussed with the help of Figure 1 where we see the expected conditional utility  $E[u|I_{t_{info}}]$  for two different sequences of signals depending on  $t_{info}$  and  $\alpha$ . All parameters remain equal, but due to the different sequences of stochastic signals, we obtain slightly different results, which we denote by cases 1(a) and 1(b). We choose the risk aversion parameter  $R$  sufficiently high so that assumption (20) is true for every example sequence of signals. For every time step  $t_{info} = 0, 1, \dots, T$  we solve the maximization problem for  $E[u|I_{t_{info}}]$  to find the optimal choice of  $\alpha$ . In Figure 1 the corresponding maximal utility is depicted as an asterisk for every step. The number of sequential search steps that can be found using the process described above is indicated as a black square "S" (stop). We choose  $\tilde{\eta}_A = \tilde{\eta}_B = 0.1$  for our examples. Furthermore, the maximal utility over all search steps is depicted as a black dot if it is not equal to the number of sequential steps. With these two markers, we can see that our sequential search indeed is an approximation of the optimal solution that could be found if the signals were known before the search. However, this is not realistic from the individual's viewpoint. A more detailed comparison of the following outcomes is in the Appendix.

In this *first scenario* both true expected match values are equal to 6. Thus, the search reveals that a balanced combination of both belief systems is the best choice, which implies that  $\alpha^*$  is close to 0.5. However, we can see in Figure 1 that the difference in stochastic sequence leads to different outcomes. In case 1(a) (first sequence of signals) in Figure 1, the optimal number of sequential search steps is 5 with  $\alpha^* = 0.5$ , and the expected utility is  $E_{\alpha_{t_{info}}^*}[u|I_{t_{info}}] = 5.900$ . We also see that after the second step, the optimal choice for  $\alpha^*$  is already 0.5, which does not change with further steps. The individual continues to search as the reduction in uncertainty increases the expected conditional utility.

FIGURE 1

TWO OUTCOMES FOR  $E[u|I_{t_{info}}]$  IN THE FIRST SCENARIO WITH PARAMETERS  $\mu_{A,0} = 5, \mu_{B,0} = 5.2, \sigma_{A,0}^2 = 0.6, \sigma_{B,0}^2 = 0.8, \eta_A^2 = 1, \eta_B^2 = 1, \mu_A = 6, \mu_B = 6, R = 30, w = 2, p = 10, t_L = 1, T = 10$  and  $\tilde{\eta}_A^2 = \tilde{\eta}_B^2 = 0.1$

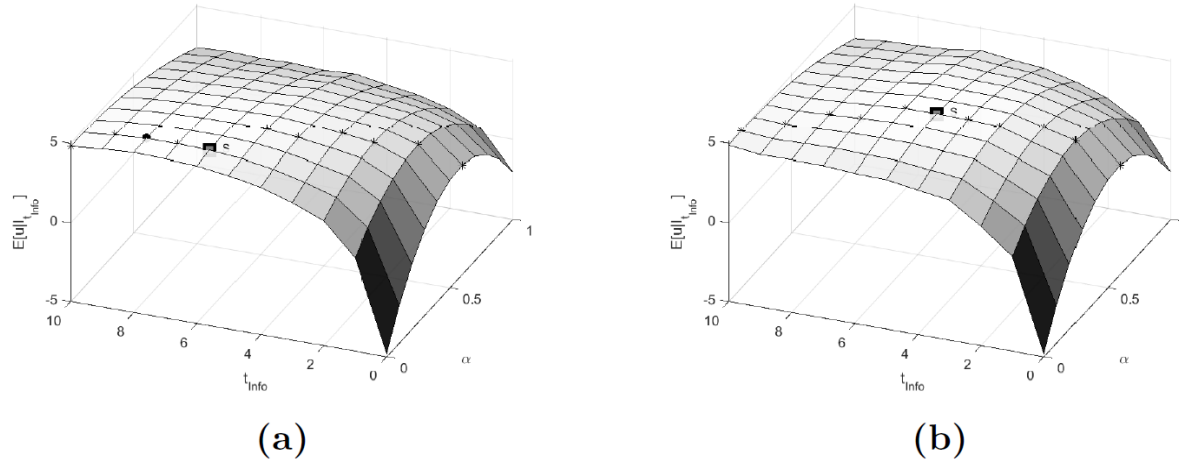


In case 1(b) (second sequence of signals) in Figure 1, the optimal number of sequential search steps is 5 with  $\alpha^* = 0.4$  and the expected utility is  $E_{\alpha^* t_{info}} [u|I_{t_{info}}] = 5.833$ . The value for  $\alpha$  is not as stable as in case 1(a). This means that the several signals suggest that belief system  $B$  has a slightly higher match value than belief system  $A$ . More search steps than in case 1(a) would be necessary until  $\alpha$  reaches 0.5. However, the search is stopped early as search costs prevent further steps. With fewer steps, the individual cuts down on costs, and the expected utility is slightly greater than in case 1(a). As intended, the example illustrates that different sequences of stochastic signals already generate different final outcomes.

For the *second scenario* we only change the true expected match value of belief system  $A$  to 4 instead of 6 ( $B$  remains with a true match value 6). All other parameters remain equal. In this second scenario, the information search process ought to reveal that the choice of belief system  $B$  is the better one, which means that the search should end with a value of  $\alpha$  close to 0. In Figure 2, this can be observed in both cases 2(a) and 2(b) of the example. However, as the search is costly, maximum utility is reached after a few search steps with a positive optimal value for  $\alpha$ . Thus, the search process has not yet fully revealed that  $B$  is the true better belief system and so a combination of both belief systems is recommended as optimal. In Figure 2, we see that in case 2(a) the number of sequential search steps is 6 with  $\alpha^* = 0.1$  and the expected utility is  $E_{\alpha^* t_{info}} [u|I_{t_{info}}] = 5.112$ . In case 2(b), the number of sequential steps is 5 with  $\alpha^* = 0.4$  and the expected utility is  $E_{\alpha^* t_{info}} [u|I_{t_{info}}] = 5.137$ . In both cases, more search steps would be necessary until  $\alpha$  approaches 0, as the theoretically correct solution under perfect information.

FIGURE 2

TWO OUTCOMES FOR  $E[u|I_{t_{info}}]$  IN THE SECOND SCENARIO WITH PARAMETERS  $\mu_{A,0} = 5, \mu_{B,0} = 5.2, \sigma_{A,0}^2 = 0.6, \sigma_{B,0}^2 = 0.8, \eta_A^2 = 1, \eta_B^2 = 1, \mu_A = 4, \mu_B = 6, R = 30, w = 2, p = 10, t_L = 1, T = 10$  and  $\tilde{\eta}_A^2 = \tilde{\eta}_B^2 = 0.1$



What we learn from this example is that search costs lead to a limited set of information. We can have different outcomes even if we choose the same parameters, but without search costs, the information search process would eventually reveal which ideology is the better one. The outcomes depend on the specific values of the stochastic signals that are received. Thus, we can further conclude that a higher variance in signals leads to more different outcomes.

### BELIEF SYSTEM CO-DETERMINES DECISIONS

In the previous section, we discussed extensively how individuals search for ideologies and figure out which ideological mixture matches their underlying need structure. Once a choice has been made, the individual is willing to adhere to the norms, rules, and values of the chosen ideologies, because they generate consistency, certainty and meaning in life. Ideologies, and their mental meaning-making systems help individuals to process incoming stimuli (through the lens of the ideology), understand reality, and make decisions that are consistent with their needs and preferences. So in this section, we explain how ideologies help individuals to make everyday decisions once they are adopted. The rules, narratives, norms, and values of a particular ideology imply low information costs and facilitate the individual's understanding and evaluation of information. Furthermore, they liberate the individual from evaluating the appropriateness of their own behavior, the social acceptance of their own norms and values, and from coordination and communication problems. Instead, they provide a basis for communication and behavior, for perception, understanding, and evaluation.

Since individuals choose ideologies that resonate with their underlying need structure, adhering to the rules and norms of those ideologies implies consistent behavior. This means that behaving, perceiving, and making decisions according to chosen ideologies serves individuals' needs and increases their utility. These belief-based rules, norms, or values can serve as heuristics and provide a valuable source for information-processing and decision making. Individuals trust that their chosen belief systems are accurate and complete, and hence rely on them to understand reality and make everyday decisions. Trust plays an important role in belief formation, as individuals do not have the resources and capacities to evaluate all available information; instead, they adopt, sometimes even unquestioningly, the propagated beliefs and narratives. Processing information and making choices according to the chosen ideologies not only decreases information and decision costs, it also addresses the psychological needs of the individual:

making choices based on ideological narratives, rules, norms and values generates consistency, certainty, and order in one's life. Perceiving the environment based on the ideological patterns and sharing these perceptions with a social group emphasizes social belonging, identification and approval. It also generates a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, as it increases individuals' belief in their capacity to demonstrate a certain behavior and make choices based on their own needs and preferences.

Taking these (subjectively) positive implications of an ideological choice into consideration, it becomes clear that individuals are eager to adhere to the rules, norms, and values of the chosen ideologies and hence make decisions accordingly. In the following section, we explain how following these rules and norms in everyday decision making enhances individuals' subjective utility. This can be illustrated by a standard rational choice model.

### Utilities, Rules, and Consumption Decisions

Formally, we assume that each individual has a set of  $n$  mental needs that they try to reconcile. However, each person has a different desire to the extent that a certain need has to be served. In addition, we assume that a belief system  $K$  addresses each of these need components  $i$  ( $i = 1, \dots, n$ ) to the extent  $B_{K_i}$  and we denote by  $B_K$  the set of these index numbers for the need components of ideology  $K$ ,  $B_K = \{B_{K_1}, B_{K_2}, \dots, B_{K_n}\}$ .

Suppose  $Z$  is the set of all behavioral rules or norms that may be part of an arbitrary ideology. The leaders of an ideology  $K$  can use an index number or a combination of index numbers from  $B_K$  to form a rule  $r \in Z$ . Thus, each rule results from a subset of  $B_K$  of need-reconciling services that are provided by the corresponding ideology. We denote by  $P(B_K)$  the power set of  $B_K$ , which is the set of all subsets of  $B_K$ . Then we define the relation

$$Z_K = \{(f, r) \in P(B_K) \times Z : f \text{ is the set of index numbers of the needs that build rule } r\}. \quad (25)$$

Note that it is possible that a certain combination of index numbers, which is represented by a set  $f \in P(B_K)$ , implies several rules  $r \in Z$ .

Let  $Z_K \subseteq Z$  be the set of rules  $r$  with  $(f, r) \in Z$ . Thus,  $Z_K$  is the set of rules that ideology  $K$  prescribes. After adopting belief system  $K$  individuals are principally willing and inclined to follow such rules and norms  $r \in Z_K$ .<sup>7</sup>

We assume in the following that the individual has to make a (consumption) choice and can decide between two different proceedings. The first proceeding would imply the adherence to the rules of a chosen ideology, while the second proceeding would not align with the ideological rules. Suppose  $\rho$  is an index that measures the extent at which activities and choices of the individual are in line with the narratives and rules of the belief system. Thus,  $\rho$  is the match of ideological rules with the individual's own activities and this serves the underlying psychological needs. Therefore,  $\rho$  enters the everyday utility function.

The rule-inconsistent activities are denoted by  $a_c$  and these are proceedings that purely relate to consumption. If  $\bar{c}_c$  is a standardized pure consumption unit and total pure consumption activities are represented by  $a_c$ , total consumption that purely serves consumption purposes is  $c_c = \bar{c}_c a_c$ . Activity  $a_\rho$  is another consumption activity. Defining again a standardized amount of this kind of consumption as  $\bar{c}_\rho$ , the total amount of this kind of consumption is

$$c_\rho = \bar{c}_\rho a_\rho. \quad (26)$$

Activity  $a_\rho$ , however, not only serves general consumption, but it is also consistent with the rules and narratives of the chosen belief system. This means that activity  $a_\rho$  is a consumption proceeding that is consistent with an individual's psychological needs and thus contributes one unit to the belief-based utility  $\rho$ . Hence, the index value of  $\rho$  is directly determined by the number of activities that are consistent with the chosen belief system and the psychological needs

$$\rho = a_\rho. \tag{27}$$

As a result,  $a_\rho$  generates a positive externality. This belief-based activity serves both, the consumption needs as well as the psychological needs (because the consumption choice is based on the rules of the chosen ideology, which in turn resonates with the psychological needs of the individual). Thus, it will not only increase the consumption of kind  $c_\rho$ , but it will also address intangible benefits  $\rho$ . Combining (26) and (27) describes the fixed ratio of consumption that serves both psychological and consumption needs,

$$\rho = \frac{1}{\bar{c}_\rho} c_\rho. \tag{28}$$

As  $\rho$  serves the psychological needs by behaving in a belief-compliant manner  $\rho$  will directly enter the utility function. With two kinds of consumption goods that both serve consumption preferences the utility function with standard characteristics can be described by  $u = u(\rho, c_\rho, c_c)$ . We make the standard assumption of positive and decreasing marginal utility with respect to both activities  $a_\rho$  and  $a_c$ .

### Constraints and Choice Problem

As  $c_\rho$  and  $c_c$  are both different kinds of consumption goods, we have two prices for these two goods,  $p_\rho$  and  $p_c$ . For clarity, we assume that there is no direct way to purchase intangible benefits, like buying a unit of self-esteem or social approval.<sup>8</sup> With a given income  $\bar{y}$  the budget constraint is simple:

$$p_c \bar{c}_c a_c + p_\rho \bar{c}_\rho a_\rho - \bar{y} = 0. \tag{29}$$

The complete choice problem is

$$\max_{a_c, a_\rho} u = u(\rho, c_\rho, c_c), \text{ s.t. } p_c \bar{c}_c a_c + p_\rho \bar{c}_\rho a_\rho - \bar{y} = 0. \tag{30}$$

As we assume a standard choice problem we can apply the Implicit Functions Theorem and obtain optimal activities  $a_c^* = a_c^*(p_\rho, \bar{c}_\rho, p_c, \bar{c}_c, \bar{y})$  and  $a_\rho^* = a_\rho^*(p_\rho, \bar{c}_\rho, p_c, \bar{c}_c, \bar{y})$ , which lead to optimal demand functions for  $c_\rho^*$  and  $c_c^*$  and an optimal level of serving the belief system  $\rho^*$ .

### Interpretation

While it is a standard procedure to derive the optimal demand functions, it is more interesting to look at the first order condition to understand how the choice is determined. From these conditions we obtain

$$\frac{\frac{\partial u}{\partial \rho} + \frac{\partial u}{\partial c_\rho} \bar{c}_\rho}{\frac{\partial u}{\partial c_c} \bar{c}_c} = \frac{p_\rho}{p_c}. \tag{31}$$

In equation (31) the term  $\frac{\frac{\partial u}{\partial \rho} + \frac{\partial u}{\partial c_\rho} \bar{c}_\rho}{\frac{\partial u}{\partial c_c} \bar{c}_c}$  gives the willingness to pay for good  $c_\rho$  in terms of goods  $c_c$ . If  $\bar{c}_\rho$  is comparable with  $\bar{c}_c$  in serving the pure consumption preference  $\left[ \frac{\partial u}{\partial c_\rho} = \frac{\partial u}{\partial c_c} \right]$ , condition (31) indicates that we are willing to pay more for  $c_\rho$  due to the consumption externality. Buying a belief-conform consumption good not only serves individuals' material needs, it also serves their mental preferences. Similarly, rewriting (31) gives

$$\frac{\frac{\partial u}{\partial \rho} + \frac{\partial u}{\partial c_\rho} \bar{c}_\rho}{p_\rho} = \frac{\frac{\partial u}{\partial c_c} \bar{c}_c}{p_c}. \quad (32)$$

That is, marginal utility per unit income must be equalized and each \$ must generate the same effect on marginal utility. As consumption  $c_\rho$  with activity  $a_\rho$  has a positive externality by generating consumption-related utilities as well as belief-related benefits, the individual would be willing to pay more for the same amount of consumption good purchased.

The following example illustrates this reasoning. If an individual has adopted a green ideology (or environmentalism) as their guiding belief system, one rule could be to eat organic food as often as possible. The individual serves their underlying needs if they follow this belief-based rule. However, while a standard meal with conventionally produced ingredients is normally less expensive than one produced with organic ingredients, due to the positive consumption externality the individual is willing to pay more for the belief-based (organic) meal. The increased demand for the more expensive organic meal is explained by the increased belief-based utility. Following the rules, attitudes, and norms applied by the green ideology not only serves tangible preferences of the individual (buying food to satisfy a hunger), it also has psychologically positive implications. Acting according to the adopted ideology not only serves the individual's needs, it also provides positive self-image and facilitates coherent decision making.

### Implications for Gaining Empirical Evidence

Beliefs provide a mental guide to understanding and adapting to given environmental settings and help process information in a subjectively coherent way. Relying on certain belief-based ideals, rules, and norms to make decisions about what is right or wrong not only reduces anxiety and self-related uncertainty, it also provides a sense of security and higher self-esteem (Flannelly & Galek, 2009).

Although this implies that beliefs are a potent cause of action, this internal cognitive mechanism seems difficult to observe. The revealed preference approach in economics postulates that individuals' (consumption) preferences can be revealed by observing their purchasing behavior, under different price and income conditions. This means that individuals reveal their preference patterns by their market behaviors (Samuelson, 1948). However, the initiating source of this behavior can be difficult to identify.<sup>9</sup>

Recent neuroimaging and lesion studies provide evidence that beliefs are indeed "observable" in terms of neural underpinnings in the human brain. The choice of a particular belief system seems to be associated with individual differences in basic neurocognitive mechanisms (for a review see Cristofori and Grafman (2017)). Such physiological measures are useful to assess implicit responses and infer subjective preferences. In neuroeconomics, it is assumed that if two different objects elicit neural activation of equal intensity, the two objects should be equally preferred. However, observing an increased activation toward one object over another, the object that induces a stronger neural reaction should be preferred (Brosch & Sander, 2013). These studies find differential neurocognitive effects - after a decision, task, or stimulus - that are possibly linked to the previously adopted belief system.

Further, in our model we showed that belief-based consumption not only serves individuals' consumption needs, but it also serves their psychological demands. We can assume that making choices according to one's own belief system implies greater rewards. We can extend the classical revealed preference approach with observable mental processes. Following the rules and principles of a belief system and making choices accordingly may reveal the belief-based preferences of the individual (such as buying only organic products reveals the adoption of ecologist beliefs). However, as we cannot provide all at once, these suggestions must be left for further research.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we answer two major questions: (1) Why and how do individuals search for ideologies and figure out which ideology or mix of ideologies matches them best? (2) How does an ideology - once chosen - determine everyday decision-making?



To answer the first question, we argue that human beings are constantly confronted with complexity amidst which they have to make consistent choices. In order to understand or even reduce complexity and make decisions, individuals need information. But information can be complex, ambiguous, or false. The information set is costly to acquire and is never complete. Ideologies help individuals to process and evaluate information and organize reality into coherent and comprehensible regularities, by representing different philosophies of life. Ideologies substitute and/or complement information. But why are different individuals attracted to different ideologies and belief systems? We suggest that the choice of an ideology is not random; it is driven, among others, by a set of underlying psychological human needs - such as the need to understand and control one's environment, to feel accepted and approved by social others, to make autonomous decisions, to feel self-efficacious, and to have high self-esteem. Ideologies and their unique mental meaning-making systems provide options to serve these needs; that is, they help individuals to process information, understand the social environment, unpredictable events, and circumstances, identify with social others, and make consistent decisions. Individuals choose the belief systems that best resonate or are consistent with their underlying need structure. How can individuals find the belief system they are most comfortable with? This is answered by suggesting a Bayesian learning procedure with costly information. Information allows for a better match and reduces the likelihood of making bad choices. Decreasing marginal utilities from an information search leads to an optimal stopping of information acquisition and an optimal decision about the best matching ideology.

The second question addresses the role of ideologies in everyday decisions. Ideologies are a way to reduce complexity so as to make "good" decisions at low cost. Belief-based rules, narratives, and norms are low-cost substitutes for high information and deliberation costs and are thus perceived as important instruments in subjective decision making. Thus, following the rules, norms, and values imposed by the chosen ideology positively enters utility as their consistency with the chosen ideology indirectly serves one's underlying needs. This is also formally modeled. An action such as the consumption of a meal not only generates utility by satisfying one's desire to eat. If the consumption is consistent with the ideological rule, it generates an extra utility as the individual behaves consistently with their beliefs.

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## ENDNOTES

1. In the literature we find various kinds of beliefs according to their different functions, such as Bayesian beliefs or motivated beliefs (Bénabou, 2015; Pronin et al., 2002; Zimmerman, 2002). However, we refrain from an extended discussion about such kinds of beliefs and focus instead on our own understanding of belief systems.
2. However, if the chosen ideologies repeatedly fail to provide "good service" (in terms of bad decisional outcomes, inaccurate representation of reality [due to changed circumstances] or lack of coherence), individuals re-evaluate or even reject them and restart the search.
3. This reflects individual's preference for belief consonance (Golman et al. 2016). Individuals tend to adopt ideologies that other persons in their social environment or the group they feel they belong to have chosen. Thus, they can form an initial belief about the ideological match based on the experience of their social environment. For a young person family and friends may be a source for this prior belief.
4. For example, if there is a leader who promotes their ideology in a way that intensively addresses the individual's emotions, then the individual's prior belief about this ideology may be very strong (low  $\sigma_{K,0}^2$ ) and new information has a low impact. The interpersonal relationship with the leader also plays a role when people stick to their ideology and are less sensitive to (or reject) new information.
5. The function  $f: \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}, f(x) = 1 - \exp(-x)$  is monotonically increasing in  $x$ . Therefore, it is sufficient to maximize the function in the exponent of our exponential function.

6. This is modeled as in McCardle (1985) who examines an optimal stopping problem for technology adoption. In this case, the individual has to decide if a new technology is adopted or rejected after a certain number of information acquisition steps depending on the expected profit.
7. If individuals adopt a combination of ideologies  $K$  where each ideology is chosen at a fraction  $\alpha_K \in (0,1)$  they also choose the corresponding fraction of rules from  $R_K$  of the chosen ideologies  $K$ .
8. These are simplified assumptions since we can also think of material goods that can directly serve psychological needs. Buying a luxury product, for example, may indirectly increase one's self-esteem and may lead to higher social approval.
9. Several studies show that individuals make decisions that are not consistent with their preferences and beliefs in order to align with social norms or to be liked by significant others (Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; Sechrist & Stangor, 2001; Sinclair et al., 2005).

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## APPENDIX

### Derivation of Assumption (20)

For simplicity, we substitute  $t := t_{info}$ . First, we assume  $\Delta_t = E_{\alpha_{t+1}^*}[\tilde{u}|I_{t+1}] - E_{\alpha_t^*}[\tilde{u}|I_t] > 0$  which is equivalent to

$$\alpha_{t+1}^* \mu_{A,t+1} - \frac{(\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 + (1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*) \mu_{B,t+1} - \frac{(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{B,t+1}^2 - \alpha_t^* \mu_{A,t} + \frac{(\alpha_t^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{A,t}^2 - (1 - \alpha_t^*) \mu_{B,t} + \frac{(1 - \alpha_t^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{B,t}^2 > 0 \quad (33)$$

and

$$\frac{1}{2} R (-(\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 - (1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+1}^2 + (\alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t}^2 + (1 - \alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t}^2) > \alpha_t^* \mu_{A,t} + (1 - \alpha_t^*) \mu_{B,t} - \alpha_{t+1}^* \mu_{A,t+1} - (1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*) \mu_{B,t+1}. \quad (34)$$

Thus, we have to assume that

$$(\alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t}^2 - (\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 + (1 - \alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t}^2 - (1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+1}^2 > 0 \quad (35)$$

so that

$$R > 2 \frac{\alpha_t^* \mu_{A,t} + (1 - \alpha_t^*) \mu_{B,t} - \alpha_{t+1}^* \mu_{A,t+1} - (1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*) \mu_{B,t+1}}{(\alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t}^2 - (\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 + (1 - \alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t}^2 - (1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+1}^2} \quad (36)$$

Additionally, we assume  $\Delta_t - \Delta_{t+1} = 2E_{\alpha_{t+1}^*}[\tilde{u}|I_{t+1}] - E_{\alpha_t^*}[\tilde{u}|I_t] - E_{\alpha_{t+2}^*}[\tilde{u}|I_{t+2}] > 0$  which is equivalent to

$$\begin{aligned} & 2\alpha_{t+1}^* \mu_{A,t+1} - 2 \frac{(\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 + 2(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*) \mu_{B,t+1} - 2 \frac{(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{B,t+1}^2 - \\ & \alpha_t^* \mu_{A,t} + \frac{(\alpha_t^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{A,t}^2 - (1 - \alpha_t^*) \mu_{B,t} + \frac{(1 - \alpha_t^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{B,t}^2 - \alpha_{t+2}^* \mu_{A,t+2} + \frac{(\alpha_{t+2}^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{A,t+2}^2 - \\ & (1 - \alpha_{t+2}^*) \mu_{B,t+2} + \frac{(1 - \alpha_{t+2}^*)^2}{2} R \sigma_{B,t+2}^2 > 0 \end{aligned} \quad (37)$$

and

$$\begin{aligned} & \frac{1}{2} R (-2(\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 - 2(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+1}^2 + (\alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t}^2 + (1 - \alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t}^2 + (\alpha_{t+2}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+2}^2 + \\ & (1 - \alpha_{t+2}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+2}^2) > 2\alpha_{t+1}^* \mu_{A,t+1} - 2(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*) \mu_{B,t+1} + \alpha_t^* \mu_{A,t} + (1 - \alpha_t^*) \mu_{B,t} + \\ & \alpha_{t+2}^* \mu_{A,t+2} + (1 - \alpha_{t+2}^*) \mu_{B,t+2} \end{aligned} \quad (38)$$

Thus, we need to assume that

$$R > 2 \frac{-2\alpha_{t+1}^* \mu_{A,t+1} - 2(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*) \mu_{B,t+1} + \alpha_t^* \mu_{A,t} + (1 - \alpha_t^*) \mu_{B,t} + \alpha_{t+2}^* \mu_{A,t+2} + (1 - \alpha_{t+2}^*) \mu_{B,t+2}}{-2(\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 - 2(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+1}^2 + (\alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t}^2 + (1 - \alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t}^2 + (\alpha_{t+2}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+2}^2 + (1 - \alpha_{t+2}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+2}^2} \quad (39)$$

and slightly adjust (35) to

$$-2(\alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+1}^2 - 2(1 - \alpha_{t+1}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+1}^2 + (\alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t}^2 + (1 - \alpha_t^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t}^2 + (\alpha_{t+2}^*)^2 \sigma_{A,t+2}^2 + (1 - \alpha_{t+2}^*)^2 \sigma_{B,t+2}^2 > 0. \quad (40)$$

Thus, if we assume (35), (40), and that  $R$  is larger than the maximum of the right-hand sides of (36) and (39) we obtain assumption (20).

### Comparison of Numerical Examples

We take another look at our first example, which is illustrated in Figure 1. If we compare the results of the sequential search with the overall maximal utility, we find differences only in case 1(b). In case 1(a), the number of sequential search steps is equal to the number of optimal steps from the general optimization problem. This implies that the optimal fraction  $\alpha^*$  is equal, too. Thus, in this case, the anticipation for the subsequent expected utility is correct. In case 1(b), the sequential search stops after five steps, whereas the optimal number from general optimization is four. Thus, the anticipated gain in utility for a fifth step is positive, which implies that the sequential search continues. After conducting the fifth step, the individual knows that this slightly reduces utility from 6.008 to 5.833 and the sequential search stops, too. However, the loss in utility is small and  $\alpha^*$  is equal to the result from the general optimization.

In our second example, which is shown in Figure 2, we see a difference in case 2(a). In case 2(b), the sequential search again stops at the overall maximal utility. In case 2(a), the number of optimal steps from general optimization is eight whereas the sequential number is six. Thus, the anticipated gain in utility is not positive but the specific signals are high enough to increase expected utility. However, individuals cannot know this. They can only elaborate if they expect a further increase in utility based on what they know so far. The optimal expected utility could be increased to 5.150 with two more steps. However, this loss in utility is very small and  $\alpha^*$  is equal in both optimization strategies. From the individual's point of view, it is best to stop the search early.