

The Falsifiability Test

Here's a question worth asking about almost any claim someone makes with confidence:

What would have to happen for you to admit you were wrong?

Not "what evidence supports this." Almost anything can find supporting evidence if you look selectively enough. The sharper question is the opposite one: is there any outcome — any fact, any event, any result — that the person making the claim would accept as proof they were mistaken?

If the answer is no — if literally any outcome can be explained as confirming the claim — that's a signal worth noticing. Not proof the claim is false. But proof it isn't currently built to be checked.

A claim that can't lose isn't really a claim. It's a conviction wearing a claim's clothes.

When the Explanation Always Fits

Watch how some predictions survive contact with reality.

A policy is enacted. The economy does well afterward. Supporters say: proof it worked. The economy does poorly afterward. Supporters say: it would have been worse without it, or it just needs more time, or something else caused the downturn.

Notice what happened. Two opposite outcomes — the economy improving, and the economy declining — were both treated as confirmation of the same claim. That's the tell. If both a thing happening and its opposite happening count as evidence for your position, your position was never actually being tested by events. It was just being restated after the fact, no matter what the facts turned out to be.

This isn't a partisan pattern. It shows up identically on every side of every debate — in economics, in foreign policy, in predictions about a rival's motives, in explanations for why an election went the way it did. Whenever an explanation is flexible enough to absorb any result, it has stopped being a prediction and become an article of faith.

This Doesn't Mean "Nothing Is Knowable"

The falsifiability test isn't an invitation to distrust everything, or to treat every claim as equally unprovable. Plenty of claims are genuinely testable and have, in fact, been tested — and treating well-supported findings as if they were just "someone's opinion" is its own kind of failure to think clearly, not a sign of open-mindedness.

The test is narrower than that. It's aimed at claims that sound confident but are quietly built so they can never be wrong — where no future fact, however inconvenient, would ever change the person's mind, because the explanation will simply stretch to cover it.

A claim worth trusting is one its own holder could imagine losing to evidence.

Naming the Losing Condition Is Only Half the Test

The other half is honoring it when the moment actually arrives.

It's common to see people name a real, falsifiable condition up front — a date, a number, a specific outcome — and then, when the evidence shows up and doesn't cooperate, quietly explain it away instead of updating. The timeline gets extended. A new caveat appears that wasn't there before. The miss gets attributed to some outside factor that conveniently absolves the original claim.

This is different from genuine refinement. New evidence sometimes really does turn out to be more complicated than a first prediction accounted for, and reasonably distinguishing that from what was actually predicted is just honest reasoning. The difference is which direction the motion runs: is the claim changing because the evidence demands it, or because the conclusion needs protecting from the evidence?

Specifying what would prove you wrong is the easy part. Actually changing your mind when it happens is the part that counts.

A Question to Carry Into the Next Debate

Before accepting — or dismissing — a confident claim, it's worth asking the person making it, or asking yourself if you're the one making it:

What would change your mind? What specific outcome, if it happened, would you count as proof this was wrong?

If there's a real answer — a number, an event, a timeframe — that's a claim built to meet reality. It might still turn out to be wrong, but it was at least playing the same game as the facts.

If there's no answer, or the answer keeps moving, that's worth knowing before investing much trust in it.

Not every claim needs to be provable to be worth holding. Values aren't falsifiable, and they don't need to be. But claims about what will happen, what did happen, or why something happened — those are exactly the kind of claims falsifiability is built to test.

The people most confident they're right are sometimes the ones least willing to say what would prove them wrong.

That's worth noticing, on every side, including our own.