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Applying the Unimodel to Political Persuasion

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Kruglanski and Thompson's unimodel of persuasion provides a theoretical and empirical challenge for both dual-route theorists and for the numerous scholars applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM; Chaiken, 1980) to everyday phenomena like advertising and political campaigning: Why use two routes of persuasion when, as Kruglanski and Thompson claim, one is sufficient? In this article, I first examine why dual-route models have had such great appeal to those studying the dynamics of political persuasion. I then contrast different predictions derived from dual-route models and the unimodel. Specifically, I examine how the two models explain persuasion in a situation where cue information is more readily available than message arguments, a situation that is quite common in the political context.

Political Persuasion

One of the core tasks of politicians is to persuade. Whether they aim their efforts to persuade at col-

leagues or at citizens, politicians continuously try to convince others that their party has the best solutions for the country's problems and the best people to implement those solutions. The question of how people come to accept or reject these persuasive messages has traditionally attracted a lot of attention from both social psychologists and political scientists. Dual-route models like the ELM and HSM have been helpful in understanding political persuasion. Kruglanski and Thompson's attempt to replace the two routes by a single one is therefore a daring one.

One reason dual-route models have been helpful in explaining political persuasion is the distinction that is usually made between politically aware and politically unaware citizens. In a political utopia, people are highly politically aware: They hold political attitudes that are relatively stable over time, that change as a result of new and relevant message arguments, that show a certain consistency, and that are predictive of different kinds of political behavior (e.g., voting or taking part in political protest). Before going to the election booth, these ideal citizens all read the party programs, they watch the political debates on television, read all

the op-ed pages, and discuss their findings extensively with friends, family, and colleagues. In real life, however, most citizens are not that politically aware: Their political attitudes are not that consistent and they change over time in a seemingly random way (Converse, 1964). Voting preferences seem to depend on candidates' looks rather than on their political programs. Citizens lack even the most basic factual political knowledge (see Page & Shapiro, 1992, pp. 10–11, for examples of the lack of political knowledge among U.S. citizens).

One of the key questions in political persuasion research is how this large group of politically unaware citizens differs from the politically aware in the way they come to their political preferences. Both the ELM and HSM have shown large heuristic value in answering this question. The cognitive and motivational determinants of the two ELM (or HSM) routes (e.g., low vs. high need for cognition, low vs. high involvement) mirror many of the distinctions made in political psychology to separate the politically unaware from the politically aware: uneducated versus educated (e.g., Phelan, Link, Stueve, & Moore, 1995), novice versus expert (e.g., Fiske, Kinder, & Larter, 1983), and uninvolved versus involved (e.g., Judd, Krosnick, & Milburn, 1981).

Politically unaware citizens are usually compared with the students in the low-involvement condition in Petty and Cacioppo's classical comprehensive exam experiment. As Zaller (1992) put it, "most politics, at least in the contemporary United States, is notoriously low key and uninvolved. The stakes are high, but people find it hard to stay interested" (p. 47). Under such conditions, one cannot expect citizens to make the effort of processing all the message arguments during a political campaign. Why bother to examine the pros and cons of NATO expansion or higher minimum wages if you can judge a candidate by their looks, eloquence, or the party they represent?

Politically aware citizens are typically compared to the students in the high-involvement conditions in the Petty and Cacioppo experiments. McGraw and Hubbard (1996) referred to Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and stated that the politically aware, whom they called *sophisticates*, "are both motivated and able to carefully scrutinize a politician's explanation" (p. 150). Part of the appeal of dual-route models thus seems to lie in the fact that the large body of research concerning the ELM and HSM can be used to hypothesize about differences between the politically aware and unaware. Dual-route models make clear predictions about the way that people, given their different levels of involvement and knowledge, deal with political persuasive information.

Apart from this heuristic value of dual-route models, there is another reason for students of political persuasion to resist substituting the two routes for one

single route. To many political theorists there is a qualitative difference between political preferences based on processing peripheral cues (e.g., the looks of the candidate) versus preferences based on political message arguments. Specifically, they contend that cue-based preferences are more prone to misleading persuasive attempts than argument-based preferences. This may not be a principled difference in the persuasion process as such, as Kruglanski and Thompson argue. It does, however, constitute a principled difference in the way people form political preferences. In this perspective, the (normative) aim has always been to make the group of politically aware citizens as large as possible: Democracy would function in a better way if its citizens paid more attention to message arguments than to political cue information. The assumption is that argument-based preferences would make citizens less vulnerable to easy solutions offered by populist politicians.

Given the aforementioned reasons for applying dual-route models to political persuasion, is there a reason for applying the unimodel to political persuasion? If both models were to make the same predictions about how the politically aware and unaware get persuaded by political messages, I would argue that there is no compelling reason to prefer one model over the other. However, Kruglanski and Thompson's theorizing leads them to predict that, under certain conditions, dual-route models make predictions that are quite different from those made by the unimodel. These conditions, I argue in the remainder of this commentary, are very common in the context of political persuasion and therefore highly relevant for studying the effects of political communication.

How to Persuade the Politically Aware?

The core of Kruglanski and Thompson's argument is that "once differences on persuasively relevant *informational parameters* are controlled for, cue-based and message argument-based persuasion should be impacted similarly by various persuasively relevant *processing variables*." Kruglanski and Thompson point to the length, complexity, and ordinal position of the cues and message arguments as possible causes of the effects that are established within the ELM and HSM framework.

In their first study, Kruglanski and Thompson showed that when cue information is lengthy and complex, low-involvement participants are not influenced by cue information, whereas high-involvement participants are. These conditions, namely cue information that is more lengthy and complex than message arguments, are quite common in the political information that people receive from mass media. Kruglanski and

Thompson's results thereby question the idea that the politically aware, typically compared to high-involvement participants, are persuaded by arguments rather than cues. Thus, in the context of lengthy and complex cue information, the unimodel predicts that cue information influences the involved more than the uninvolved, whereas the dual-route models would predict the opposite (McGraw & Hubbard, 1996; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

In mass media messages about politics, relatively more attention is devoted to information about the political sources and their relations with each other than to information about the issues. Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, De Ridder, and Bos (1995) conducted a detailed content analysis of the news during the campaigning for Dutch parliamentary elections in 1994. Their results showed that about one third of the news contained issue information (i.e., message arguments), information about the different parties' stands on the issues that are at stake. The remaining two thirds of information concerned the success a political party had during the campaign or its relationships with other parties (i.e., cue information).

Another example of the dominance of cue information in political news can be found in a study conducted by Klandermans and Goslinga (1996). These authors studied the news media content after a highly controversial measure proposed by the Dutch cabinet. In 1991, the Dutch government proposed a drastic cut in the level of disability benefits, resulting in a period of large-scale protest. The authors' analysis of the mass media reporting about the conflict led them to conclude that "It is clear who the actors are ... it is much less clear what exactly the controversy is about" (p. 322). Put differently, in a naturalistic setting message arguments again appeared to be less salient than cue information.

Thus, in political news, cue information prevails. This is an intriguing finding because this is exactly the condition in which the dual-route models make predictions that are different from the predictions made by the unimodel. Within the dual-route models it is commonly assumed that the politically aware judge a politician according to his or her issue positions, whereas the politically unaware use all sorts of judgmental heuristics (e.g., Snidermann, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). The question is whether this hypothesis holds with the unimodel in mind. Are the politically aware indeed mainly persuaded by the strength of arguments? The dual-route models would predict that this is the case given the higher motivation and ability of the politically aware. The unimodel, however, predicts that this effect depends on variations in the information of cues and message arguments: If cue information is dominant, then the politically aware's acceptance or rejection of the political message would be the result of the extensive processing of cue information. All this de-

pends on the structure of the information that is provided. Whereas dual-route models attribute effects of persuasion to different processing modes (central or peripheral), the unimodel attributes the effects of persuasion to information characteristics (e.g., length or complexity).

Elite Influence on Public Opinion: An Example From the Gulf War

One of the more consistent findings in political persuasion research is that when the political elite (e.g., politicians, scientists, journalists) consistently, and over a long period of time, stresses one point of view over another, the politically aware tend to follow the elites' point of view (the mainstream effect; Zaller, 1987, 1992). When, for example, both Democrat and Republican U.S. politicians favored sending troops to the Persian Gulf in the period just after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the politically aware, both Democrats and Republicans, were the first to accept this point of view (Zaller, 1994). The question arises whether the politically aware came to support the elite point of view because of the presented message arguments or because of the partisan cues that were provided. Whereas dual-route models would predict arguments, whether or not processed in a biased way, to be the vital factor here, the Unimodel would predict that political involvement leads people to process the cues more extensively. Cues in such a situation are powerful: Almost everybody that matters in Washington agreed that troops should be sent.

Departing from dual-route models, Zaller (1992) explained the mainstream effect by stating that all citizens should be regarded as the low-involvement participants in the ELM or HSM experiments. He thus questioned the generalizability of the ELM and HSM findings concerning the highly involved to the highly politically aware. In his view, the only difference between the politically aware and the politically unaware is the amount of exposure to political information and the ease with which the politically aware can put political (mostly partisan) cues to use. The unimodel would state that whether the politically aware are persuaded more by arguments than by cues depends on the structure of the information that is provided. Both arguments and cues can be processed extensively and both can lead the politically aware to change their opinion.

The Gulf War example clearly shows the value of the unimodel in explaining political persuasion. The unimodel can explain the mainstream effect without making the additional assumption, like Zaller does, that everybody is relatively uninvolved. Similarly, it can explain the mainstream effect without assuming that the politically aware are convinced by message

arguments mainly, like the dual-route models would argue.

Concluding Remarks

Political persuasion research is often conducted in naturalistic settings (e.g., mass surveys). These settings make it difficult to control for the type of information that people have encountered in the way that is typical for Kruglanski and Thompson's studies. Research in naturalistic settings often has to rely on assumptions about the information that people encounter and about the way they process this information. These assumptions are often based on dual-route models like the ELM and HSM. The implicit assumption in the ELM is that cue information is short and simple, whereas arguments are lengthy and complex. Although one would wish this to be the case in political news, the practice of newsgathering makes such a structure of news very unlikely. Extensive argumentation about political issues is usually confined to those pages that very few people read.

Kruglanski and Thompson's unimodel should lead scholars of political persuasion to take another look at the assumptions they hold concerning the structure of political information and the way the politically aware and the politically unaware use this information to come to a judgment. This could lead to hypotheses that are the opposite of the hypotheses derived from dual-route models. For example, under certain conditions, message arguments could lead the politically aware to change their opinions, whereas the politically aware are influenced by extensive cue information.

It remains to be seen whether the unimodel can account for several well-established differences between the attitudes of the politically aware and unaware. The studies conducted by Kruglanski and Thompson did not consider the consequences of processing cues versus message arguments under conditions of high involvement. For example, does cue processing under high involvement lead to the stable attitudes that are characteristic of highly politically aware citizens? Are these attitudes as consequential for behavior as attitudes resulting from extensive arguments processing? These are some questions still to be answered by the unimodel.

Note

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