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THE SCOPE AND GENERALITY OF AUTOMATIC AFFECTIVE BIASES IN POLITICAL THINKING: REPLY TO THE SYMPOSIUM

ABSTRACT: Our response to this symposium on our 2006 paper centers on three questions. First, what motivations exist in the political wild, and do our experimental manipulations realistically capture them? We agree that strong accuracy motivations are likely (but not certain) to reduce biases, but we are not at all confident that the real world supplies stronger accuracy motivations than our subjects received. Second, how can we square our findings of stubbornly persistent beliefs and attitudes with the well-established literatures on framing and persuasion, which find political opinion to be more malleable? We argue that our John Q. Public theory of political information accounts for both persistence and persuasion and explains when we should expect one or the other. Citizens will be more responsive to contextual information or persuasive appeals when prior feelings are weak, knowledge is sparse, and information is encountered outside of awareness. Resistance to information or arguments is most likely when prior feelings are strong, attitudes are embedded within dense knowledge networks, and appeals are consciously perceived. Third, is belief persistence driven by feelings and emotions, as we claim, or is it more the result of a conviction that one’s priors are accurate? We suggest that the distinctions that stand behind this question are suspect. We see in some of our commentators a tendency to align accuracy motivation, central processing, and cognition on one side of the dual-processing framework, with directional motivation, peripheral processing, and feelings on the
other side. On the contrary, we argue that beliefs in the truth of one’s priors often result from feelings and wishes and are themselves sources of motivated bias in processing new information. Moreover, directional motivations are also often a source of central processing, so it is not easy to disentangle these processes.

We are impressed and pleased by the thoughtfulness of the commentaries and appreciate their generally positive response to our research design—and to our findings of confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, and the subsequent polarization of attitudes. But of course there are a number of important criticisms.

The chief objection, voiced by all the commentators, is that we underestimate the ability of people to escape the power of their prior attitudes in evaluating arguments. Encouraging our experimental participants to think carefully and urging them to be “fair-minded” and “evenhanded” when examining policy debates may not have been sufficient motivation to evaluate the arguments critically; hence our findings may be overstated. Moreover, the nature of the “evidence” itself can be important, since it is clear that scientific evidence, including the results of controlled experiments, carries more weight with voters than the policy arguments with which we presented them in our research.

James N. Druckman is surely right when he voices a common thread found throughout the commentaries: that actual public debate, partisan controversy, and campaign advertising alert citizens to opposing views, and that these, in turn, familiarize them with the issues and help them structure their opinions. Real political communication, in this reasoning, encourages greater sophistication and promotes deeper processing that could well override the shallow and slipshod thinking we found in our experimental subjects. But two words of caution here. First, given the well-documented ignorance and apathy of the American voter (e.g., Bartels 2005) and the convoluted route people take to justify their beliefs and values (Haidt 2012), it isn’t clear what an ecologically appropriate set of instructions or manipulations to encourage clear and deep thinking would look like. In fact, it seems to us that the very act of asking either survey or experimental participants to answer questions, think carefully, and reason about issues creates a demand to take the task seriously, to be reasonable, to be logical, and to weigh the available evidence more than they otherwise would. All of these are decision characteristics sorely lacking in the real world, or at least here among New Yorkers. Second and even more crucially, increasing the knowledge and motivation of
citizens to process deeply may not solve the problem of motivated biases, since these are the very characteristics that we find increase the pull of priors in evaluating political arguments (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2008). Even scientific evidence does not guarantee even-handed evaluation, a point we mention but do not test in our paper (but see Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979).

We do acknowledge, however, that a stronger accuracy motivation and/or explicitly articulated counterarguments will likely promote less biased reasoning, and we agree with Kruglanski and Boyatzı that “it would be excessive to conclude . . . that people invariably resist information inconsistent with their current beliefs.” But we cannot unequivocally agree with them that motivated skepticism does not constitute a “general phenomenon.” While individual differences in motivation (need for cognition, need for non-specific closure, etc.) can be important, we hope to show that defense of one’s prior attitude is the general default when reasoning about attitudinally contrary arguments, and it takes dramatic, focused intervention to deflect people off a well-grounded attitude.

The key demonstrations of how and where a strong accuracy motivation can promote in-depth processing, which may, in turn, promote less biased reasoning, are rooted in cognitive models of framing (perhaps more appropriately called persuasion models, since alternative frames typically contain different information rather than different presentations of logically equivalent information). The theoretical logic behind this research paradigm derives from the Petty–Cacioppo (1986) Elaboration-Likelihood Model. Central to the ELM is an “elaboration continuum” which ranges from superficial processing to in-depth thinking about an issue. When considering arguments people can take the low road, the “peripheral route,” which requires little cognitive effort. Choices are made quickly upon a cursory scan of the evidence, and people base their evaluations on such externalities as the attractiveness of the messenger or other readily available heuristics. But if people are sufficiently motivated and have the opportunity to scrutinize the evidence, they can follow a “central route” in which they appraise the evidence more closely so as to determine its merits. Upon taking the central route, if the thoughts generated by elaboration are favorable, the evidence will likely be accepted, and the individual persuaded.

Any persuasion factor—source, message, recipient, context—can influence attitude change, and its influence will depend on the route taken, with the same factor acting peripherally as a simple heuristic or
centrally by promoting pro versus con considerations. A key finding of
the framing/persuasion approach is that when taking the central route,
people are more likely to change their attitudes in response to strong,
credible arguments on issues they care about, but when taking the
peripheral course they are more susceptible to weak arguments and
superficial cues.

The Chong and Druckman AAA process model is broadly repre-
sentative of the framing approach in political science, in which three
main psychological processes, availability, accessibility, and applicability
(AAA), are said to “determine the extent to which a given consideration
affects an individual’s opinion” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 639). In
this model, a consideration must be available (present in memory) and
accessible (retrievable from memory) in order to influence information
processing and behavior, but when there is opportunity and motivation
to process centrally, this influence will be contingent on the applicability
or relevance to current goals of the consideration.

Individuals sometimes base their opinions on available and accessible
considerations without conscious deliberation. . . . Other times an in-
dividual will consciously evaluate the applicability of accessible consider-
tions (i.e., accessibility will not be a sufficient condition for influence). . . .
Conscious evaluation occurs if one of the following two conditions are
met. First, if individuals are sufficiently motivated, they will weigh the
competing considerations that either come to mind spontaneously or are
suggested by a frame. . . . Second, prior research shows that all individuals
will become motivated to engage in conscious evaluation when they are
exposed to opposing considerations. (Ibid., 639–40)

The AAA model is similar to John Zaller’s (1992) Receive-Accept-
Sample (RAS) model, in that one’s stated opinions are a product of
cognitive considerations that have been received and stored in long-term
memory (available), which are sampled from the most salient thoughts
that come momentarily to mind (accessible), and which, in turn, are
more likely to be accepted if they are consistent with one’s prior beliefs
and partisan persuasion (applicable). As in the Zaller-Feldman (1992)
“Model of the Survey Response,” the thrust of these models is to
challenge the idea that voters have fixed preferences. Instead, individuals
are ambivalent because they have conflicting “considerations” (facts,
values) in long-term memory on many specific political issues, and their
expressed preferences are determined by the momentary mix of
considerations made accessible to conscious memory. Our chief concern here is the extent to which the retrieval of considerations is biased by one’s prior attitude.

It is especially noteworthy that the ELM, RAS, and AAA models are cognitively directed, memory-based depictions of preferences rooted in those considerations currently in conscious memory. As expressed in Zaller’s Reception Axiom, affective information is likely to influence respondents “only insofar as it leads to intellectual—which is to say, cognitive—engagement” (Zaller 1992, 42–43). This focus on conscious cognition is reprised in Zaller’s key Resistance Axiom, which proposes that arguments inconsistent with citizens’ predispositions will be rejected “only to the extent that they (the respondents) possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions” (ibid., 44). Here, “contextual information” refers to the small sample of considerations currently in conscious working memory. A problem here: Asking people to “stop and think” before responding, which is the major manipulation in the Zaller-Feldman (1992) analysis of the survey response, and which also captures the thrust of our commentators’ recommendations, brings less-important cognitive considerations to mind and thereby deflects the evaluation off its online trajectory. This phenomenon is empirically demonstrated in Gigerenzer 2007, Wilson 2002, and Forgas 2000, as well as in our own forthcoming book on The Rationalizing Voter (Lodge and Taber forthcoming).

In the memory-sampling models, the expression of beliefs and attitudes is rightly conceived as a constructive process, assembled from whatever associations are retrieved from long term (LTM) to working memory (WM). There is no “point” in memory representing a “true attitude” or crystallized opinion, other than perhaps those chronically accessible “objects” in memory that come to mind spontaneously on their mere exposure. A stimulus or message pushes a small number (four to six) of the strongest associations into focal attention (WM) by activating them. Once they are in WM, a judgment, preference, impression is constructed and a choice made. The judgment, preference, or choice depends on what associations are currently in WM: What You See Is All There Is (WYSIATI) (Kahneman 2011). The response is a function of what associations are momentarily in focal attention, so “most of what gets measured as public opinion does not exist except in the presence of a pollster” (Zaller 1992, 265). All well and good, and an important point lost on many analysts. But this is not an antidote to
motivated reasoning, in which the retrieval of thoughts and feelings is automatically biased in the direction of initial affect, most often by the prior attitude toward the object of evaluation.

We agree with Kruglanski and Boyatzi when they argue that the formation of judgments will rationalize and support the “cognitive goals to which [one] subscribe[s]. Social cognitive theory and research suggest that if one’s current beliefs satisfactorily serve those goals, then one would be more likely to resist new information that contradicts those beliefs (and hence undermines the goals in question).” On the other hand, say Kruglanski and Boyatzi, “where one’s current beliefs are incompatible with one’s goals, one will readily abandon those beliefs and welcome novel information that contradicts them.” They go on to claim that “the explicit motivation in forming any judgment is to get to the truth on a given topic; that is, to render an accurate judgment or arrive at a correct opinion.” Here is where we part company: Thinking about the evidence is treated as “cool reasoning” in search of the truth.

Many people, academics in particular, put great faith in the central route and feel very comfortable in recommending it to others. We are less sure. Note, in particular, that the ELM, RAS, and AAA models hold that the thoughts that come to mind—whether due to superficial cues or careful reasoning—determine the attitudinal response. These persuasion models are at heart metacognitive (thoughts about thoughts) response models in which one considers, evaluates, and potentially rejects considerations based on how useful or applicable they are to current goals (Petty and Briñol 2010). As such, they put conscious goals at the helm of information processing, which in our view of the rationalizing voter is exactly backwards. Moreover, these models assume that a large enough set of considerations is available and accessible in memory so that sampling procedures will generate ambivalence, which is adjudicated by conscious goals. Sometimes this is true, but the modal number of open-ended responses in pre-election NES surveys of candidates is zero or one, and more often than not the response is a simple “I like him (her, it).” Not much ambivalence to mull over.

No doubt, framing effects are real and robust. But the processes that are assumed to produce the effects are causally backwards, in our view. The commonly observed instability of frame-induced opinions (Druckman and Leeper 2012) is an artifact of (1) encouraging in-depth processing, (2) relying on the retrieval and application of cognitive instead of affective associations, and (3) explaining changes in preferences
by means of conscious considerations. This cognitive-appraisal perspec-
tive is in sharp contrast to an important thrust of contemporary social-
psychological research on the effects of automatic “hot cognition” on
memory and judgment (Zajonc 1984; Bargh et al. 1992; Bargh 2007;
Fazio 2001; Lodge and Taber forthcoming). In this research, it is assumed
that all social-psychological concepts that have been evaluated in the past
are affectively tagged and that this charge enters the decision stream
spontaneously.

A related criticism, found most directly in the commentary by Ross,
concerns the relationship between accuracy and directional or “partisan”
goals and whether there is clear evidence to support our affective
interpretation over cognitive explanations of belief perseverance. Ross
points out that “the term ‘motivational’ refers to something broader than
that encompassed by [our] findings; we cannot assume that people persist
in their views simply because of some emotional attachment to them.”
The very fact that the participants in our studies spent more time and
worked harder to disconfirm challenging arguments suggests a strong
accuracy motivation, and seems inconsistent with a purely directional
interpretation.

We agree that strong accuracy motivations often coexist with strong
directional motivations, but we suspect that we do not agree with some
of our commentators on which is the dog and which the tail. People
with strong priors are motivated to arrive at a “truth” or defensible
position that is consistent with those priors. They are not motivated to lie
to themselves, and in that sense they follow an accuracy motivation, but
most often accuracy goals remain subservient to partisan goals. And it is
important to point out that the conviction that one’s prior beliefs are
accurate is a frequent source of motivated bias in evaluating new
evidence; this conviction is not a form of accuracy motivation, but most
often is a source of directional motivation. In short, we often believe in
the truth of our priors because we are emotionally attached to them.

Implied within Ross’s discussion of cognitive or affective explanations
of bias and belief persistence is a question about the evidence. Is there in
fact clear evidence to favor affect as the primary mover in motivated
reasoning, as we claim? Admittedly, the two motivated skepticism
experiments reported in our target article provide no direct evidence that
would rule out a purely cognitive explanation based on the power of
prior beliefs (rather than affects) to bias the retrieval of considerations.
Indeed, the prior attitudes as measured in these studies could be
interpreted as beliefs rather than feelings. There is, however, some indirect warrant in these studies to believe the causal arrow flies from feelings to thoughts rather than the other way around: When asked to list the thoughts they had when thinking about our arguments, our participants generated a large number of purely affective statements about the arguments (Taber and Lodge, 2006, 763), which suggests this was an affect-laden process. Moreover, as we have just argued, it is not easy to distinguish belief from affect about that belief, and the strength of conviction about the truth of prior beliefs is itself often a function of affect.

Better evidence for the biasing influence of feelings on thinking can be found in the experiments we have conducted with Cengiz Erisen (Erisen, Lodge, and Taber, forthcoming) and the simulation of an electoral campaign done with Sung-youn Kim (Kim, Taber, and Lodge, 2010). The first set of experiments demonstrated a very strong effect of a purely affective prime on the valence of thoughts that were retrieved when thinking about immigration and energy security, with the affective balance of thoughts mediating an ultimate influence on a subsequently reported attitude toward these policy issues. This experiment was designed explicitly to rule out a cognitivist or consciously deliberative interpretation of the biasing effect of prior affect, since the primes used had no relevant semantic meaning (smiley and frowny cartoon faces). The second study, which used artificial electoral agents built to behave as our theory predicts, successfully simulated the behavior of real citizens in the 2000 presidential election as captured in the Annenberg National Election Study. Most telling for current purposes, the affective influence on the retrieval of considerations was essential to the ability of the model to replicate the motivated-reasoning behavior of real citizens. Purely cognitive model specifications were far too responsive to contemporary information to reproduce the persistence of beliefs as found in the survey respondents.

More generally, there is a temptation to align accuracy motivation, central processing, and cognition on one side of the dual-processing framework, with directional motivation, peripheral processing, and affect on the other side. We believe that this is profoundly misleading. Certainly the desire for accuracy motivates deeper central processing, but so can strong affect (e.g., fear); it is clear that cognitive and affective cues both operate on the periphery; and perhaps most surprising (from an Enlightenment view of emotion), feelings as well as cognitions are
critically important to central processing and the desire for accuracy. Finally, an accuracy motivation is not easily disentangled from a directional motivation if new information is evaluated in terms of one’s priors, which may be heavily biased by one’s desires. With this in mind, we now turn to the theoretical framework we have developed to account for a variety of findings in political and social psychology, including our own work on motivated skepticism in processing political arguments as well as the results our commentators cite on framing and persuasion.

**A Theoretical Model of Motivated Reasoning**

The *John Q. Public* (JQP) model of political feeling and thinking rests on a distinction between unconscious (“System 1,” “implicit”) and conscious (“System 2,” “explicit”) processing. System 1 processes are spontaneous, fast, effortless, and operate below conscious awareness, while System 2 processes are slow, deliberative, effortful, and self-aware (Lodge and Taber forthcoming; see also Kahneman 2011 and Haidt 2012). Both explicit and implicit affect will likely be triggered by political communications. Sometimes citizens are consciously aware of an event, for example watching a campaign ad, but people are also responsive to unnoticed primes or cues embedded in messages that register but escape conscious appraisal (e.g., the unappreciated effect of an attractive, squared-jaw, presidential candidate or the impact of American flags beside the podium at a candidate rally).

Figure 1 (modified from Lodge and Taber forthcoming) presents an overview of our account of the evaluation process from the initial, unconscious registration of an event to the generation of an evaluative, perceptual, or behavioral response. The fundamental assumption of the model is that both affective and cognitive reactions to external and internal events are triggered unconsciously, followed spontaneously by the spreading of activation through associative pathways which link thoughts to feelings to behavior, so that very early events, even those that remain invisible to conscious awareness, set the direction for all subsequent processing. This theory—rooted in a node-link associative memory architecture—tracks causal processing over time: a stimulus event spontaneously triggers the stream of processing, proceeding
through affective and then cognitive mediators to the construction of evaluations of political objects and conscious deliberation.

The model claims that all thinking is “hot,” suffused with affect, and that these positive or negative feelings arise automatically within 300–400 milliseconds after exposure to explicit events as well as to unnoticed or unappreciated cues (Morris et al. 2003). It is only at the tail end of this stream of processing that we experience what subjectively seems to be consciously initiated thinking and reasoning (Custers and Aarts 2010; Libet 1985). Note that the conventional model of political reasoning is...
focused on the c-g-h sequence in Figure 1: an event triggers the retrieval of cognitive considerations from memory, from which conscious deliberations are constructed, yielding reasoned evaluations. This is the dominant path of processing in the priming/framing research that our commentators recommend as a counter to motivated reasoning.

Two sources of affect, however, routinely influence the construction of impressions, judgment, and choice: prior attitudes toward the focal object (one’s liking of Obama on seeing him on the TV screen) and incidental affect (positive and/or negative feelings triggered by implicit cues embedded in a message or context). Shortly after the arousal of positive and/or negative feelings, activation will spread along associative pathways from the stimulus object to other semantically and affectively related concepts in LTM.

The hot cognition hypothesis (arrow a) stands at the center of our JQP model of political reasoning in claiming that all political objects that have been perceived in the past are tagged to positive and/or negative feelings in long-term memory. The model treats affect as primary because it arises first in the stream of processing, is unintentional, and is difficult to control. Affect precedes and contextualizes cognition. On mere perception, the decision stream becomes affectively charged, viscerally “hot,” and thereupon embodies our thoughts, providing proprioceptive feedback to mental processing (for example, Damasio 1994). Any subsequent considerations, deliberations, and evaluations are necessarily influenced by early spontaneous affect. From this perspective, the conventional c-g-h pathway (capturing the process of reasoned evaluation) can occur only in the context of hot cognition, and the question then becomes how strong is the influence of affect.

The affect transfer hypothesis (arrows f) postulates that one’s current affective state, whether sparked by an explicit attitude or an unnoticed or unappreciated cue, automatically transfers positive and/or negative feelings to the object of current thought. The affect contagion hypothesis (arrows d and e), rooted in the extensive literature on priming (see Bargh 2007), posits that the immediate affective response (whether intrinsic or incidental) influences the retrieval of considerations from memory. In the context of just-aroused feelings, the retrieval of considerations will be biased in the direction of the valence of initial affect. A flag in the background of a candidate’s speech, the emotive music of a campaign ad, a sunny day, all influence the content and character of thought by favoring the retrieval of affectively congruent considerations while suppressing incongruent ones.
With sufficient time and motivation, the retrieval of a set of considerations can trigger the conscious construction of deliberative reasoning, or central-route processing (Devine 1989; Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2007; Olson and Fazio 2009). Even this seemingly controlled process, labeled *argument construction* (arrow g) in Figure 1, will depend heavily on the earlier processes of hot cognition, spreading activation, and affect contagion. The processes of motivated reasoning, including disconfirmation biases and the active counterarguing of counterattitudinal evidence, invoke these affective biases on memory retrieval (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009).

Citizens might consciously *construct their evaluations* (arrow h) of political figures, groups, or ideas from well-reasoned foundations, as in the conventional c-g-h model. In the context of hot cognition, affect contagion, and affect transfer, however, such cold evaluations will be exceedingly rare. In JQP the reverse causal pathway from evaluation to deliberation dominates. This *rationalization* hypothesis (arrow i) asserts that the causal pathways in Figure 1 that travel through unconscious affect, and in particular the affect-driven evaluation processes, cause most of our deliberation about politics. It is not that citizens are incapable of rational thought in the traditional sense defined by c-g-h links, but there is now evidence that attitudes, behavioral intentions, and even behavior itself arise from automatic, uncontrolled processes set before we begin seriously “thinking” about them. This being the case, deliberation commonly serves to rationalize rather than cause.

The two dashed arrows in Figure 1 represent updating processes through which affect and considerations may be stored back to memory for future use. *Affect updating* (arrow j) allows the feelings and evaluations associated with current unconscious and conscious thought to be linked to objects in memory, where they become the source of future hot cognition. *Belief updating* (arrow k) allows new beliefs or semantic associations to be stored in memory. This might include the creation of new memory objects or new linkages among objects.

This theory of motivated reasoning predicts that both prior attitudes and incidental contextual cues will bias attention to and processing of information in ways that favor acceptance of affectively congruent evidence and rejection of incongruent information. From the perspective of JQP, people automatically update their attitudes toward a variety of social and political objects in real time as they encounter relevant information (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). The process is
autoregressive: Summary judgments are not based on a fresh consideration of all the evidence, but rather on the online tally and the assessment of messages at the instant they are received.

**Priming, Framing, and Motivated Reasoning**

Coronel and Kuklinksi ask whether our online model is compatible with motivated skepticism and suggest that more research is needed to “identify the conditions under which directional (in this case, partisan) motivational systems switch on and off.” It took us seven years to develop and test what we hope is a reasonable account of the processes underlying the motivated defense of one’s priors (see Kim, Taber, and Lodge 2010; Lodge and Taber forthcoming; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). This section will clarify how our JQP theory, sketched above, can explain priming and framing findings, as well as our own motivated-reasoning research.

Long-term memory in JQP is characterized as an associative network (Anderson, 1983; Collins and Loftus, 1975; Collins and Quillian, 1969) as sketched in Figure 2 for the issue of the Patriot Act (keep in mind that a full network in long-term memory would encompass tens of thousands of nodes and links). Druckman and Leeper (forthcoming) use this case as the source of an excellent framing manipulation experiment, and though their emphasis is on the effect of pretreatment influences on experimental subjects, this will serve as a convenient example of a framing study. Our purpose is to illustrate the application of our theory to a framing experiment with results that we fully accept, so we will ignore significant aspects of the design and results in the service of simplicity.

Memory objects in Figure 2 are represented by ovals (issues), rectangles (social entities), rounded rectangles (appraised and stored emotions), and diamonds (behavioral intentions). The thickness of object borders denotes the current level of accessibility, which is responsive to the recency and frequency of prior activation, as well as to activation, which spreads from associated objects and decays rapidly (although some objects remain chronically accessible because of their frequency of activation). Note that in our version of the classic model of associative memory, positive and/or negative valence affect is tagged to all objects and represented by a plus or minus sign of varying darkness to denote the strength of affect (to reduce clutter, we do not include affect toward
behavioral intentions in the figure), so the model can represent univalent (e.g., 9/11) or ambivalent (e.g., Patriot Act) objects. The hypothetical citizen portrayed in Figure 2 has rather weak prior affect toward most objects, with the exception of 9/11 and the memory of anger. This JQP model of memory, which provides the functional architecture for the causal model presented in Figure 1, is formally developed and empirically tested in Kim, Taber, and Lodge 2010 (see also Lodge and Taber forthcoming).

So what is priming in this model? Simply stated, semantic priming is the increase in the accessibility of an object due to the presentation of an associated object. For example, if the phrase “border protection” were presented to our hypothetical citizen, we would predict that the concept “border protection” would become energized, and then activation would spread to the associated concept “security,” which would become more accessible. We would say that “border protection” primed “security.” Since entry into conscious working memory is a function of level of activation, priming is a critically important process that provides relevant information to consciousness.
Of course, priming can be manipulated in the laboratory or in the real world to influence what people consciously think about. As we have explained, affective priming is also very important in our theory, and this occurs through the spreading of activation to concepts that share affective valence with a given prime. For example, priming “cancer” (incidental affect) or “9/11” (intrinsic prior affect) would reliably increase the level of activation of negatively charged memory objects, like “anger” in Figure 2. This is an important process because it constrains the set of considerations that enter subsequent information processing in the direction of initial affect, providing both coherence and persistence to political thought; this persistence is also a major source of motivated bias. Note that semantic and affective priming are not dependent on conscious awareness. The primes we have described would likely have similar effects when presented subliminally, or peripherally, or when their connection to the primed object (target) never enters consciousness.

Framing/persuasion effects are also easily accommodated within this theory. To illustrate, we will continue to build on the Patriot Act case drawn from Druckman and Leeper (forthcoming). The U.S. Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed the Patriot Act shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks; the Act was still a matter of public debate at the time of the study. Some respondents received by random assignment the following (civil liberties) version of the Patriot Act question:

The Patriot Act was enacted in the weeks after September 11, 2001, to strengthen law enforcement powers and technology. Under the Patriot Act, the government has access to citizens’ confidential information from telephone and e-mail communications. As a result, it has sparked numerous controversies and been criticized for weakening the protection of citizens’ civil liberties. What do you think—do you oppose or support the Patriot Act?

Others received a distinct (security) version that asks:

The Patriot Act was enacted in the weeks after September 11, 2001, to strengthen law enforcement powers and technology. Under the Patriot Act, the government has more resources for counterterrorism, surveillance, border protection, and other security policies. As a result, it enables security to identify terrorist plots on American soil and to prevent attacks before they occur. What do you think—do you oppose or support the Patriot Act?
The Druckman and Leeper study, like much of the work taking this competitive framing approach, finds that respondents’ opinions, on average, differ significantly, depending on which version of the question they receive. Those exposed to a civil-liberties frame think twice about their support for the Patriot Act, while those who read about terrorists and security endorse the Act with some enthusiasm. Indeed, the modal finding across many such framing experiments, as in the persuasion experiments from psychology, is that opinions are exceedingly responsive to immediate context and information—WYSIATI—and moreover that the effects decay quickly. As noted by several commentators, these findings appear to be inconsistent with the persistent and resistant citizen of motivated reasoning.

But let’s take a closer look. Druckman and Leeper found that citizens who receive the terrorism version of the Patriot Act question become more supportive of the Act, while those who learned about civil liberties concerns went in the other direction. It seems likely to us that most citizens had rather weak and ambivalent attitudes toward the Patriot Act, while their feelings about 9/11 were clear and strong. In short, many participants in this study probably looked something like our hypothetical citizen in Figure 2, and their responses did not reflect well-established attitudes but rather were constructed piecemeal on the spot from whatever strong and weak considerations were activated by the multiple concepts and affects presented in the complex message. Figure 3 illustrates what JQP predicts would happen if our hypothetical citizen only read the civil liberties frame, and Figure 4 shows the expected result of reading only the security frame. Both predictions result from the straightforward application of concept priming and spreading activation to a particular sub-network within long-term memory, with clear implications for behavioral intentions. Note also that for the participants in the study who had not previously connected the Patriot Act to civil liberties (likely a few) and those in the other condition for whom the security frame was novel (likely not many), the frame served the purpose of informing, and the process for the participant was simple learning (in our theory, the creation of new nodes and links to represent new associations). When you present different information and arguments to different people who do not harbor strong priors, they are likely to be responsive to the information they receive, but their responses will not be grounded in a well-formed, affect-driven knowledge structure and will consequently be quite unstable (Zaller 1992; Bartels 2002).
Our contention is that strong pre-existing attitudes would be more resistant to the discordant frame. Consider a different hypothetical citizen, one who has a strong univalent positive attitude toward the Patriot Act, as shown in Figure 5. If this citizen were presented with Druckman and Leeper’s security frame, we predict she would easily and uncritically accept the argument, resulting in somewhat heightened activation for the security cluster of concepts and a stronger inclination to support the Act. More interesting and in sharp contrast to any of the previous examples, if exposed to the civil-liberties frame, we predict that this pro-Patriot Act citizen would actively recruit counterarguments from memory, bolstering and perhaps even polarizing her original inclination to support the Act. This would result in even more activation for the security concepts than from the security frame itself, as the security concepts are actively used to support the prior attitude. Finally, if this pro-Patriot Act citizen were exposed to arguments from both sides, as in our own motivated-reasoning studies, we would predict that the arguments consistent with priors would be accepted uncritically, while those that challenge priors would trigger deeper processing in the service

Figure 3. Civil Liberties Frame Illustration for Patriot Act
of disconfirmation. The net result from processing a mixed stream of
information, we expect, would be the greatest level of activation for the
affectively consistent and semantically linked set of security arguments
and the greatest likelihood of attitude polarization. In all three cases, the
end pattern of activation would look something like Figure 5, although
the degree of bias would predictably vary as just described.

It isn’t clear how often or how much such experimenter-induced
dissonance would influence the attitudes of ordinary citizens, who appear
to be highly tolerant of, if not oblivious to, holding discrepant beliefs and
incompatible attitudes and who, for the most part, do little politically that
would generate troubling discordant opinions or behavior. Our
commentators are most critical in arguing that by choosing issues which
our participants thought important, repeatedly asking them to think
seriously about the arguments, encouraging them to be even-handed,
and in some studies upping the ante by informing them that they would
have to publicly defend their attitudes, the motivational incentives in our
studies to promote central-route processing were too weak to spark an
in-depth critical evaluation of the arguments. At issue, and a question we
leave hanging, is where in everyday life does the motivation to think about politics come from, if not from the activation and defense of attitudes when the consequences of being wrong are weak to nil?

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Given the sharp distinction we’ve drawn between the cognitive-centered approach to persuasion and our primacy-of-affect model, let us suggest a reconciliation of sorts.

Lerner and Tetlock (2003, 438) propose two types of processing for when decision makers will think carefully. Exploratory thinking is “even handed consideration of alternative points of view,” whereas confirmatory thinking is “a one-sided attempt to rationalize a particular point of view.” Exploratory processing applies when the decision maker evaluates evidence and arguments before having formed a preference. We suggest that this mode of thinking is triggered for many participants in the
framing/persuasion studies, who do not have strong priors on the complex set of new or weakly connected associations found in the manipulated frames. By contrast, our studies generally presented participants with facts, figures, and arguments focused on well-formed pre-existing attitude objects, such as George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, major party and ideological labels, welfare, the death penalty, immigration policies, gun control, and affirmative action. In our studies, mere exposure to an affectively charged object spontaneously activates congruent thoughts and feelings which then drive motivated skepticism and limit the persuasive power of attitudinally incongruent information.

There is room in our theory to accommodate both sets of findings: the instability of beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions is demonstrated by framing/persuasion and priming effects, where even subliminal primes can move attitudinal responses up and down preference scales; the stability of beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions is demonstrated by the motivated-reasoning studies. Much of our research and that of others shows responsiveness to subtle situational and contextual effects, especially when the cues escape conscious awareness, affect is weak, and the network of associations is sparse. Prior attitudes become resistant to information or arguments when they are consciously triggered, affectively strong, and embedded within dense associative networks.

We have little confidence in, and have found little support for, cognitively mediated strategies changing crystallized attitudes and habits. Admittedly, we have spent little time and less effort exploring ways to correct the judgmental biases to which our participants fall prey. The reason for this is not that we believe that biases are unimportant or that biased processing does not have serious behavioral consequences, but that we have become increasingly pessimistic over the course of this research project about the ability of citizens to override their biases when defending strong prior attitudes.

REFERENCES


