POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY AT STONY BROOK: A RETROSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: *During the 1970s and 1980s, political psychologists at the State University of New York at Stony Brook focused political scientists' attention on online processing. Borrowing from the new field of social cognition in psychology, they argued that voters' evaluations of candidates are the products of a summing up of reactions to happenings during a campaign. Voters might not remember the specific events later on, but their running tallies of reactions over the duration of the campaign would ensure that they take the forgotten information into account when entering the voting booth. Later, these same scholars yet again borrowed from (a very changed) psychology, and argued that many people, especially the most politically sophisticated, try to confirm their current political evaluations—for example, by seeking out confirmatory evidence and dismissing evidence that challenges their attitudes. We ask whether online processing and motivated reasoning have the same or different implications for democratic governance, and whether the two empirical perspectives can be reconciled.*

A "new" political psychology emerged in the 1980s and quickly became the most prominent approach to the study of citizen decision making. No single scholar or group of scholars more strongly influenced the shape of this new endeavor than Milton Lodge, Kathleen McGraw, and Charles Taber.

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Several features of this movement differentiate it from previous research programs that attempted to use concepts and methods drawn from psychology to study politics![1] First, political psychologists borrowed freely from a rapidly changing landscape in social and cognitive psychology; more about this below. Second, political psychologists began to undertake experiments to study citizen decision making. The adoption of a method that entails active manipulation of the treatment group helped political psychologists to determine more accurately than before the interactions between the informational environment and basic human mental processes. Third, and undoubtedly a factor in the exponential rise of experimental research, some of the original movers and shakers in the ''new'' political psychology movement included scholars who received Ph.D.s in psychology or who obtained formal post-doctoral training in it. Shanto Iyengar, Jon Krosnik, Kathleen McGraw, David Sears, and Philip Tetlock are names that quickly come to mind.

The Stony Brook (henceforth SB) team began as Lodge and McGraw and later continued as Lodge and Taber. For the most senior member of the team, the road to political psychology was long and circuitous. Lodge began his career as a student of Soviet politics, after which he devoted considerable time and effort to demonstrating the value of incorporating magnitude scales into surveys, an endeavor that likely would have succeeded had implementation not proved difficult. In short, Lodge entered the domain of political psychology as someone with considerable intellectual breadth and experience. McGraw joined the SB faculty as a young psychologist, among the first to be hired by a political-science department. Taber, a political scientist by training, brought to the table an in-depth knowledge of cognitive psychology as well as skills in computational modeling.

Everyone, we think, would agree that the Stony Brook perspective on political psychology is distinctive; yet explicating its defining features proves difficult. Some have suggested that the work is more psychological and less political than most other political-psychology research. It is true that the SB researchers focused largely on the general question of how specific mental processes operated within the context of a political environment. In addition, their experiments closely resemble those conducted by cognitive psychologists, who progress incrementally via a series of related experiments. For example, SB authors faithfully used the study-test memory paradigm borrowed from

memory research for nearly a decade (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Collectively, however, the SB experiments speak loudly and clearly to the role and nature of citizen decision making in democratic governance.

Our argument, in brief, is that the SB research program can be understood only by attending to the broader scholarly context. For the most part, this context consists of changes that were occurring within psychology. SB research consisted of two phases, one on online processing and the other on directed motivated reasoning. Each phase has its own limitations, which underlines the fact that even the best work is not perfect. After considering these limitations and assuming that disciplines do not necessarily progress rationally, we speculate as to how the SB research might have differed had psychologists not lost sight of the idea of motivation during the 1980s and 1990s.

The Context of the Stony Brook Research

SB research took shape during a period of remarkable change in social psychology. That change began with an inexplicable movement away from viewing motivations as the primary basis of beliefs and attitudes; it ended with an equally inexplicable return to them as a driving force in belief and attitude change and formation.

During the1970s and much of the 1980s, a so-called "cognitive revolution" transformed social psychology. At that time, a group of social psychologists, including Russell Fazio, Reed Hastie, Richard Petty, Thomas Srull, and Robert Wyer, shifted the field's emphasis almost entirely to an information-processing perspective. These scholars, and many others, asked questions such as: When, why, and how do people attend to social information? How is this information stored in long-term memory? How and when do people retrieve this information and place it into working memory? As part of this new emphasis, Hastie and Bernadette Park wrote an influential *Psychological Review* article (1986) that distinguished online from memory-based information processing. This article brought the concept of online processing to the fore in psychology.

The psychological research of the 1970s and 1980s stood in stark contrast to prior work, when prominent psychologists such as Leon Festinger (1957) and Elliot Aronson (1968) argued that people seek to

hold consistent beliefs and attitudes, and will do what it takes to ensure consistency when reality challenges either. In this earlier view, it was less the processing of information than the adjustment of opinions to maintain consistency that mattered. With only a little exaggeration, one might say that psychologists in the 1950s and 1960s tended to view people as actively aligning their beliefs and attitudes so as to minimize psychological discomfort, while during the next two decades they came to view people as somewhat mechanically responding to information they happened to receive. In the 1990s, psychology shifted back toward the first view.

After the first of these two shifts, political scientists, like the psychologists from whom they were borrowing, began to approach the study of decision making almost exclusively in terms of information processing. It was during the 1980s and '90s that the SB group published its work on online processing of political information (also see Zaller 1992). Like the psychologists from whom they borrowed, they did not consider how motivations might affect the formation and stability of people's beliefs and attitudes.

Then, just as suddenly as psychologists had abandoned motivation, so did they return to it. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a multitude of theories emerged, bearing names such as "self-affirmation theory" (Steele 1988), "self-evaluation maintenance theory" (Tesser 1988), "self-regulation theory" (Scheier and Carver 1988), and "motivated reasoning" (Kunda 1990). All of these theories placed motivation at their core, and all, despite the introduction of new terms, followed the basic model of cognitive dissonance. The old wine had made a comeback in new bottles. Ziva Kunda's (1990) notion of motivated reasoning emerged as the most prominent of the modern incarnations of cognitive dissonance.

Few if any political scientists have followed developments in psychology more closely than the SB group. Unsurprisingly, therefore, SB research did not let this renewed interest in motivation among psychologists go unnoticed. Lodge and Taber, following Kunda (1987 and 1990), began to explore the processes by which those holding partisan identifications, especially strong ones, maintain their existing beliefs and attitudes. The answer was simple: They seek out confirming information and ignore or refute information that challenges those beliefs and attitudes. This line of work, culminating (for the moment) in "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs" (2006), brought a tidal

wave of change in the questions political scientists asked and the answers they gave. Indeed, tidal wave might be an understatement.

This short discussion of the context and general contours of the SB research provides a basis for understanding why the authors pursued the questions they did, when they did. It does not, however, convey the thought, sustained attention, and logical progression that give meaning to the term "research program."

Online Processing

Quite naturally, the SB online-processing research applied the prevailing posture in social psychology to a political setting, which meant that its driving concerns were with how people encode, store, and retrieve the overwhelming amount of information that is made available during a political campaign. The answer: Rather than storing specific information into long-term memory and, at the time of casting a vote, retrieving this information and placing it into working memory, people instead act as online processors. Although they forget the specifics that influenced their judgments, the specifies nevertheless shape their final judgments via an affective tally, or overall summary evaluation.

The SB researchers did not extensively address questions such as: How often do people actually change their evaluations of candidates during a campaign as a result of online processing? Can some types of information affect the running tally more than others? Do certain kinds of information affect the tallies of some people while different kinds of information affect the tallies of others? Instead, the SB group, like the psychologists from whom they borrowed, explored a general mental process by which ordinary citizens could reasonably perform in their complex informational environments.

The SB scholars published two defining studies on the topic. In Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989, a landmark study on online processing and candidate evaluation, participants were asked to read about a political candidate and his issue positions. They were then given a brief task to distract them and asked to provide affective evaluations of the candidate. Afterwards, they had to recall what they remembered about the candidate. A recognition memory test followed. Participants were shown "old" candidate-issue pairs (pairs of issues that were previously associated with the candidate) and "new" candidate-issue pairs (pairs of issues that had not

been shown during the study phase). Participants were asked to judge whether each candidate-issue pair was "old" or "new." A measure of the online tally was created by summing each participant's likes and dislikes of the candidate's policy positions. A regression analysis showed that online tallies strongly predicted candidate evaluations, while participants' recognition memories for previously seen issue positions did not.

A follow-up study tried to determine whether online processing produced enduring effects by varying the time interval between learning about a candidate and evaluating him (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Participants received information about two candidates and their issue positions. Then, at intervals ranging from one day to one month later, they were asked to provide overall affective evaluations of the candidates. Following the protocols of the earlier study, the authors once again found that participants' online tallies robustly predicted their evaluations of the candidates' issue positions, while recalled facts only marginally predicted them. Now, however, Lodge et al. were able to show that even when the evaluations came within a month or so after the learning phase, online processing worked as advertised. The researchers concluded that a continuously updated, affective tally can effectively substitute for explicit recall of specific information, which people typically have forgotten by the end of a campaign.

Motivated Reasoning

Lodge and Taber's later work echoes the return to motivations in psychology. In contrast to the online-processing research, it focuses on the biases that underlie many citizens' use (or nonuse) of information. In "Motivated Skepticism," the authors argue that citizens, and especially politically sophisticated citizens, ignore politically relevant information that threatens their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes; they find ways to argue against contradictory information; they interpret new information to fit with their prior beliefs and attitudes; and they seek out confirming information.

The paper is based on an experiment in which participants searched for and read arguments that either favored or opposed two policies, affirmative action and gun control. The participants were told that they would be asked to explain each issue to a group of interested students at the end of the study. In reality, the students did not have to present the

issues to anyone. The researchers provided these instructions to promote evenhandedness among the participants as they read the pro and con arguments.

The researchers first obtained participants' prior attitudes on the issues. Participants were then put before computer screens, which allowed them access to sixteen hidden arguments related to affirmative action and gun control. A specific political organization was explicitly identified as the source of each of the hidden arguments. Because participants had previously been told these organizations' stances on the two issues, they could reasonably infer whether a hidden argument supported or opposed a particular stance. They could choose to view up to eight of the sixteen arguments. The researchers recorded the amount of time participants spent reading each chosen argument. After participants had read the arguments, the researchers once again measured their attitudes about them. Later, a subset of participants was asked to reread two pro and two con arguments they had previously selected and to list the thoughts that came to mind.

Taber and Lodge argue that the results show confirmation bias; participants more frequently sought out arguments that supported their initial attitudes than arguments that opposed them. The authors also uncovered what they viewed as a disconfirmation bias; participants spent markedly more time reading incongruent than congruent arguments, and more frequently expressed denigrating thoughts about incongruent arguments. Taber and Lodge interpret the disconfirmation behavior as evidence that individuals actively counterargue positions that threaten their initial priors. Furthermore, Taber and Lodge found attitude polarization—participants' pre-existing attitudes about the issues were stronger after than before they read the arguments. The authors point to the confirmation and disconfirmation biases as the primary causes of polarization. Perhaps most significantly, confirmation and disconfirmation bias and polarization were most prevalent among the politically sophisticated, that is, those most motivated and best able to maintain their prior attitudes.

In retrospect, the Taber-Lodge conclusions about the mental gymnastics of the politically sophisticated members of society ring true. Until the publication of their work, however, political scientists had tended to assume that more political knowledge is always preferable to less. The validity of this assumption depends on the validity of two others: people will use information when they possess it, and they will

use it in an even-handed way. The new SB research not only debunked all three assumptions; it raised questions about where the political intelligence of ordinary citizens actually lies, and, indeed, whether it exists at all.

The Nature of the Evidence

The SB research represents some of the best and, certainly, most influential interdisciplinary work in the general fields of public opinion and political behavior. Both the online-processing and directional motivated-research programs led others to rethink how ordinary citizens evaluate political phenomena, and justifiably so. But just how far do the data allow the authors' conclusions to be pushed?

Consider, first, the SB team's work on online processing. The main implication of online processing is that voters make decisions about candidates based on previously learned information, e.g., issue positions, even when they cannot remember that information. They accomplish this feat by simply reactivating a stored, occasionally updated affective tally. Since the average voter will likely not remember all relevant information previously learned during the updating process—in this case, a political campaign—online processing represents an almost-magical remedy to the problem of information overload.

Demonstrating that an online tally secures *adequate* political decisions in the absence of explicitly stored information, however, is a challenging task. To validate such a claim requires that voters do not remember any previously learned facts about a candidate. If a voter remembers and correctly associates even a single fact with a candidate, the researcher cannot dismiss the possibility that the voter used this explicit information when evaluating the candidate. Only this standard will satisfy the strongest skeptics of online processing.

Not surprisingly, given the nature of social-scientific research, the SB group does not quite reach this standard. Participants, overall, actually demonstrated robust recognition of previously learned information about a candidate when reminded of it (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989, 407, Table 2); and a large portion of participants (40 percent) was able to remember on their own at least one piece of previously given information (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995, 314). That a good number of the participants were able to recollect explicit knowledge

opens the possibility that recalled information undergirds the strong relationship between the online tally and evaluations of candidates. In fact, Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995 (317, Table 2) found that explicitly recalled facts influenced evaluations of one of the two candidates.

One plausible way to eliminate this possible confounding variable would have been to examine separately the subset of participants who did not demonstrate any explicit knowledge of previously learned information during the free recall and recognition tests. A robust relationship between online tallies and candidate evaluations within this subset of participants would have been compelling. It is possible, however, that the small number of cases precluded such an analysis. As the analysis stands, however, one cannot dismiss the possibility that explicit knowledge mediated the relationship between the online tallies and the overall affective evaluations.

Online processing occurs across time, so another possible criticism is that the authors did not provide a sufficient across-time test. Their first study, in particular, used data collected in a one-shot study. To address this problem, the authors undertook a second study in which they examined the impact of the online tally across various time intervals (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Even here, though, one might wonder whether the test was adequate. Using data collected four times over the duration of academic semesters, for example, Dona-Gene Mitchell (2012) found that partisanship completely trumped online processing as the key determinant of her subjects' final choices.

The SB studies of directional motivated reasoning turned the online orthodoxy on its head. Suddenly, in almost herd-like fashion, political scientists began reporting instances of biased decision making, especially among the more politically sophisticated members of the citizenry (Gaines et al. 2007; Lebo and Cassino 2007; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). The citizens described in Taber and Lodge's 2006 *American Journal of Political Science* article, and who many others identified subsequently in their own studies, seemingly did not resemble the citizens the SB group had described earlier.

However, it is possible that the authors overstated the level of directional motivated reasoning. Recall that participants were given false instructions and were explicitly told before the start of the experiment that they were going to present the issues to a group of interested students. Participants presumably had this task in mind as they searched

through various pieces of information about the issues. Why is this important?

Assume, reasonably, that participants knew more about the sides of the issues they favored than about the sides they opposed. Then it would make sense for them to spend more time reading about the sides they opposed, given the prospect of speaking before a group of interested fellow students. At the extreme, they would want to commit information about the opposing side's arguments to memory for purposes of making their anticipated presentations.

It is unfortunate that the researchers did not follow through and require participants to make presentations. Suppose most participants, especially the politically sophisticated, spoke in biased terms before their peers. This would help to confirm that they were driven by directional motivations. If participants did not speak in biased terms, we could not tell whether they were motivated by "accuracy goals" or by "partisan goals" (Taber and Lodge 2006, 756) that were obscured by a felt need to come across as unbiased when presenting before fellow students. Nevertheless, conducting a study where participants were required to make a presentation would speak to the question of whether directional motivated reasoning has consequences for the communication of political information.

More generally, such types of study would begin to identify the conditions under which directional (in this case, partisan) motivational systems switch on and off, be it for sincere or strategic reasons. For example, suppose participants had to present an issue before three different types of groups: a group that had no opinion about the issue, a group whose members' opinions about the issue converged with the sender's view, and a group whose members' opinions about the issue diverged from the sender's position. Would participants consistently express bias across the three groups?

Changing Concepts, Changing Language

Our earlier account portrays the SB scholars as having pursued two distinct programs, one in online processing and another in directional motivated reasoning. The group's publications do reveal a marked change in the concepts and language used, and these changes closely parallel the very real and significant changes that were occurring in

psychology around the same time. In short, "research programs" would appear to describe the SB activities more accurately than "research program."

Yet this conclusion is probably too simplistic. Lodge functioned as senior researcher throughout; he saw and understood the changes occurring in psychology and their implications for his own research. Since all of the work discussed here focuses on citizen decision making, we cannot imagine that he abruptly said goodbye to one endeavor and hello to the other. From this perspective, viewing the SB research as evolutionary makes sense. Of course, only the authors, who have thus far remained silent about the connection, if any, between their online processing and directional motivated reasoning research, can provide an answer. We hope that this *Critical Review* forum will encourage them to do so.

In the meantime, we pose two questions: Do online processing and motivated reasoning, when each is taken on its own terms, imply different conclusions about the quality of citizen decision making? And are the two perspectives fundamentally incompatible or can they be integrated into a single, encompassing framework?

It is tempting to posit that online processing is a good thing, in that it provides citizens a mental process by which to navigate a complex informational environment characterized by countless stimuli and the constant replacement of this week's debates with next week's. Online processing would seem to solve the limited-memory problem as long as the affective tally, at the end of the day, accurately captures the citizen's "true" overall evaluation.

However, the SB scholars' concluding comments about online processing were, as always, cautious. Nowhere do they express unbridled enthusiasm for online processing; nowhere do they proclaim online processing as "the solution," as "the" means by which citizens can and do play a meaningful role in democratic governance generally and in elections specifically. (To be sure, various other scholars later expressed some of the unbridled enthusiasm that the SB scholars did not.)

One might ask why Lodge and colleagues did not exhibit more enthusiasm for online processing. Again, only the authors can say; in the meantime, we offer two speculations. First, the SB group has consistently stated the implications of its results in a conservative fashion. Second and more pertinent, the SB scholars probably recognized what their research had *not* shown. Their experiments did not reveal how people's affective

tallies actually change in reaction to new information; and the experiments did not extensively determine whether different people update in different ways to the same stimuli. More fundamentally, the experiments did not and perhaps could not demonstrate that the final affective tally is, in some sense, "right." Trying to define "right" would have mired Lodge and his colleagues in an irresolvable normative debate, and might have diverted attention from their important empirical findings.

We also wonder whether Lodge and colleagues had begun to suspect, as they approached the end of their online-processing research, that citizens do not respond to new information in neutral and objective ways. Whether they did or did not, their subsequent research convincingly documented the validity of such a suspicion.

Whereas the authors refrain from lauding the virtues of online processing, Taber and Lodge end their primary study of directional motivated reasoning, republished here, on a strongly negative note. They suggest that it cannot be a good thing for citizens to avoid information that challenges their beliefs, or for them to refuse to change beliefs when they are exposed to challenging information. This is especially true when the same information causes supporters and opponents of a particular policy to use mental processes that produce even further divergence in their opinions.

Our interpretation of the SB research is that it would not be completely wrong to conclude that online processing and motivated reasoning raise different implications for the nature and quality of citizen decision making. Nor would it be completely right. This equivocal interpretation arises largely from the authors' reluctance to reach strong, positive conclusions about the value of online processing. They obviously see value in online processing, but one also cannot help but sense some ambivalence on their part, perhaps for the reasons stated above.

This leads to the question of whether online processing and directed motivational reasoning are in fact compatible as conceptions of citizen decision making. If they are not, then most social scientists, as a normative matter, presumably would like to see online processing "win out" in the name of democracy. Empirically, however, to declare the incompatibility of the two research agendas would raise questions about each of them, in light of the context we have provided. Have the SB researchers *merely* been following the fashion in psychology? We seriously doubt it.

On the other hand, online processing and motivated reasoning might not be incompatible at all. Online processing does not require that everyone update similarly in reaction to new information. It does not require that everyone be exposed to such information, or that everyone interpret that information as positive or negative. Nor does it require that citizens change their affective tallies every time a new situation arises during a campaign. The paradigm, in short, does not—as an empirical matter—claim that citizens are pursuing ''accuracy'' rather than partisan goals in their information processing.

We close with two thought experiments. First, suppose that psychologists had not rediscovered motivation during the 1990s. Would political scientists correctly hold a different view about the nature and value of online processing in political decision making? We think so, and we suggest that the resulting consensus would exaggerate the objectivity of citizens' evaluations of political phenomena. Second, suppose that psychologists had not earlier abandoned motivation, in droves, and substituted information processing. Would the concept of online processing have emerged at all? A good guess would be no.

We can only speculate about such matters. We strongly encourage the SB scholars to share their thoughts and views, including when and why their views changed, if they changed at all.

NOTE

1. For a discussion of these previous efforts, see McGuire 1993.

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