

Political Ideology and Persuasion: Systematic and Heuristic Processing Among Liberals And Conservatives

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Two studies explored the relationship between political orientation and the systematic and heuristic processing of persuasive messages. In Experiment 1, liberals, but not conservatives, differentiated between strong and weak arguments in their evaluations of argument quality, indicating the use of systematic processing. In Experiment 2, more attitude change was observed among liberals, than among conservatives, in response to strong messages compared to weak messages, again suggesting the use of systematic processing in liberals. Attitude shift was observed among conservatives, however, in the presence of a source similarity cue, indicating the use of heuristic processing. The results suggest that the divergent psychological motivations of liberals and conservatives lead them to process information in distinct ways and be susceptible to different types of persuasive strategies.

Many people assume that the key to persuasion is the ability to generate strong, compelling arguments that induce agreement in the audience. Indeed, common knowledge dictates that the content of a message determines how persuasive that message will be. In the political world, for example, candidates for office partake in debates, where they articulate their issue positions to voters through reasoned, structured arguments. However, political candidates also employ other strategies to convince voters to support them. Very often they make use of emotional appeals, catchy slogans, and references to group identity to garner support. Political rallies are rife with these types of heuristics-based persuasion tactics. Are strong arguments or gut-level appeals to shared identity more persuasive?

We argue that the answer to this question depends on the political leanings of the audience. Political strategists and social scientists have long recognized that political orientation and ideology determine how the contents of a political message will be received. For example, one expects liberals and conservatives to disagree on the merits and drawbacks of affirmative action or legalized abortion. In this paper, however, we argue that the political orientation of the message recipient also plays a role in determining which persuasion tactics are likely to be most effective, independent of message content. The current studies tested the proposition that political orientation is related to the use of systematic and heuristic processing of

persuasive messages. This notion has clear implications in the political domain, but it has important consequences in daily life as well.

Information Processing and Persuasion

Given the broad relevance of persuasion, it is not surprising that it has been one of the most widely studied processes in social psychology. Decades of persuasion research have emphasized two distinct routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984) the central route involves attempts to change the attitudes of a message recipient through the use of message-relevant information, whereas the peripheral route involves the use of cues that are not directly relevant to the content of the message. When the message recipient cares about the issue at hand and has the cognitive resources available to think about it at length, the central route should be relatively more effective than the peripheral route in producing attitude change. Conversely, when the issue's personal relevance is low, or when the cognitive resources of the message recipient are limited, the peripheral route should produce greater attitude change (e.g., Cacioppo, Petty, Kao & Rodriguez, 1986; DeBono & Snyder, 1992).

In a related model, Chaiken and colleagues emphasized the role of information processing in persuasion, distinguishing between systematic and heuristic processing. Systematic processing

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involves effortful engagement with the content of a message and careful evaluation of the merit or validity of an argument (Chaiken, 1980). For example, an individual might analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a message before deciding whether or not it is valid. The central route to persuasion is most effective when the individual processes the content of the message systematically, which requires cognitive resources and high levels of motivation. Heuristic processing, on the other hand, involves the use of mental shortcuts to arrive at a conclusion quickly and easily, i.e., without having to engage in effortful, in-depth processing of the message itself (Chaiken & Eagly, 1983). For example, the recipient might infer that a message is valid—and change one’s attitudes accordingly—when the message is delivered by an expert source. The length of a message may also serve as a heuristic about its validity, providing the message recipient with a way to reach a conclusion without having to evaluate the quality of the message itself (Chaiken, 1980). Thus, the peripheral route to persuasion is most successful when the recipient of the message engages in heuristic processing, tuning in to external cues to quickly and efficiently evaluate a message.

Research suggests that individuals are more likely to use heuristic processing when they are distracted, when they are unable to, or when they lack the motivation to process information in a thorough, systematic manner. For example, Chen, Schechter, and Chaiken (1996) showed that when participants were motivated to be accurate in forming new opinions about a topic, they processed information systematically and their attitudes were unbiased by their discussion partner’s opinions. When participants were motivated to get along with their discussion partner, and were therefore less concerned about the accuracy of the information they received, they relied on their partner’s opinion in generating their own opinion. Furthermore, Mackie, Worth, and Asuncion (1990) showed that when a message was relevant to participants’ in-group, they processed the message

systematically, and only strong messages led to attitude change. When the message was delivered by a member of the in-group but the content of message was irrelevant to the in-group, participants relied on heuristic processing to respond to the message, accepting the attitudes advocated by the in-group regardless of argument strength.

Research has also identified individual differences in the chronic use of systematic vs. heuristic processing. For example, style of information processing has been linked to the need for cognitive closure, which refers to the psychological motivation to pursue quick and decisive answers to life’s questions (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Individuals who are high on need for closure have been found to rely on heuristic cues to a greater extent than those who are low on need for closure (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983). In other words, if the motivation to reach an immediate conclusion is high, individuals should be more likely to take advantage of any available mental shortcuts to reach a definitive conclusion. On the other hand, individuals who are motivated to think in complex ways should process incoming information more thoroughly, taking care not to jump to conclusions based on incomplete information. In line with this reasoning, research has demonstrated that individuals who score higher on the need for closure (cognition?) SEE COMMENT scale tend to employ systematic processing to a greater extent than those scoring low on the scale (Cacioppo et al., 1986; Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris 1983).

The Psychological Correlates of Political Ideology

After World War II, a vocal group of researchers denounced political ideology as a meaningless construct, claiming that the terms “conservative” and “liberal” were no longer useful politically or psychologically (e.g., Durrheim, 1997; Ray, 1988). Recent research by Jost and others (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost, 2006) has contradicted these claims, demonstrating reliable associations between political ideology and corresponding psychological and political variables. It is becoming

increasingly clear that political ideology is a relevant construct, not only during an election season, but also in a variety of non-political domains. It appears that knowing whether someone is liberal or conservative provides information about how the individual tends to think, feel, and act in daily life. If this is the case, do liberals and conservatives also differ with regard to how they process persuasive messages? The current study serves as one of the first experimental investigations into this question.

In a meta-analysis of 88 previously conducted studies, Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) demonstrated that political ideology is associated with a set of related underlying psychological needs. Specifically, they found that conservatives and liberals differ in terms of the types of epistemic needs that motivate them. Conservatives tend to score higher on need for cognitive closure, which may motivate them to pursue quick, unambiguous answers to life's questions. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to score higher on need for cognition (Sargent, 2004). This means that they may prefer to process information deeply and engage in considerable deliberation before arriving at any definite conclusion.

We propose that the aforementioned psychological differences between conservatives and liberals have implications for their use of systematic and heuristic processing in a persuasion context. Given that liberals tend to have a higher need for cognition, they should be more likely than conservatives to process persuasive messages systematically. Given that conservatives tend to have a higher need for closure, they should be more likely than liberals to process persuasive messages heuristically.

To test these predictions, we asked participants across the country to rate various counterattitudinal arguments in terms of their strength and persuasiveness. Traditional persuasion research paradigms provide participants with strong and weak arguments to determine whether different groups of participants distinguish between the two.

Participants who are able to differentiate between strong and weak arguments are inferred to engage in systematic processing (e.g., Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Accordingly, we hypothesized in Experiment 1 that participants who rated themselves as liberal would differentiate between strong and weak arguments to a greater extent than those who were conservative.

EXPERIMENT 1

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 108 adults from around the United States recruited to an online survey through an advertisement on the Facebook website. Fifty-six of the participants were undergraduates, 24 had recently earned their Bachelor's degrees, and 22 were graduate students.

Design

The study employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between subjects design. Independent variables were participant ideology (conservative or liberal), quality of arguments (strong or weak), and message topic (comprehensive exams or tuition increase). Participant ideology was measured with three items toward the end of the survey asking participants to rate how liberal or conservative they were in general, on economic issues, and on social issues (1=very liberal, 7=very conservative). The item concerning political ideology on economic issues produced the least liberally skewed distribution ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.69$), so we used this item to classify participants as either liberal or conservative. While economically related political issues represent just one subset of the political beliefs that comprise an individual's ideology, we operationalized them because we believe that they serve as a good representation of participants' political orientation. In the participant pool used in this study, the correlation between self-rated general political orientation and self-rated political orientation on economic issues was very high ($r = .817$).

Participants were divided into groups according to the mean and median responses on this measure, whereby those who rated themselves as 1, 2, or 3 were categorized as liberal, and those who rated themselves as 4, 5, 6, or 7 were categorized as conservative. This classification procedure resulted in the 54 most liberal participants being categorized as liberal and the 54 most conservative participants being categorized as conservative. While the assignment of the 4s to the conservative group might appear to some people to make the distribution asymmetrical, the split along both the mean and median justifies the distribution that we used. Furthermore, the inclusion of the 4s in the conservative group actually produced a more difficult test than would their exclusion, since it increased the probability of producing diluted results.

Materials And Procedure

Participants followed a link to the survey and completed it anonymously. In this study, we drew two commonly used topics and 20 arguments (10 for each topic) from previous persuasion studies. Discussion topics were counterbalanced across conditions to allow for generalization of the results beyond a single attitudinal domain. Participants assigned to the “comprehensive exams” topic condition read arguments in favor of implementing comprehensive examinations for college seniors (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Participants in the “tuition increase” topic condition read arguments in favor of increasing tuition at universities (Darke & Chaiken, 2005). Arguments were generally counterattitudinal; college students have been shown to generally oppose both the institution of comprehensive exams and increases in tuition.

Participants evaluated either five strong or five weak arguments about the topic to which they were assigned. Pilot data from previous research showed that these arguments were either strong or weak (see Darke & Chaiken, 2005; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). An example of a strong argument for increasing tuition was that the university could use the extra

revenue to fund the addition of more computer labs and upgrade technology in the classroom. The corresponding weak argument was that the university needed the money to beautify its campus. Participants in the current study rated the strength and persuasiveness of each argument using a 6-point scale (1=not at all, 6=very). They then rated the five arguments as a set on these same dimensions. Finally, they provided information about their political ideology and their level of education.

RESULTS

We hypothesized that liberals would engage in systematic processing to a greater extent than conservatives; an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) supported this prediction. The results revealed that there was a significant main effect of argument quality on participants’ ratings of argument strength ($F(1, 104)=10.47, p=.002$). However, there was a significant interaction between argument quality and participant ideology ($F(1, 104)=4.793, p=.03$), whereby liberals’ ratings of strength differed between the strong- and weak-argument conditions, and conservatives’ ratings of strength did not. A Tukey HSD post-hoc test was used to analyze the differences in overall strength ratings, collapsed across discussion topics. Figure 1 illustrates the results. In line with predictions, liberals rated strong arguments as being significantly stronger ($M=3.21, SD=1.03$) than weak arguments ($M=2.27, SD=.78$), $p=.001$. Conservatives, on the other hand, did not differentiate between strong ($M=2.96, SD=.93$) and weak ($M=2.77, SD=.85$) arguments in terms of their perceived strength, $p=.88$.

A similar pattern was observed for ratings of persuasiveness. As shown in Figure 1, liberals perceived strong arguments to be marginally more persuasive ($M=2.82, SD=1.06$) than weak arguments ($M=2.19, SD=.85$), $p=.06$. Once again, conservatives did not differentiate between the persuasiveness of strong arguments ($M=2.78, SD=.85$) and that of weak arguments ($M=2.57, SD=.90$), $p=.83$. In sum, liberals gave higher ratings to strong arguments

than to weak arguments, but conservatives did not differentiate the arguments based on quality. These findings support our predictions and suggest that liberals engaged in systematic processing, whereas conservatives did not.

DISCUSSION

The results of Experiment 1 supported the prediction that, when faced with a persuasive appeal, liberals would process the information systematically, whereas conservatives would not. The differences in the ratings of strength and persuasiveness of strong and weak arguments among liberals suggest that liberals were systematically processing the content of the arguments. Conservatives, on the other hand, did not differentiate between strong and weak arguments, which suggests that they did not engage in systematic processing. Data on the initial attitudes of the participants toward the discussion topics showed that liberals were slightly more opposed to comprehensive exams and conservatives were slightly more opposed to increases in tuition before reading any of the persuasive arguments. The results held consistent across topics despite these differences, making it highly unlikely that the effects found were due to the particular topics used. Thus, Experiment 1 provides initial evidence in support of the predicted relationship between political orientation and the processing of persuasive messages. However, Experiment 1 did not address the relationship between political orientation and the use of heuristic processing. To test the idea that liberals and conservatives would also differ in the extent to which they drew on heuristic cues in processing persuasive appeals, we conducted Experiment 2.

As previously mentioned, liberals and conservatives tend to differ in the epistemic needs that motivate them (Jost et al., 2003). Given conservatives' higher needs for cognitive consistency, one might expect this group to resist overt persuasive attempts to a greater extent than liberals. It would seem that maintaining consistency in their beliefs

over time should satisfy the elevated epistemic needs for closure observed among conservatives. However, under certain conditions, it may also be possible to satisfy epistemic needs for certainty through attitude change rather than through resistance to persuasion.

How might changing one's attitude in response to a persuasive appeal serve the desire for certainty? According to the theory of shared reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996), satisfying relational needs can simultaneously satisfy epistemic needs. A relational need is the need to relate to others, creating and maintaining social relationships and establishing a sense of shared reality with others. According to some researchers, cognition and social relationships are completely interdependent (Hardin & Conley, 2000). In other words, by establishing a sense of consensus with a relevant other, one is able to experience a sense of certainty in one's thoughts and beliefs (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). When our perceptions are shared with relevant others, transient, ambiguous intuitions become objective reality. Consistent with this reasoning, a recent study found that individuals who had high epistemic motivation (in this case, the desire to acquire knowledge about the situation at hand) aligned their implicit attitudes with the attitudes endorsed by their interaction partner (Lun, Sinclair, Whitchurch, & Glenn, 2007). Furthermore, Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, and De Grada (2006) concluded, on the basis of a broad review of the literature, that a high need for closure, another type of epistemic motivation, led group members to seek shared reality with one another through emphasis on speedy consensus, unambiguous group stances on issues relevant to the group, and opinion uniformity among group members. Based on this collection of research, we hypothesized that conservatives, given their greater needs for epistemic certainty, would be more likely to change their attitudes in response to a persuasive attempt when a favorable relational cue—which could be conceptualized as a type of heuristic—was available.

In Experiment 2, participants were presented with either strong or weak messages in favor of raising tuition at NYU. Half of the participants in each group were also provided with a heuristic cue about the source of the message. Participants in the similarity cue condition were told that they shared their birthday and home state with the person delivering the persuasive message. This similarity manipulation was used because sharing a birthday has been shown to induce feelings of similarity, even though no information about shared attitudes or values is conveyed (Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998). The heuristic used in the present study is interpersonal in nature: information about what similar others think about an issue can be used as a clue as to what individuals themselves should think. This type of cue is most likely to be used by individuals who are motivated to get along with an interaction partner (Chen et al., 1996). The perception of similarity to the source of a message may thereby result in attitude change, even in the absence of strong arguments.

Although the link between this type of relational influence and political orientation has not yet been demonstrated directly, recent research in this domain does suggest that political attitudes shift to reflect the attitudes of significant others (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). In addition, some evidence exists to suggest that conservatives value conformity to a greater extent than liberals do (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Thus, we expected conservatives to be more motivated to share reality with similar others, and to therefore be more likely to succumb to persuasion on the basis of perceived similarity to the source. Accordingly, in Experiment 2, we hypothesized that conservatives' attitudes would shift more in the direction of a persuasive appeal when a similarity cue about the source was available than when such a cue was not provided; we did not expect conservatives' attitudes to change as a function of argument strength. We further hypothesized that liberals' attitudes would shift more in the direction of a persuasive message when argument quality was strong rather than weak; we

did not expect liberals' attitudes to change as a function of perceived similarity.

It is important to note that, in Experiment 1, we assessed the strength attributed to various arguments by participants themselves, rather than the amount of actual change in participants' attitudes. It is possible that an argument would be perceived to be strong and persuasive but not change the attitude of the message recipient. To rule out this possibility, the dependent variable in Experiment 2 was a measure of attitude change subsequent to exposure to persuasion.

EXPERIMENT 2

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 64 undergraduate students (17 men and 47 women) at New York University, who participated in the study in exchange for partial course credit. All participants were currently enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology course, and all participants had completed a large battery of questionnaires at the start of the semester (i.e., a minimum of four weeks prior to the study). The battery assessed (among other psychological variables) participants' self-reported political orientation, date of birth, and home state. The current study was described as an experiment investigating the effects of different modes of communication, and participants were free to sign up for the study from a larger list of studies available to them.

Political orientation was again assessed in terms of self-placement on economic issues, this time using an 11-point ideological spectrum (1=very liberal, 11=very conservative). For the purposes of the current study, we categorized participants as liberal if they fell into the bottom quartile of the student sample distribution on this item and conservative if they fell into the top quartile. Moderates, or the middle two quartiles of the sample, were allowed to participate in the experiment but were excluded from analyses. Liberal and conservative students

who had participated in the battery were also invited to participate in the current study via e-mail. The study was briefly described in the e-mail as a study investigating “Modes of Communication.”

Design

The study employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between subjects design. Independent variables were participant ideology (conservative or liberal), quality of arguments (strong or weak), and similarity cue (similar or non-similar). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two argument quality conditions and one of the two similarity cue conditions, with the following exceptions: Six of the participants in our study had the same home state or birthday as in the generic information used to describe the purported interaction partner presenting the persuasive message—these participants were assigned to the similarity cue condition. This was done to ensure that all participants either shared both a birthday and home state with their partner or did not share either. Five of the participants were international students—these participants were assigned to the no similarity cue condition, because in most cases, it would have been obvious that the partner was not from their home country. The number of participants that deviated from random assignment is somewhat high, but this was unavoidable, given our need to create clear divisions between the levels of perceived similarity in the similarity cue and no similarity cue groups. Furthermore, the participants who were not randomly assigned to a similarity condition were randomly assigned to the argument quality conditions and evenly distributed across ideology conditions, making it unlikely that the lack of random assignment had any systematic effect on the results. The dependent variable was the amount of attitude change in the direction of a persuasive appeal in support of a tuition increase at NYU.

Materials and Procedure

Participants arrived at the laboratory in groups of one to four, expecting to partake in a study called

“Modes of Communication.” A female experimenter provided the following instructions, which provided the basis for our cover story:

“Today we’ll be looking at the effects of different modes of communication. All of you are randomly paired up with another student who’s begun the experiment down the hall. You all [or “you”, or “you both”] have been assigned to the role of “receiver” and your partners down the hall are the “senders.” In this role, you will receive information from your partner, the sender, and you will answer some questions about that information and how it was communicated. There will be three modes of information: written, videotaped, and in-person.

Participants were then led to separate rooms to complete the experiment individually. In reality, all participants were receivers of communication and received information about the same fictitious person.

Initial Attitudes Toward Increasing Tuition

Participants first completed a basic questionnaire about their attitudes toward various topics. One of the topics included in the questionnaire was increasing tuition at NYU. Support for increased tuition was measured on an 8-point scale (1 = strongly oppose, 8 = strongly support). This item provided a baseline measure for attitudes toward a tuition increase. Filler topics included on the questionnaire were Harry Potter, math, plastic surgery, New York City, and classical music.

Similarity Cue Manipulation

Participants were reminded that they would be interacting with their study partner later in the experiment. Each participant was then asked to complete a basic information sheet about him- or her-self. Participants were asked to provide their birthday and home state on this questionnaire. Participants were told that all participants in the study would complete the information sheet, but that only the “receivers” would have access to the responses of their partners.

After completing the information sheet about themselves, participants were handed a bogus information sheet and told that this information sheet had just been completed by their interaction partners. The bogus information sheet had actually been completed by the experimenters prior to the study. Across all conditions, the partner was presented as a male sophomore named Seth. In order to manipulate the presence of a similarity cue, half of the bogus information sheets were completed so as to indicate that Seth was from the same home state as the participant and shared the participant's birthday. The other half of the information sheets indicated that Seth was from Michigan and was born on February 10, 1989.

Similarity Manipulation Check

Each participant then completed a questionnaire about the effectiveness of Seth's information sheet as a written mode of communication. The questionnaire consisted mostly of filler items designed to enhance the study's cover story. Embedded in the questionnaire were manipulation check items assessing the extent to which participants felt similar to their study partner and the extent to which they felt motivated to relate to him.

Persuasive Message

Each participant was instructed to check his or her email for a video message from the purported interaction partner. Participants watched a 7-minute video, supposedly recorded during the same experimental session in another room across the hall. The video featured Seth, the bogus interaction partner (played by a trained actor), explaining the reasons for his support of a tuition increase at NYU. Participants were told that the discussion topic had been chosen by their partners from the list of attitudes they saw at the beginning of the study. In reality, all participants received a message about the same topic. To manipulate argument strength, half of the participants received a video that contained four strong arguments in favor of increasing tuition, and the other half received a

video that contained four weak arguments in favor of increasing tuition. The arguments used here were a subset of the tuition increase arguments used in Experiment 1. Once again, argument strength was previously established (see Darke & Chaiken, 2005). We modified the arguments to a more naturalistic speaking style, but the content and logic used in the arguments was the same as in previous studies. Corresponding pairs of strong and weak arguments shared the same sentence structures and syntax, only changing keywords to alter the content of the message. In order to control for any potential effects of a particular personal or speaking style on attitude change, two different actors were employed to play the role of Seth. Each actor was recorded delivering one video featuring a strong message (i.e., consisting of four strong arguments) and another video featuring a weak message (i.e., consisting of four weak arguments). Videos were reviewed by four observers to ensure that strong and weak videos were virtually identical in terms of non-verbal cues and delivery, and different only in message content. Videos featuring the two actors were counterbalanced across conditions.

Attitudes After Persuasion

Immediately after watching the video, participants completed a questionnaire about the effectiveness of the video as a mode of communication. To enhance the study's cover story, each participant was first asked to select from a list the topic that his or her partner had discussed in the video. Participants were then asked to report their attitudes toward increased tuition a second time. Participants again rated their support for increased tuition on an 8-point scale (1=strongly oppose, 8=strongly support). Finally, the questionnaire asked participants to list their thoughts about the video and evaluate the communication style of their partner.

Before debriefing, participants were probed for suspicion about the study's cover story. They were then informed by the experimenter that there

would be no in-person interaction, fully debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Final persuasion scores were calculated by subtracting participants' Time 1 attitudes toward increasing tuition from their attitudes toward the same issue at Time 2 (i.e., after persuasion). There were no significant differences in attitude change between men and women, $t(62) = -.377$, ns, so gender differences will not be discussed further. Attitude change was comparable across the two actors used in the recording of the persuasive messages, $t(62) = .815$, ns. The manipulation check of the similarity cue indicated that participants in the similarity cue condition did, in fact, feel more similar to their study partner ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.29$) than those in the no similarity cue condition ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(62) = 3.54$, $p < .01$. Ten participants indicated suspicion of the experiment's cover story and were excluded from further analyses. Although this number is somewhat high, the attrition rate was approximately equal across conditions, and therefore likely had little effect on the results.

All data were analyzed using an ANOVA. There was a significant interaction between similarity condition and ideology on persuasion ($F(1, 48) = 5.12$, $p < .03$), whereby the extent of attitude change in conservatives differed depending on similarity cue condition and attitude change in liberals did not. As shown in Figure 2, conservatives in the similarity cue condition ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.67$) shifted their attitudes in favor of increasing tuition to a greater extent than did conservatives in the no similarity cue condition ($M = .09$, $SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 27) = 5.20$, $p < .04$. Conservatives' mean levels of persuasion did not, on the other hand, differ between the strong argument condition ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 2.06$) and the weak argument condition ($M = .78$, $SD = 1.39$), $F(1, 21) = .08$, $p = .78$. These findings suggest that the heuristic cue of source similarity was more effective in inducing persuasion among conservatives than was a strong persuasive message.

Also in line with predictions, liberals were more persuaded by strong arguments ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 1.22$) than by weak arguments ($M = .67$, $SD = .82$), $F(1, 27) = 3.27$, $p = .08$. Although this difference is only marginally significant, we predict it would reach the $p < .05$ alpha level if our sample size (and statistical power) were larger. The mean persuasion scores of liberals who received a similarity cue ($M = .93$, $SD = .88$) did not differ from liberals who did not receive such a cue ($M = 1.07$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1, 27) = .12$, $p = .74$. In other words, strong arguments effectively induced persuasion among liberals, but the heuristic cue of similarity did not have such an effect.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of these two studies supported our hypotheses. In both studies, liberals' susceptibility to persuasion depended primarily on argument strength. Liberals perceived stronger arguments to be stronger than weak arguments in Experiment 1, and they demonstrated greater attitude change in response to a strong message versus a weak message in Experiment 2. Thus, liberals processed persuasive messages in a systematic manner. Conservatives, on the other hand, did not appear to engage in systematic processing, showing no differences between argument strength conditions in perceived argument strength or attitude change.

In the second study, liberals did not demonstrate susceptibility to cues of similarity. Evidently, liberals were more likely to focus on the content of a persuasive message and, conversely, less likely to take advantage of the mental shortcuts that heuristic cues would provide. Further research should elaborate on the current findings by directly establishing and clarifying the role of liberals' psychological needs in their systematic processing. In Experiment 2, conservatives exhibited heuristic processing, shifting their attitudes toward those of an interaction partner when a similarity cue about the source was provided. More research needs to be done to clarify exactly which psychological

Figure 1
 Mean ratings of argument persuasiveness and strength as a function of participant ideology and argument strength.

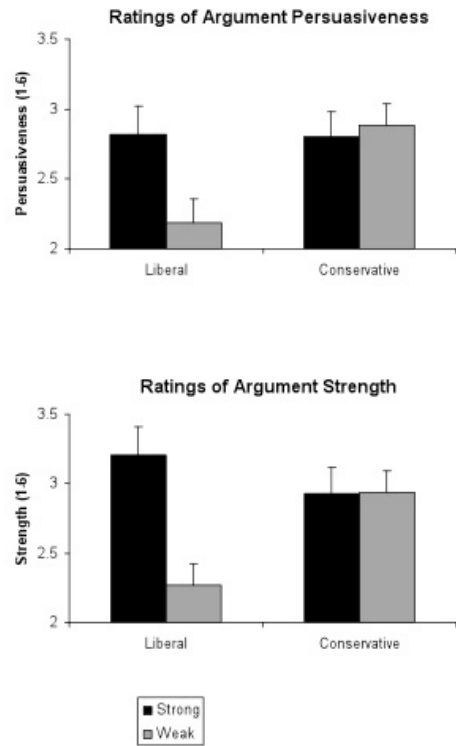
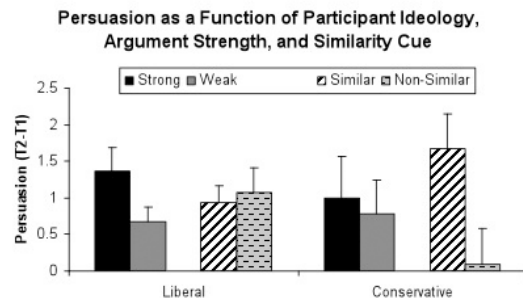


Figure 2
 Mean persuasion in favor of increasing tuition at NYU as a function of participant ideology, argument strength, and similarity cue.



processes are involved when conservatives prioritize the heuristic cues surrounding a message over the content of that message.

The results of this study support the notion that the content of a message is not the only factor that determines how the message is received. The myriad factors involved in the presentation of a message can vastly influence people's response to it. Furthermore, these factors seem to influence different types of people in different ways. It is important to note that systematic processing is not inherently superior to heuristic processing. Depending on the situation, either mode of processing may prove advantageous over the other. Certain decisions may involve complex considerations and require careful weighing of the alternatives, whereas other situations may require quick and efficient decision-making. For example, when buying a new car, it is wise for a consumer to gather information about his or her options ahead of time, rather than depending on the car dealer to provide accurate, trustworthy information. When caught in a fire, on the other hand, stopping to evaluate all of the possible responses will only put the individual in danger; a much more adaptive strategy is to simply follow the cues provided by a firefighter. Both types of processing can be useful in daily life, as individuals navigate through the wealth of information constantly available to them in the environment.

Implications

These two studies are, to our knowledge, the first to directly investigate the relationship between political ideology and the processing of persuasive messages. The findings provided here shed light on the psychological differences between conservative and liberal individuals. In doing so, the current research has significant implications for persuasion research as well as for political psychology and social psychology at large. Ideological groups reflect very real divisions in our society, and membership in such groups has meaningful consequences for the individual. After decades of theoretical

arguments and correlational data, the current study offers experimental evidence in support of the view that political ideology is, in fact, a meaningful construct in the persuasion context and in everyday life. We have demonstrated that ideology can have a substantial influence on interpersonal interaction and on how incoming information is processed. Contrary to what some theorists have claimed (e.g., Durrheim, 1997; Ray, 1988), political ideology remains a meaningful construct in the study of psychology and society at large. The current study provides strong support for this argument.

In light of the consequential implications of the current study, it is important to discuss some of its limitations. One major limitation was the ideological composition of the participant pool in the present studies. Although we attempted to recruit an ideologically balanced group of individuals in Experiment 2, questions remain about the meaning and psychology of conservatism in a politically liberal university in New York City. It is possible that membership in an ideological minority group results in psychological motivations that differ from those that stem from membership in the majority group. We believe that the results from Experiment 2 would be even more pronounced in a more ideologically balanced context. However, we cannot generalize our findings to the American population at large until the results have been replicated in other regions of the country. On the other hand, Experiment 1 was conducted with participants from across the country and led to findings that were consistent with Experiment 2. Further studies in more politically conservative locations and with older participants would help to reinforce the results of the current study.

Another possible limitation in the current study was the way in which political orientation was operationalized. While some might argue that political beliefs about economic issues only capture part of an individual's political ideology, we found them to be highly correlated with general political orientation. Furthermore, American colleges—and NYU in particular—tend to be more socially liberal than

the population at large. There are fewer socially conservative individuals present, and their status as the political minority might make them less likely to be honest about their social beliefs in an experiment. Therefore, categorizing participants based on their beliefs about economically related political issues produced a more ideologically balanced sample and likely led to more accurate self-ratings from participants.

Finally, some might argue that the strong arguments used in the studies could have represented values that were more liberal in nature, rather than being “objectively” more strong, and the weak arguments could have represented values that were more conservative in nature, rather than being “objectively” more weak. However, the current study employed two different discussion topics for Experiment 1 and achieved consistent results across the two topics. For this reason, it seems unlikely that the results observed were uniquely produced by the particular arguments used in the study. Future research should employ a variety of discussion topics to further clarify which types of arguments might be considered “objectively” strong and to confirm whether the pattern of results found in this study is generalizable across different attitudinal domains.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the current study has important implications. Although it is easy to grasp the relevance of political groups in the context of an election season or a political event, it is important to remember that ideology also has consequences in everyday life. In our study, conservatives and liberals processed a persuasive message in two very distinct ways, even though the message content did not involve explicitly political or ideological issues. By showing that differences between liberals and conservatives extend beyond the political domain, we lend support to the psychological perspective on ideology. It is important to recognize that liberals and conservatives take such different approaches to similar problems in society not only because of loyalty to their preferred parties and their positions on political issues, but also

because of different psychological needs that may ultimately manifest in different political attitudes. Furthermore, the topics of discussion used in the current study were highly relevant to the individuals in the sample, rather than arbitrary. Personally relevant topics involve more cognitive elaboration and lead to more cognitive certainty than do personally irrelevant topics, making it more difficult to create attitude change. Our predictions, therefore, stood up to a very difficult test and the results were replicated across two different samples and two different topics of discussion. Above and beyond their utility in the study of psychology, the current results could also inform political strategists and the makers of public policy. Knowing how to tailor persuasive messages to the psychological tendencies of specific political audiences could have a major impact on how political campaigns and new public initiatives gain support.

Future research should examine the extent to which conservatives and liberals rely on various types of heuristic cues, such as source-relevant cues versus message-relevant cues, in their processing

of persuasive messages. The current study only investigated one type of interpersonal heuristic cue, so examination of other heuristic cues is certainly warranted. Future research should also examine the lifespan of the newly formed opinions that arise when individuals engage in systematic versus heuristic processing. It would be interesting to learn whether differences exist in the longevity of the persuasion induced in conservatives as compared to the persuasion induced in liberals. Finally, although the current study employed topics of discussion that have been well established in the body of literature on persuasion, future studies might use a wider variety of topics—perhaps issues that are personally relevant to conservatives, and which might lead conservatives to process more systematically. Until then, it will suffice to know that political ideology plays an important role in our everyday lives, particularly in the realm of information processing, and that it is a subject worthy of the sustained attention of research in psychology. ■

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