

“Hot” Political Cognition: Its Self-, Group-, and System-Serving Purposes

John T. Jost, Erin P. Hennes, and Howard Lavine

Abstract

In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to understand current political controversies without appreciating the extent to which information processing is driven not merely by empirical evidence but also by ideological and other goals. This chapter reviews recent research on “hot” or motivated political cognition. The authors begin by summarizing historical developments in psychology and political science that set the stage for a “motivational turn” in theory and research. Next they turn their attention to three classes of relevant motives (or purposes), namely self-, group-, and system-serving motives. The authors then consider evidence bearing on the possibility that there are ideological asymmetries in motivated political reasoning. Finally, they conclude by suggesting not only that research on motivated social cognition may be useful for understanding political judgment and behavior but also that observing political judgment and behavior may provide new insights into social cognition.

Key Words: motivated reasoning, political cognition, ideology

All of us who are concerned for peace and triumph of reason and justice must be keenly aware how small an influence reason and honest good will exert upon events in the political field.

—Albert Einstein

There has been a palpable resurgence of interest among social psychologists and, more recently, political scientists in the problem of *motivated reasoning*—namely, the processes whereby goals, needs, and desires affect information processing (e.g., Balcells, 2008; Beer, 2012; Ditto, 2009; Kruglanski, 1996, 1999; Kunda, 1990; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Lodge & Taber, 2000; Redlawsk, 2002; Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009). There is no way of knowing whether increased scientific attention to this topic is due, even in small part, to the fact that national (and international) politics seem as nasty, deceptive (or perhaps self-deceptive), and unconstrained by reality as ever. It is difficult, for instance, to understand

current controversies over global climate change, health care reform, immigration, regulation of the financial services industry, and other issues without appreciating the extent to which information processing is driven not merely by empirical evidence or a commitment to accuracy or rationality but also by ideological, partisan, fundraising, and other goals.

In this chapter, we review recent research on “hot” or motivated political cognition in the hope that by illuminating its dynamics we may also develop a better understanding of how to minimize its most pernicious consequences. We cover scholarship in political psychology that takes inspiration from the “motivational turn” in social cognition, including research suggesting that goals operate implicitly or automatically (e.g., Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000; Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Troetschel, 2001; Ferguson, Hassin, & Bargh, 2008; Kruglanski et al., 2002). We begin by summarizing

historical developments in psychology and political science that set the stage for a renewal of interest in motivated political reasoning, and then turn our attention to three classes of motives (i.e., self-, group-, and system-serving motives) that appear to shape information processing in political contexts.

The Cognitive Revolution and Its Aftermath

The cognitive revolution that swept through psychology in the late 1950s (e.g., Allport, 1954; Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956; Chomsky, 1959; Miller, 1956; Simon, 1957) made its mark on political science in the mid-1970s (e.g., Axelrod, 1973, 1976; Jervis, 1976). By the 1980s, psychologically minded political scientists had skillfully and fruitfully applied *information processing* concepts such as bounded rationality, knowledge structures, schemata, construct accessibility, availability, applicability, and semantic priming to the study of elite and mass decision making in policy and electoral arenas (e.g., Conover & Feldman, 1984, 1989; Fiske & Kinder, 1981; Fiske, Kinder, & Larter, 1983; Fiske, Lau, & Smith, 1990; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Larson, 1985; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986). Examples include Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder's (1982) cognitive theory of agenda setting, Lodge and Hamill's (1986) work on schematicity and on-line processing (see also Hamill, Lodge, & Blake, 1985), Lau's (1985, 1989) studies of construct accessibility and valence asymmetry in political evaluation, Tetlock's (1986, 1992) analysis of foreign policy decision making and the relationship between cognitive style and political ideology, and various treatments of heuristic processing and "low information rationality" (e.g., Lupia, 1994; Popkin, 1994).

By the 1990s, a focus on the ingredients of policy attitudes and voting decisions had given way to intense scholarly interest in the ways in which political information is acquired, organized in memory, and retrieved in making political judgments. This led to several valuable insights concerning public opinion and electoral behavior, including the distinction (imported from psychology) between *on-line* and *memory-based* models of political evaluation (Lavine, 2002; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). According to certain on-line models, citizens extract the evaluative implications of political information at the moment of exposure, integrate these into a "running tally," and then proceed to forget the nongist descriptive details (e.g., Lodge, McGraw, & Stroh, 1989). From this perspective, judgments are not necessarily constrained by the pros and cons that citizens can recall; to express an opinion, individuals need

only to retrieve the current value of the on-line tally. This process-focused model of political evaluation forcefully challenged the long-standing assumption that rational political choice flows from information retention and ideological sophistication.

As in social psychology, much work in political cognition assumed that people are "cognitive misers" (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Hamilton, 1981; Tajfel, 1969) who rely on cognitive shortcuts or *heuristics* to simplify problem-solving domains and minimize information processing effort (Kuklinski & Quirk, 2001; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Popkin, 1994). Researchers compiled lengthy lists of heuristics that citizens use, including reliance on political parties, special interest groups, newspaper endorsements, candidate appearance, presidential approval ratings, and feelings about certain social groups (see Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). For example, rather than taking the trouble to learn the details of a complex policy debate, individuals can save time and effort by delegating their judgments to trusted experts who are perceived to share their values (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). Over the years, political scientists have applied insights from cognitively oriented social psychology to an impressive (and ever-expanding) range of domains, including ideological sophistication, political partisanship, candidate perception, issue preferences, voting behavior, racial attitudes, and international relations (Abelson & Levi, 1985; Huckfeldt, Levine, Morgan, & Sprague, 1999; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Ottati, 1994; Jervis, 1993; Lau & Sears, 1986; Lodge & McGraw, 1995; McGuire, 1993; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Readers who wish to learn more about "cold" political cognition—that is, the ways in which nonmotivated information processing mechanisms and constraints affect political judgment and decision making—are directed to several excellent literature reviews (i.e., Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000; Lau, 2003; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Lavine, 2002; McGraw, 2000, 2003; Steenbergen & Lodge, 2003; Taber, 2003).

However, it is important to point out that not all political scientists greeted the cognitive revolution enthusiastically. Some, like Lane (1986, p. 303), were skeptical that information processing paradigms could illuminate the "purposes" of political cognition, asking: "To what ends these schemata, these concepts, and these ideational structures? For what purposes is information processed?" Lane offered several possibilities:

People are doing more than trying "to organize the political world" (Conover & Feldman, 1984); they are making their thoughts more comfortable to themselves; they are watching with a sports fan's eye and passion, impressing others, evaluating a process that, in the end, they cherish; and they are trying to understand and achieve something beyond the election that requires them to enlist their theories, interpret government boundaries and capabilities, and decide who should get what, themselves included. Each of these purposes will give color and tone, transience or durability, shape and content to their political schemata. (pp. 316-317)

Lane's (1986) observations call to mind an earlier distinction between hot and cold cognition (Abelson & Rosenberg, 1958), that is, between information processing that is affected by affective or motivational considerations and purely logical, rational concerns. Today, we would identify Lane's "purposes" as *motives* that guide (or perhaps "bias") cognitive processing (e.g., Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockhart, 1998; Dunning, 1999; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Kruglanski, 1996; Kunda, 1990). The focus of the present chapter is squarely on the role of motivation in political cognition.

The Motivational Turn in Social Cognition

Since Lane's (1986) petition, research in social and political cognition has indeed been "hotter," that is, more attentive to affective and motivational factors. The motivational turn in social cognition was instigated to a considerable extent by the conceptual and empirical work of the late Ziva Kunda (1990), who concluded that "directional goals do affect reasoning" such that individuals "are more likely to arrive at those conclusions that they want to arrive at" (p. 495; see also Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989, 1991; Kunda & Sinclair, 1999; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). As we shall see, this view does not assume that people are indifferent to considerations of accuracy. Rather, people attempt to "strike a workable balance" between getting it right and maintaining preferred conclusions. Other luminaries in social psychology joined Kunda in seeking to clarify the role of motivation in information processing (e.g., Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto et al., 1998; Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; Kruglanski, 1996, 1999; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993; Munro & Ditto, 1997).

It is important to bear in mind that the sudden consensus concerning motivational influences on cognitive processing materialized only after prolonged debate in the field (e.g., see Miller & Ross, 1975; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross & Fletcher, 1985; Tetlock & Levi, 1982). Skeptics asserted that motivational explanations for self-serving forms of bias were unnecessary, because it was possible to explain the results of many studies using principles of information processing such as accessibility or availability. Some researchers countered the skepticism by directly manipulating motivational needs, demonstrating that biased processing was shaped by the motivational significance of the conclusion (e.g., Ditto, Jemmott, & Darley, 1988; Kunda, 1987). For instance, female coffee drinkers were shown to be more resistant to scientific data indicating that caffeine poses a severe health risk for women in comparison with (1) males, (2) females who did not consume caffeine regularly, and (3) females who were told that the health risk of caffeine consumption was not serious (Kunda, 1987).

Once experimental paradigms were developed to demonstrate that nonmotivational (i.e., purely cognitive) explanations failed to explain certain phenomena, attention shifted from determining *whether* motivated reasoning occurs to *how* it occurs. Four major hypotheses emerged from a set of highly influential articles that were published between 1987 and 1996 (see Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). Of central importance to the debate that followed was the question of whether motivation affects the *quantity* or *quality* of information processing (or both).

Quantity-of-Processing Perspectives

Ditto and Lopez's (1992) quantity-of-processing model assumes that individuals possess a finite supply of cognitive resources, which they selectively assign to various problem-solving tasks. Because individuals are loath to accept preference-inconsistent conclusions, they demand more information (and therefore engage in more persistent information processing) before relinquishing their point of view. In an especially clever demonstration, Ditto and Lopez invited participants to test themselves for the presence of a rare enzyme that was allegedly associated with pancreatic disorders. Participants were given a "testing strip" (actually, a plain piece of yellow paper) and instructed to dip the strip in their saliva. Half of the participants were told that the strip would change color after about 20 seconds if

they *did* have the undesirable enzyme, and half were told that the strip would change color if they *did not* have the undesirable enzyme. All participants were asked to place their test strip into an envelope as soon as their test result was clear. As hypothesized, participants for whom a color change was described as a desirable outcome waited significantly longer before accepting their test result, and also engaged in more retesting behaviors than did participants for whom a color change was described as undesirable.

Ditto and Lopez's (1992) *quantity-of-processing* model is broadly consistent with several other models of motivated social cognition. For instance, Kruglanski and Webster (1996) proposed that individuals tend to persist in information processing until a satisfactory conclusion is reached; from that point on, they strive to avoid belief change. This model of "seizing and freezing" makes predictions about the *quality* as well as the quantity of information processing, insofar as the motivation to "seize" upon an acceptable conclusion may affect not only the extent but also the focus and direction of information search, and the motivation to "freeze" may affect the perceived endurance or stability of informational attributes.

Quality-of-Processing Perspectives

Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987) posited that (1) individuals allocate greater information processing resources to preference-inconsistent than preference-consistent information, and (2) inconsistent information is often viewed as less valid and relevant than preference-consistent information. According to their *biased hypothesis testing model*, the desire for accuracy may be trumped by self-serving motives to reach a desired conclusion about oneself or one's situation. Along these lines, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Holt (1985) found that participants who received failure feedback on a test later evaluated a research report concluding that the same test was highly valid as being less well-conducted in comparison with participants who had received success feedback.

Kunda (1990), too, argued that motivation may influence not only the quantity but also the manner of information processing, including the recruitment of different beliefs, inferential rules, and the treatment of certain kinds of information as more or less relevant. For instance, the motive to reach a desired conclusion may facilitate the accessibility of supporting evidence stored in memory. Biased memory search may pertain to the self, to others, or to external events, and it may be pulled in one direction

or another as a function of exposure to information about what is socially desirable in a given situation (e.g., toothbrushing, Ross, McFarland, & Fletcher, 1981; caffeine intake, Sherman & Kunda, 1989, as cited in Kunda, 1990; introversion vs. extraversion, Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). These findings and others suggest that individuals may process different pieces of information selectively depending on the conclusion they wish to reach.

Much of the research in motivated *political* cognition has been influenced by the hybrid approach of Baumeister and Newman (1994), who contrasted the intuitive scientist, who seeks accuracy and understanding, with the intuitive lawyer, who seeks predetermined and preferred conclusions. Their model assumes that goal-directed information processing involves four steps. In Step 1, individuals gather evidence. Here, inferences may be biased by selective attention, confirmatory memory searches, and the tendency to "freeze" on a desired conclusion. In Step 2, the implications of the evidence as gathered are automatically processed. Then, in Step 3, motivation may lead individuals to reassess the evidence and the inferences that can be drawn on the basis of it. The intuitive lawyer may at this point selectively evaluate the evidence and discard that which is deemed inconvenient. Finally, in Step 4, individuals seek to integrate the evidence, differentially weighting various pieces of evidence so as to reach a preferred conclusion.

Accuracy Motivation

Kunda (1990) reviewed evidence that several "nondirectional" goals—including the desire to be accurate (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983; Tetlock, 1983), the need to prolong closure (Kruglanski et al., 1993), and the inclination to process information systematically when it is self-relevant (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)—can produce especially careful, deliberate, effortful, and complex forms of reasoning. Several studies have illustrated that increasing accuracy motivation can indeed produce informational benefits (e.g., Chen, Shechter, & Chaiken, 1996; Thompson, Roman, Moskowitz, Chaiken, & Bargh, 1994). At the same time, accountability pressures and other admonishments to be accurate do sometimes fail, especially in the presence of an insidious bias or a tempting conclusion (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Lord, Lepper, & Preston, 1984).

Kunda (1990) offered the intriguing but worrisome possibility that accuracy goals, when paired with other (directional) goals, could *enhance* rather

than *reduce* bias (see also Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). It may be that personal investment in a given decisional outcome facilitates the construction of justifications, which strengthen the (subjective) case for a preferred outcome while avoiding evidence that supports the nonpreferred conclusion. Although very few studies have pursued this possibility directly, it is in line with certain findings suggesting that political "sophisticates" sometimes engage in biased political reasoning to an even greater extent than less informed citizens (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Duch, Palmer, & Anderson, 2000; Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007; Jacobson, 2010; Kuklinski, Quirk, & Peyton, 2008; Taber et al., 2009; Wells, Reedy, Gastil, & Lee, 2009; these findings are described in more detail below).

Motivated Political Cognition

Drawing on social psychological descriptions of the motivated reasoning process, Taber and Lodge (2006) proposed that all attempts at human reasoning reflect a tension between motivation for *accuracy* and motivation for *belief perseverance*, that is, the desire to maintain one's own preexisting beliefs (e.g., Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). We readily agree that belief perseverance (or "cognitive conservatism"; see Greenwald, 1980) is a powerful psychological motive, but it is by no means the only one that opposes or interferes with accuracy in social and political cognition. There are probably several possible taxonomies of motivational processes, including a tripartite classification of motives according to *self-serving*, *group-serving*, and *system-serving* goals, ends, or purposes (see also Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; Stangor & Jost, 1997). Because almost all of the published research on motivated political cognition has addressed self- or group-serving motives, we focus on these two in the present chapter, before considering a few implications of the possibility that many (and perhaps most) individuals also exhibit system-serving biases.

Self-Serving Motivation in Political Cognition

Thanks to Freud, psychologists were quick to discover that human cognition is biased by ego-defensive needs and tendencies (e.g., Westen, 1998). Self-serving motivational processes were emphasized in so-called functional approaches to social and political attitudes, including Smith, Bruner, and White's (1956) classic, *Opinions and Personality*. The basic idea was that attitudes and beliefs are formed and maintained to the extent

that they satisfy individual needs, such as minimizing intrapsychic conflict, maintaining self-esteem, expressing personal values and identities, obtaining social rewards and avoiding punishments, and advancing material self-interest (see also Katz, 1960; Lavine & Snyder, 1996; Maio & Olson, 2000). Lane (1986), too, noted that political cognition is driven by purposes of "internal adjustment, perhaps to conserve effort ('cognitive misers'), to relieve mental conflict (e.g., balance theory), or to achieve self-consistency or improved self-esteem" (pp. 304–305).

Self-Gratification and Self-Aggrandizement

Consistent with this functional perspective, political psychologists have long argued that political perceptions, preferences, and behaviors serve self-regulatory goals. In seminal works such as *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930), *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (1935), and *Power and Personality* (1948), Harold Lasswell—often credited as the father of political psychology—applied psychodynamic concepts to a broad range of political questions, including the organization of belief systems, the role of political symbols in mass persuasion, personality and democratic character, and styles of political leadership. Perhaps his most important insight was that political ideologies reflect the displacement of private motives and emotions onto public objects, which are then rationalized in terms of the public interest (see also Ascher & Hirschfelder-Ascher, 2005). Political behavior is thus "aimed at self-gratification or aggrandizement but is disguised and rationalized as public-spirited" (Sullivan, Rahn, & Rudolph, 2002, p. 28).

Lasswell's displacement hypothesis anchored a motivational perspective on the nature and origins of political cognition and behavior, and it anticipated several highly influential studies of political leaders and followers, including Fromm's (1941) *Escape from Freedom*, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford's (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, George and George's (1956) *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*, Rokeach's (1960) *The Open and Closed Mind*, and Lane's (1962) *Political Ideology*. Each of these works expresses a neo-Freudian tradition in which the political beliefs of ordinary citizens and the actions of political elites were seen as manifestations of deep-seated (and often unconscious) psychological needs and conflicts. For example, in their monumental study of the intrapsychic roots of anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and fascism, Adorno et al. (1950) hypothesized that future authoritarians

are subjected to rigid and punitive child-rearing practices, resulting in feelings of intense hostility toward parental authority. To protect the dependent child's ego from overwhelming anxiety, these feelings are repressed but manifested unconsciously in the glorification of and submission to parental values, along with displaced aggression toward political, ethnic, and moral outgroups.

Self-esteem continued to play a role in subsequent work in political psychology, with low self-esteem being implicated in (1) racial stereotyping and prejudice (Allport, 1954; Fein & Spencer, 1997); (2) role conformity in decision making among judges (Gibson, 1981); (3) political conservatism (Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; McClosky, 1958; Wilson, 1973); (4) "passive" presidential character (Barber, 1985); (5) low political efficacy and trust among black children (Abramson, 1972); (6) decreased levels of political awareness and increased levels of political cynicism among adolescents (Carmines, 1978); (7) social intolerance (Rokeach, 1960, Sullivan, Marcus, Feldman, & Piereson, 1981); and (8) isolationist (i.e., noninterventionist) attitudes on foreign policy (Sniderman, 1975).

In an influential program of research, Sullivan, Marcus, and their colleagues (Sullivan et al., 1981; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982; see also Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995) demonstrated that low self-esteem heightened intolerance both directly (through the projection of personal inadequacies onto disliked groups) and indirectly (by interfering with the learning of democratic norms). Similarly, Sniderman and Citrin (1971) proposed that isolationist attitudes in foreign policy can provide individuals with "an opportunity to express their fears, suspicions, hostility and self-dislike," and "offers relief from feelings of helplessness and unworthiness" (see also Sniderman, 1975). They demonstrated not only that low self-esteem is tied to isolationist (vs. internationalist) policy preferences and conservative self-identification, but also that self-esteem served to *organize* attitudes in different policy domains, in that intercorrelations among attitudes were diminished by statistically adjusting for self-esteem.

Self-Interest Motivation

An even more obvious basis of political judgment and decision making than self-esteem is *self-interest* motivation. The assumption that political life—and human behavior in general—is fundamentally grounded in the pursuit of self-interest pervades the social and behavioral sciences as well as popular

culture (e.g., Miller, 1999). In economics and politics, for example, the theory of rational choice holds that people are motivated to maximize "utility," that is, to follow those courses of action that are personally advantageous in terms of one's cost-to-benefit ratio (e.g., Downs, 1957; Schumpeter, 1942/1994).

However, the empirical evidence as a whole reveals that rational considerations such as economic self-interest play a fairly minor role in shaping evaluations of issues and candidates, unless the stakes are large and unambiguous (Green & Shapiro, 1994; Sears & Funk, 1991). Most citizens do not seem to be "pocketbook" voters (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981). Kinder and Sears (1985) concluded that "neither losing a job, nor deteriorating family financial conditions, nor pessimism about the family's economic future has much to do with support for policies designed to alleviate personal economic distress" (p. 671). Poor people are seldom more likely and sometimes even less likely than members of the middle class to support liberal or leftist economic policies that would encourage the redistribution of wealth (e.g., Hochschild, 1981; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lane, 1962). The failure of self-interest motivation to predict ordinary citizens' attitudes and behaviors may be attributable, in some cases at least, to other, more salient or proximal psychological motives.

MOTIVATION TO PRESERVE ONE'S PREEXISTING BELIEFS

Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) famously exposed research participants to two research articles—one concluding that capital punishment was an effective homicide deterrent, and one concluding that it was not. Despite the fact that all participants read identical information, participants rated as more convincing and better conducted the article that supported their own prior beliefs and attitudes about capital punishment. Because both proponents and opponents of capital punishment engaged in biased assimilation of the information presented, they strengthened their previous convictions and moved farther apart from one another, apparently exhibiting attitude polarization. Thirty-some years later, a great deal of research in social psychology and political science indicates that people selectively assimilate information that upholds the validity of their current attitudes while resisting information that challenges them (e.g., Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Frey, 1986; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006).