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

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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., Buehlert, 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 descriptively detailed (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:
It is important to bear in mind that the sudden consensus concerning motivational influences on cognitive processing materialized only after protracted 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; Pyzdek & 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-Brunswik, 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, & Pireson, 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, Pireson, & Marcus, 1982; see also Marcus, Sullivan, Thies-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).
Individuals also commonly exhibit a variety of double standards when it comes to processing information that supports versus rejects what they think they already know. For example, people are quicker to accept desirable than undesirable conclusions (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto, Munro, Apanovitch, Scepansky, & Lockhart, 2003) and to assimilate new information that is consistent with prior beliefs while rejecting information that is inconsistent with prior beliefs (e.g., Lord et al., 1979; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Unfortunately, these effects appear to be spontaneous and hold even when individuals are encouraged to be evenhanded and to examine the evidence carefully. Stubborn maintenance of false beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence can be costly to both the individual and society at large (e.g., Myrdal, 1969). At the same time, belief perseverance (or, as Greenwald, 1980, dubbed it, “cognitive conservatism”) may contribute in some way to psychological equanimity and the stability of the self-concept (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Greenwald, 1980; Sherman & Cohen, 2002).

Hypothesis-confirming biases and other belief distortions are especially pervasive when the state of the informational environment is ambiguous and can be reasonably construed in different ways (Bodenhausen, 1988; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Darley & Gross, 1983). Moreover, biases in political perception and judgment are apparently not distributed evenly throughout the population but may be stronger for those who are more ideologically interested, committed, and sophisticated (Bartels, 2008; Duch et al., 2000; Evans & Andersen, 2006; Taber & Lodge, 2006; but see Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). The fact that biased assimilation is often more common for those who are more politically involved and knowledgeable suggests that some false beliefs do not simply reflect suboptimal attempts to acquire accurate knowledge (e.g., deficits in information processing ability) but are instead due to motivational processes, including the desire to defend or justify one’s prior epistemic (and political) commitments. As Gunnar Myrdal (1969) put it, “All ignorance, like all knowledge, tends thus to be opportunistic” (p. 19).

Political scientists have seized on the notion that citizens tend to process political information in ways that enable them to maintain their prior beliefs and opinions (e.g., Redlawsk, 2002; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Wells et al., 2009). For instance, Lodge and Taber (2000) detailed a motivated reasoning model by which an affective tag linked to political objects directs processing of subsequently encountered information (see also Taber, Lodge, & Glathar, 2001). Specifically, they propose that the individual possesses an automatic affective association or “gut reaction” to virtually any political stimulus, and this association, which is stored in long-term memory, biases information processing that pertains to that stimulus. Accordingly, individuals spend more time researching liked than disliked political candidates and take longer to process incongruent than congruent information, apparently so that they can refute undesirable implications (Redlawsk, 2002; see also Kim, Taber, & Lodge, 2010).

Lodge and Taber (2005) also showed that individuals are faster to identify the valence of positive target words (such as “beautiful,” “laughter,” or “rainbow”) when they are immediately preceded by personally liked targets (e.g., “Kennedy,” “Americans,” or “free speech”) than when they are preceded by disliked targets (e.g., “Osama bin Laden,” “terrorists,” or “taxes”). However, this effect disappears when a longer delay between prime and target is introduced, suggesting that the effect operates outside of conscious awareness.

Some studies identify neurocognitive mechanisms that are implicated in the processing of affectively congruent versus incongruent political stimuli. For instance, Morris, Squires, Taber, and Lodge (2003) observed sensitivity to affective incongruence in relation to the N400 component, which has long been associated with semantic incongruence and is believed to reflect the ease with which word meaning can be located in processing a sentence. In their study, targets who were affectively incongruent with participants’ evaluation of political object primes elicited greater N400 amplitude following target onset than did targets who were affectively congruent with the political prime. Westen, Blagov, Harenoki, Kils, and Hamann (2006) also found that confronting threatening information about a preferred political figure was associated with activation of areas of the brain that are linked to emotional processing, such as the lateral and medial orbital prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, insula, and posterior cingulate cortex. These findings were consistent with behavioral data revealing that individuals who were presented with contradictory statements made by preferred politicians tended to downplay the extent of contradiction, compared with reactions to statements made by nonpreferred politicians.

Although the concept of selective exposure has had a long and tendentious history within social
psychology (e.g., Frey, 1986; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Sears & Freedman, 1967), there has been renewed attention to the phenomenon whereby people expose themselves more to attitude-consistent than inconsistent information (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Consistent with Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway's (2003) theory of political conservatism as motivated social cognition, several studies suggest that conservatives and Republicans are more likely than liberals and Democrats to avoid opinion-challenging information, exposing themselves to more one-sided information (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Sears & Freedman, 1967; but see Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009) and engaging in more one-sided political conversations (Mutz, 2006). We will return to this observation in discussing system-serving biases near the end of the chapter.

OVERCOMING SELF-SERVING BIAS THROUGH THE PROCESS OF SELF-AFFIRMATION

Several experiments exploring the implications of Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory have provided compelling evidence that boosting self-esteem can alter the cognitive processes that mediate attitude change on political issues. In one experiment, Cohen, Aronson, and Steele (2000) presented devout supporters and opponents of capital punishment with scientific evidence that contradicted their beliefs about the policy's effectiveness in deterring crime. As in prior research by Lord et al. (1979) and others (e.g., Edwards & Smith 1996; Kunda 1987), participants in the control condition exhibited the typical "disconfirmation" bias: they found flaws in the study's methodology, doubted the integrity of the report's authors, and maintained their preexisting attitudes. Cohen et al. asked whether individuals would be less defensive "if their self-integrity were secured by an affirmation of some alternative source of self-worth? If the motivation to maintain self-integrity is thus satisfied, [would] people be more willing to give up a cherished belief when reason or experience dictates that they should?" (p. 121)

To investigate this possibility, participants assigned to self-affirmation conditions either (1) wrote about a personally important value or (2) were given positive feedback concerning an important skill. As hypothesized, temporarily bolstering individuals' feelings of self-esteem in either of these ways enabled them to respond more open-mindedly to the attitude-discrepant report on capital punishment. That is, they were less critical of the evidence, less likely to suspect bias on the part of the study's authors, and more likely to change their attitudes in the direction of the report's conclusion. This line of research suggests that self-serving biases in political perception and judgment maybe overcome through motivational interventions.

Group-Serving Motivation in Political Cognition

Evidence for the central role of groups can be found in the earliest empirical studies of political behavior (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). For example, the sociologically oriented work of Lazarsfeld and colleagues emphasized economic class, level of urbanization, and religion as the primary determinants of vote preference. It is well understood that sympathies and resentments toward a variety of "visible social groupings"—such as blacks, whites, liberals, conservatives, poor people, businessmen, evangelical Christians, gays, and lesbians—are related to political views, including those based on ideology and partisanship (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Campbell et al., 1960; Conover & Feldman, 1981; Duckitt, 2003).

According to social identity theory, individuals derive a substantial portion of their self-concept (and self-esteem) through associations with social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The heart of the theory is the idea that social identification occurs within an ingroup context and is motivated by a desire for "positive distinctiveness," that is, a desire to view the "ingroup" (one's own group) as distinct from and, in some ways at least, more positive than other relevant groups ("outgroups"). Self-identification (or self-categorization) as an ingroup member thus leads to exaggerated comparisons between ingroup and outgroup that are designed to favor the former, especially under circumstances of intergroup competition. During electoral campaigns and heated policy debates, citizens are especially likely to take on partisan identities (e.g., self-conceptions as Republicans or Democrats) and to approach politics from an "us" versus "them" perspective (Campbell et al., 1960; Green, Palmenquist, & Schickler, 2002).

PARTISAN BIAS

Indeed, the authors of The American Voter (Campbell et al., 1960) long ago proposed that party identification involves a deeply rooted sense of psychological attachment to the group (see also Green et al., 2002). This attachment is understood
primarily as an affective group bond, developed through socialization in early childhood and adolescence, and resulting in a sense of belongingness to a social identity in which the group (or party) is incorporated into the self-concept. The identification process also reflects a cognitive representation of the parties in terms of linkages to salient social groups and a matching of one’s self-conception to an image of the groups associated with each party (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954; Hyman & Singer, 1968; Miller & Wlezien, 1993). For example, feelings of closeness and similarity toward evangelical Christians or the upwardly mobile should facilitate identification with the Republican Party, whereas positive feelings toward the working class or racial minorities should promote identification with the Democrats (cf. Conover & Feldman, 1981). According to Green et al. (2002), potential voters ask themselves the following questions: “What kinds of social groups come to mind as I think about Democrats, Republicans, and Independents? Which assemblage of groups (if any) best describes me?” (p. 8).

Campbell et al. (1960) argued that partisanship not only is a cognitive group bond but also serves as a filter of political information; that is, it “raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (p. 133; see also Berelson et al., 1954). Thus, partisanship and other group attachments are hypothesized to produce systematic biases in how citizens attend to political information and how that information is interpreted, evaluated, and recalled (e.g., Bartels, 2002). As Zaller (1992) put it, “people tend to accept what is congenial to their partisan values and to reject what is not” (p. 241). In this section of the chapter, we review contemporary research indicating that partisanship does indeed act as a perceptual screen, creating biases in information exposure, perception, judgment, and memory.

SELECTIVE EXPOSURE

There are several cognitive mechanisms by which partisan biases in political judgment may occur. First, as described above, partisans may engage in selective exposure, preferentially seeking out information that is favorable toward their own political party and unfavorable toward other parties (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006). Second, they may interpret the same information in different ways, so that their perceptions of reality reflect systematic distortion (e.g., Gaines et al., 2007; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Third, partisans may critically scrutinize and counterargue incongruent information while accepting congruent information at face value (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Frey, 1986; Kruglan ski & Webster, 1996; Lord et al., 1979). Fourth, they may exhibit better recall for information that is congenial (vs. hostile) to their party (cf. Conway & Ross, 1984; Jacobson, 2010).

Perhaps the most efficient way of defending one’s partisan allegiance is to simply avoid potentially threatening information. Several studies suggest that individuals who care about politics routinely employ this strategy. For example, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) randomly attributed political news stories on a variety of topics to one of four media sources: Fox News, NPR, CNN, or the BBC. Participants assigned to the experimental condition were provided with a brief headline of each story along with the news organization’s logo and were then asked to indicate which of the four reports on each issue they would most like to read. Those assigned to a control condition encountered the same stories, but they were not attributed to any news source. Iyengar and Hahn observed that Republicans preferred to read about a story when it was attributed to Fox News, whereas Democrats preferred to read the same story when it was attributed to NPR, CNN, or the BBC (i.e., any outlet but Fox). The degree of selectivity bias was found to be greater for those who were high in political interest.

In another study, Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, and Walker (2008) presented a sample of registered voters in the closing stages of the 2000 presidential election with a multimedia CD-ROM containing an extensive amount of information about the candidates (e.g., issue positions, speeches, party’s platforms, and TV ads aired on behalf of the candidates). The researchers tracked participants’ viewing habits and found evidence of partisan-based selective exposure, but only among conservatives. Specifically, they found that Republicans and conservatives—but not Democrats or liberals—selectively sought out information about their preferred candidate. Several other recent studies of political information seeking have revealed similar ideological asymmetries in selective exposure (Lau, Andersen, & Redlawsk, 2008; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006).

To the extent that selective exposure is a strategic mechanism aimed to reduce anxiety arising from being confronted with unwelcome news, it may be more common in people who are dispositionally or situationally threatened. Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas (2005) exposed individuals who varied in levels of
authoritarianism (see Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005) to one article that was opposed to capital punishment, one that contained arguments in favor of it, and one that contained a mix of arguments on both sides of the issue. The presence or absence of situational threat was varied by a mortality salience induction in which half of the participants thought about the prospect of their own deaths (cf. Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon et al., 1990; see Greenberg, this volume). Lavine et al. found that in the absence of threat, both high and low authoritarians were relatively even handed in the selection of new information; specifically, they preferred the two-sided (balanced) message over either of the one-sided messages. In the presence of threat, however, they found that information-seeking proclivities changed markedly for high but not low authoritarians. Specifically, high authoritarians strongly shifted to the policy-congruent partisan message (and avoided the other two messages), whereas low authoritarians expressed a nearly unanimous preference for the two-sided message. Lavine et al. demonstrated several attitudinal consequences of selective exposure, such as cognitive bolstering of one's initial policy position, more internally consistent attitude-relevant cognitions (i.e., less ambivalence), and increased resistance to attitude change.

It has been suggested not only that politics is more salient to the mass public during presidential campaigns (e.g., Weaver, Gruber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981) but also that “the public may become increasingly aware of the media outlets corresponding to their political predispositions and may switch to more congenial sources” as Election Day approaches (Stroud, 2008, p. 346). Thus, one way to determine whether partisan differences in news preferences reflect directional motives is to examine how patterns of voluntary exposure change as a function of the election cycle. Accordingly, Stroud (2008) used the rolling cross-sectional and panel designs of the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey to examine whether Republicans and Democrats turned increasingly to partisan newspaper, talk radio, TV, and Internet media sources as the 2004 presidential election approached. Each media outlet's political leaning was determined on the basis of editorial endorsements. Stroud found that, as hypothesized, Republicans tuned in more to Fox News (and less to MSNBC and CNN) as the election neared, whereas Democrats showed the reverse pattern.

Partisanship biases have been shown to affect decision making even when the decision is otherwise personally irrelevant. For instance, Munro, Lasane, and Leary (2010) found that participants were more likely to recommend college applicants for admission when they shared their political affiliation than when they supported an opposing party. This effect was statistically mediated by the motivated distortion of ambiguous information, namely the perceived strength and significance of the applicant's letter of recommendation. Other research has demonstrated, not too surprisingly, that participants are more suspicious of ulterior motives held by politicians representing an opposing party than politicians from their own party (Munro, Weih, & Tsai, 2010).

BIASED PERCEPTION

In addition to being selective about information exposure, political partisans may defend and justify their ingroup attachments either by interpreting the same facts in different ways or, more radically, by “seeing” different facts (cf. Lippmann, 1922). In an especially dramatic demonstration of this phenomenon, Caruso, Mead, and Balcetis (2009) found that individuals who opposed Barack Obama (e.g., Republicans) perceived darkened photographs as more representative of the candidate than did those who supported him (e.g., Democrats).

In most elections, the outcome of the vote is almost immediately apparent, but in a significant minority of cases, elections are determined by minute electoral differences. In a few cases, the ballots are subjected to a recount in order to ensure that the winning candidate has been properly identified. The ability of ballot counters to make accurate decisions about voter intent in these cases is of obvious importance for democratically executing the will of the people. But are ballot counters (typically ordinary citizen volunteers) able to exclude the impact of their own preferences from their decisions?

In an experiment involving college students in Ohio (a perennial swing state), Kopko, Bryner, Budziak, Devine, and Nawara (2011) addressed this question by adapting disputed ballots from the Minnesota Senate recount involving Norm Coleman and Al Franken. The authors manipulated whether the disputed ballot had been counted as a Republican or Democratic vote and whether it had been challenged by the Republican or Democratic candidate. Because motivated reasoning has been found to occur more often when (1) the outcome is highly relevant to the individual (e.g., Balcetis & Dunning, 2006; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002) and (2) the stimulus is ambiguous (Kunda, 1990), the authors also manipulated whether the candidates
were fictitious (vs. actual) politicians and whether the instructions for determining voter intent were highly specific or relatively ambiguous. The results of this experiment revealed that individuals are indeed more likely to uphold challenges made by a member of their own political party, especially when the candidates are real (i.e., highly relevant) and the instructions are ambiguous.

BIASED INTERPRETATION

Vallone et al. (1985) exposed pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students to news coverage of the 1982 massacre of civilians in Lebanese refugee camps and found that the two groups “disagreed about the very nature of the stimulus they had viewed” (p. 582). Specifically, the pro-Arab students believed that there were twice as many favorable as unfavorable references to Israel, whereas the pro-Israeli students believed that there were four times as many unfavorable as favorable references! Thus, both sides were convinced that the same media coverage would lead neutral or ambivalent viewers to take the other’s side concerning the massacre.

Gaines et al. (2007) employed a longitudinal research design to examine how Democrats and Republicans would update their factual beliefs about troop casualties and the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as conditions changed from the beginning of the war in March 2003 to December 2004 (just after the final report of the Iraq Survey Group officially concluded that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction [WMD] program had ended in 1996). In terms of group-serving bias, one possibility was that partisans would simply engage in fact avoidance, failing to change their beliefs even after the facts had changed. As Gaines et al. noted, this would have been difficult to do, insofar as the media reported a great deal of information about both troop casualties and the failure to find WMD. A second possibility was that individuals would cope with inconvenient truths, not through outright denial, but through what the authors called meaning avoidance. In this case, beliefs may be updated along with reality, but interpretations of these beliefs are biased so that prior opinions remain relatively unaffected.

This is indeed what Gaines et al. (2007) found: both Republicans and Democrats updated their beliefs about (increased) troop casualties over the 21-month period of the study, but they interpreted facts in a manner that was congenial to their partisan allegiances. For example, as casualties rose, strong Republicans continued to interpret their numbers as “moderate,” “small,” or “very small” (even though they accurately perceived the increase over time). By contrast, Democrats interpreted the number of casualties as “large” or “very large,” consistent with their opposition to the conflict. What about beliefs regarding the existence of WMD? Gaines et al. found that rather than acknowledging that Iraq had ended their WMD program years earlier, a majority of Republicans stated that the weapons must have been moved, destroyed, or not yet found. In sum, as casualties increased and the administration’s principal casus belli for the war was gradually discredited, Republicans shielded themselves from having to rethink their support for the invasion.

SELECTIVE MEMORY

Two lines of research provide evidence that partisan biases in political cognition can arise through selective memory processes. In several surveys conducted between 2006 and 2008, Jacobson (2010) provided compelling, albeit indirect, evidence of memory bias among Democrats regarding the Iraq War. Respondents were asked to recall what their beliefs were about the existence of WMD and whether Saddam Hussein was personally involved in September 11 prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. By comparing these recollections to later survey data, Jacobson demonstrated a hefty dose of memory bias among Democrats. Specifically, he reported that in eight surveys taken before the invasion, between 57% and 83% of Democrats believed that Iraq possessed WMD; the average was 71%. In later surveys, less than half the Democrats remembered subscribing to this view; the average difference between their recalled views on WMD in 2006 and 2008 and those expressed in the surveys taken before the war was 38 percentage points. Republicans’ beliefs during the later period more closely matched those observed in prewar surveys, possibly indicating belief perseverance.

Bullock (2006) conducted a series of experiments using real-world political events in which he demonstrated a boundary condition on the classic belief perseverance effect: false beliefs influence people’s political opinions even after those beliefs have been discredited, insofar as continuing to hold them facilitates one’s partisan goals. As a simple matter of logic, when new evidence discredits old information, attitudes should cease to reflect the old information. However, we know from much research that false beliefs persist, presumably because the initial evidence triggers related ideas in long-term memory, and those ideas are used to explain the
Bullock's first study concerned an article in the May 9, 2005 edition of *Newsweek* detailing abuses of Muslim prisoners by U.S. interrogators at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The article charged that interrogators had “flushed a Qur'an down a toilet.” The claim was publicized in local media outlets in Afghanistan and Pakistan, triggering several days of anti-American rioting. The charges were quickly denied by the Pentagon, and in its next edition, *Newsweek* issued a retraction, writing that “Based on what we now know, we are retracting our original story that an internal military investigation had uncovered Qur'an abuse at Guantánamo Bay.” To determine whether partisanship moderated belief perseverance—that is, to see whether Democrats in this case continued to give credence to the evidence after it had been discredited—Bullock instructed two groups of participants to read the original *Newsweek* article. Several minutes later (after completing a series of unrelated tasks), those assigned to the treatment condition learned that the magazine had later retracted the central claim of the initial article. Subjects were then asked whether they approved, disapproved, or neither approved nor disapproved of the handling of detainees at Guantánamo Bay. As hypothesized, Democratic partisans exhibited an attitude perseverance effect; they maintained their negative attitudes toward the detention policy, even after learning that the abuse claim had been retracted.

Bullock (2006) conducted a second experiment based on a television ad released on August 8, 2005 by NARAL Pro-Choice America that accused the Supreme Court nominee John Roberts of “supporting a violent fringe group and a convicted clinic bomber.” The ad was quickly criticized as untrue (which it was), and it was taken off the air the next day. At the outset of the experiment, Bullock explained who John Roberts was, including that he had been nominated by George W. Bush to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court. Participants assigned to the control condition simply expressed their attitudes toward Roberts. Those assigned to the treatment condition read the transcript of the NARAL ad, expressed their attitudes toward Roberts, and then were informed that the ad had been withdrawn and that a prominent Democrat had criticized the ad as deceptive before expressing their attitudes toward Roberts again. Results revealed that the ad heightened disapproval of Roberts among both Republicans and Democrats. However, when the ad was discredited, the attitudes of Republicans resembled those expressed by the control group. Democrats, however, were more likely to disapprove of Roberts in the treatment condition (76%) than in the control condition (56%). These highly ecologically valid experiments demonstrate that belief perseverance can affect real-world political attitudes, and most importantly, that it is a motivated bias that can be both self-serving and group serving.

**EVALUATION OF POLITICIANS**

Political psychologists have examined how personality impressions of political candidates are biased by partisanship. Previous work has established that candidates are judged along four major trait dimensions: competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy (Funk, 1996; Kinder, 1986). Drawing on national survey data, Goren (2002) identified the perceived weaknesses of presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton by finding the trait on which the public gave them lowest marks. For example, Reagan and Bush received their lowest ratings on empathy, whereas Clinton’s lowest rating was on integrity. Goren found that partisan opponents (vs. supporters) elevated the importance of a candidate’s character weakness in rendering overall evaluations. For each of the three candidates, political partisanship (Democrat vs. Republican) interacted in the predicted direction with specific traits in predicting overall candidate evaluations. Thus, Democrats relied more than Republicans on the trait of empathy in judging Reagan and Bush, and Republicans relied more than Democrats on integrity in judging Clinton. Interestingly, these partisan asymmetries in trait usage were limited to those traits on which the public rated the candidate the lowest.

Given the potentially explosive political impact of scandals, it is important to understand how individuals perceive and evaluate them. In relatively well-known scandals such as Watergate and the Lewinsky affair, is the evidence (and its political implications) so overwhelmingly clear that partisan biases can only exert a modest impact on mass responses? Or do perceptions and evaluations substantially depend on prior attitudes toward the president (i.e., partisanship, ideology)? Two studies using panel data—in which responses were collected both before and after a scandal broke—suggest that impressions of scandal are indelibly shaped by pre-existing attitudes.

Sweeney and Gruber (1984) examined how Nixon, McGovern, and Independent voters reacted to Watergate. Most of their analyses addressed the
question of whether selective exposure occurred; it did. Nixon voters paid less attention to the scandal and knew less about it than did the other respondent groups. The researchers also observed evidence of selective judgment. In particular, Nixon voters were less likely to believe that Nixon should resign than either McGovern supporters or Independents, and they were less likely to believe that Nixon had lost credibility.

Conversely, a study of the Lewinsky affair by Fischle (2000) indicated that Democrats were more likely than Republicans to believe that the scandal was a right-wing conspiracy, that it lacked credibility, and that it was unimportant as a determinant of candidate attitudes. Fischle concluded that respondents “processed the evidence in such a way as to construct seemingly reasonable justifications for the things they believed and wanted to continue to believe” (p. 151).

**EFFECT OF EDUCATION ON SELF-AND GROUP-SERVING BIAS**

Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2009) found that educated individuals held more accurate beliefs on a range of factual issues, including whether the United States found WMD in Iraq, whether most scientists believe in evolution, whether the earth is getting warmer because of human activity, and whether the 2006 troop surge in Iraq had positive or negative consequences. Although in each case education promoted accuracy, its effect was entirely conditional on party identification. Specifically, when the factually correct answer favored Democrats (e.g., WMD, evolution, global warming), partisan motivation trumped the informational effect of education such that the latter strongly heightened accuracy among Democrats but failed to heighten—and even reduced—accuracy among Republicans. When the correct answer favored the Republican position (e.g., change in levels of violence in Iraq following the troop surge), the opposite pattern prevailed.

**System-Serving Motivation in Political Cognition**

To this point, we have reviewed evidence indicating that self-interest and group interest can and do motivate political cognition. At the same time, converging evidence from a variety of subdisciplines reveals that these are not the only influences on political judgment, evaluation, and decision making. Citizens often think and act in ways that maintain existing social, economic, and political arrangements (i.e., the status quo)—even if alternatives might be better for them as individuals or as members of social groups. For instance, it is rare for protest movements (such as the “Occupy Wall Street” movement) to win the support of most citizens, even if the attainment of the movement’s goals would materially benefit the majority. In this section, we briefly review three potentially related classes of system-serving motivational influences: sociotropic concerns, status quo bias, and system justification.

**SOCIOTROPIC CONCERNS**

Political scientists have long noted that indicators of personal (especially economic) interests (e.g., social class) are not strongly predictive of political preferences and behaviors (e.g., Green & Shapiro, 1994; Sears & Funk 1991). For instance, Kinder and Kiewiet (1979, 1981) demonstrated that voting in congressional and presidential elections (as well as party affiliation more generally) are only weakly influenced by so-called pocketbook considerations (i.e., economic self-interest). Rather, perceptions of national economic health, and other types of prosocial (or “sociotropic”) concerns, are stronger determinants of voting behavior. In addition, citizens frequently respond differently (and more powerfully) to “sociotropic threat”—defined by Davis and Silver (2004, p. 34) as a “generalized anxiety and sense of threat to society as a whole, the country as a whole, or the region in which one lives”—than to an egocentric “sense of threat to oneself and one’s family” (see also Gibson, 2006). Although recent research paints a fairly complex portrait of the relationship between self-interest and sociotropic interests (e.g., Arceneaux, 2003; Gomez & Wilson 2003; Nicholson & Segura, 1999; Radcliff, 1994), the research literature as a whole shows rather convincingly that self-interested, instrumental motives are far from the only determinants of political preferences and actions (see also Tyler, 2006).

Studies suggest that the more an individual confers legitimacy on a given institution or authority (such as the police force or the Supreme Court), the more likely he or she is to defer to decisions rendered by that authority, even if the decision is regarded as personally unfavorable (e.g., Gibson, 2008; Jost & Major, 2001; Tyler, 2006). For example, Gibson (2007) found that most Americans hold the Supreme Court in high esteem; as a result, they tend to support the Court and its decisions, even when they are cognizant that ideological and other biases sometimes interfere with judicial decision making. Moreover, those who are most knowledgeable
about legal matters are especially likely to perceive the Supreme Court as highly legitimate (Gibson & Caldeira, 2011), suggesting either that the institution is deserving of its widespread support or that those most invested in a given system are also the most motivated to defend it (cf. Taber et al., 2009).

**STATUS QUO BIAS**

More or less concomitantly, cognitive psychologists and behavioral economists have explored numerous “anomalies” by which individuals make decisions that violate their own self-interest. One of the most frequently explored phenomena has to do with preferences to “do nothing or maintain...one's current or previous decision” (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988, p. 1). In several studies, Samuelson and Zeckhauser found that most people stick with status quo options more often than would be expected on the basis of chance, and this “status quo bias” is magnified as the number of alternatives is increased (see also Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990).

These and related findings have often been explained in terms of Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theory, which posits that individuals often “anchor” on the existing state of affairs, using the status quo as a “reference point” against which all alternatives are compared. The theory also assumes that “losses loom larger than gains”; that is, individuals tend to weigh potential losses (or negative changes) more heavily than equivalent gains. As a result, most people are risk averse when evaluating status quo options. These psychological assumptions have also been used to explain “incumbency bias”—the tendency for voters to disproportionately return previously elected politicians to office (e.g., Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). That is, risk aversion and status quo bias appear to magnify incumbents’ electoral advantages over challengers—above and beyond differences in perceived experience, name recognition, committee ranking privileges, and fundraising capabilities (Abramowitz, 1975, 1991; Cover & Brumberg, 1982).

Moshinsky and Bar-Hillel (2010) demonstrated that merely labeling an option as the status quo is sufficient to increase its endorsement. The researchers selected obscure Israeli laws, created realistic alternatives, and randomly assigned citizens to experimental conditions in which they were informed either that the actual law or the make-believe alternative was in fact the legal status quo. Across a wide range of public policies, respondents preferred a given law more when they believed that it represented the current state of affairs than when they believed that the same law was merely a hypothetical alternative.

Apparently, people also assume that the way things are is the way they should be (Heider, 1958; Kay et al., 2009) and that the status quo is morally superior to alternatives (Friedrich, Kierniesky, & Cardon, 1989). Eidelman, Crandall, and Pattershall (2009) found that individuals often judge existing states of reality to be better and more desirable than nonexistent alternative possibilities. For instance, participants evaluated a “galaxy” representation (which was actually a random plot of stars) to be more visually appealing when they were led to believe that it was similar in shape to 80% (vs. 40% or 60%) of the other galaxies in the universe. Eidelman and colleagues have dubbed this phenomenon the “existence bias.” Related work by Crandall, Eidelman, Skitka, and Morgan (2009) demonstrated that U.S. citizens are more supportive of the use of torture in military interrogations when they are led to believe that it is a long-standing (vs. recent) practice in the U.S. military.

**CULTURAL COGNITION**

Legal scholars have also taken notice of the tendency for individuals to uphold culturally prevalent ideals. For instance, Kahan and colleagues (e.g., Kahan, 2009; Kahan & Braman, 2006; Kahan, Braman, Cohen, Slovic, & Gastil, 2011; Kahan, Braman, Gastil, Slovic, & Cohen, 2009; Kahan, Braman, Monahan, Callahan, & Peters, 2010; Kahan, Braman, Slovic, Gastil, & Mertz, 2007) have argued that individuals’ perceptions of environmental risks and social issues are shaped by moral and ideological assumptions (see also McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Ulhmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009). According to their theory, cultural worldviews vary in terms of two cross-cutting dimensions, namely hierarchy—egalitarianism and individualism—communitarianism. The first dimension is measured using items such as, “Our society would be better off if the distribution of wealth were more equal,” and the second by items such as, “The government should do more to advance society’s goals, even if that means limiting the freedom and choices of individuals.” In practice, these two dimensions are usually collapsed to compare individuals who are classified as “hierarchical individualists” with those classified as “egalitarian communitarians.” These classifications do predict risk evaluations and skepticism about science in relation to several issues, including global climate change (cf. McCright & Dunlap, 2011).
SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION

Although some explanations for the tendency to prefer current (vs. alternative) states of affairs have emphasized purely cognitive mechanisms (e.g., Eidelman et al., 2009; Quattrone & Tversky, 1988), system justification theory posits that epistemic needs to reduce uncertainty, existential needs to manage threat, and relational needs to achieve shared reality with others contribute to a fairly powerful motivational tendency to defend, bolster, and justify existing social, economic, and political systems (Jost et al., 2010). The idea, in other words, is that individuals want to perceive the status quo as relative good and just, even if it is not objectively so. In accordance with this notion, Kay et al. (2009) demonstrated that by activating system justification motivation (e.g., by exposing research participants to criticisms of the overarching social system), it is possible to increase the extent to which people “injusticify” the status quo, that is, describe it in the most desirable and reasonable state of affairs.

Consistent with the notion that system-justifying biases affect information processing, an experiment by Haines and Jost (2000) revealed that individuals exhibit a tendency to misremember reasons for their own group’s (experimentally induced) situation of powerlessness as being fair and legitimate—even when they had been given an illogical explanation (e.g., nepotism) or no explanation whatsoever for the power differential. Research by Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, and Pohl (2011) indicated that individuals evaluate scientific data as more persuasive when it supports the “American Dream” notion that hard work leads to success (vs. does not lead to success). This effect—which was exhibited even by those who explicitly disavowed the notion that the United States is highly meritocratic in practice—was exacerbated by exposure to system threat passages, consistent with the idea that people are motivated to defend the system against criticism and attack (see also Jost et al., 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005).

Recent studies suggest that system-relevant motivations, such as system justification, the desire to believe in a “just world,” and “cultural cognition” (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Lerner, 1980; Kahan et al., 2010), play a significant role in motivated reasoning about scientific information, such as information about environmental problems linked to anthropogenic climate change. Specifically, individuals who endorse political conservatism, hierarchical and individualistic worldviews, and other system-justifying belief systems express greater denial and ignorance than others when it comes to facts about global warming (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Kahan et al., 2010; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Similarly, those who score higher on the Belief in a Just World Scale are more likely to deny environmental problems—especially when they have been exposed to dire global warming messages (Feinberg & Willer, 2011).

There is growing reason to think that motivated social cognition may mediate the relationship between system justification and environmental attitudes. Specifically, Hennes and Jost (2010) found that chronic and temporary heightening of system justification motivation predicted greater skepticism of scientific evidence concerning climate change reported in a newspaper article and poorer memory for details from the article. Furthermore, memory distortions were system serving; that is, they occurred in a manner that justified inaction and facilitated denial and minimization of the problem. System justification motivation also affects somatosensory perceptions of the climate, such that high system justifiers perceive the outside temperature in summer to be lower, in comparison with low system justifiers (Hennes, Feygina, & Jost, 2011).

Are There Ideological Asymmetries in Motivated Political Cognition?

If we are correct that there are three relevant sources of motivation rather than just two (as previous reviews have assumed), it follows that motivated reasoning should occur most strongly for those whose preexisting beliefs are conservative or system serving in nature. That is, conservatives should be especially likely to exhibit all three types of biases, whereas progressives would be expected to display self- and group-serving biases but not (to the same extent) system-serving biases. In fact, several studies, which we review here, do suggest that conservative defenders of the status quo are more biased and less accurate than are liberals, progressives, and those who seek to challenge the status quo. Conservatives also tend to score higher on measures of self-deception, in comparison with liberals and moderates (Jost et al., 2010; see also Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003).

To begin with, a research program by Keltner and Robinson (1996, 1997) demonstrated that although defenders and challengers of the status quo frequently exaggerate the degree of ideological polarization that separates them, defenders of the status quo are consistently more likely than challengers to misperceive their ideological opponents, that
is, to see them as more extreme than they actually are (see also Robinson & Keltner, 1996; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995; Snideman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; but see Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006). For instance, English professors who favored a relatively conservative, highly traditional syllabus (i.e., “traditionalists”) significantly overestimated the attitudinal extremity of English professors who favored a syllabus that included greater representation by women and minority authors (i.e., “revisionists”; see Robinson & Keltner, 1996). Traditionalists also assumed that revisionists would choose none of the same books for their classes that traditionalists would choose. However, out of 15 books, revisionists and traditionalists actually shared 7 books (and revisionists correctly identified 6 of these). The researchers proposed that asymmetrical bias occurred because defenders of the status quo are more likely to possess, and therefore be motivated to preserve, power. If this proposal is correct, the findings from these studies are consistent with those suggesting that high-power individuals are more biased judges of low-power targets than vice versa (e.g., Chance, 1967; Fiske, 1993; but see Overbeck & Park, 2001).

As noted above, it has been discovered repeatedly that conservatives and Republicans are more likely than liberals and Democrats to actively avoid or dismiss opinion-challenging information. For example, conservatives are more likely than liberals to expose themselves to one-sided informational campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2008; Sears & Freedman, 1967) and to engage in one-sided political conversations (Mutz, 2006; but see Knobloch-Westervick & Meng, 2009, for an exception). In most laboratory studies, research participants are fairly constrained in terms of opportunities for information exposure, whereas citizens in daily life possess a great deal of control over their academic, interpersonal, and media sources of political information. Garrett (2009) provides some evidence that in naturalistic settings, liberals are more likely than conservatives to seek out two-sided opinions. Experimental research by Bullock (2011) found that Democrats were more sensitive to information about policy content, whereas Republicans were more sensitive to partisan cues.

Nyhan and Reifler (2010) investigated how individuals respond to new information suggesting that previous media reports had been erroneous. Participants in their study read a news article addressing a controversial question, namely the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Half of the participants were later presented with a “correction” to the original news article, whereas the other half were not. For conservatives (but not liberals), reading the correction actually strengthened misperceptions elicited by the original article (see also Karasawa, 1998, for a parallel effect involving social stereotypes). This finding should be interpreted with caution, however, given that Bullock (2006) observed a failure on the part of Democrats as well as Republicans to update beliefs in response to contradictory information (but no “backlash effect”).

Despite the fact that conservatives appear to engage in motivated reasoning to a greater degree than do liberals, MacCoun and Paletz (2009) found that conservatives were more suspicious of research supporting liberal conclusions than liberals were suspicious of research supporting conservative conclusions. Thus, conservatives dismissed as inherently biased studies suggesting that the death penalty fails to deter criminals more than liberals dismissed studies suggesting the opposite. These findings are broadly consistent with the work of O’Brien and Crandall (2005), which indicated that perceivers are more likely to discount as self-interested the behavior of those who seek to challenge the status quo, in comparison with the behavior of those who seek to maintain the status quo.

Possibly as a result of the types of information processing biases cited above, studies of public opinion find that conservatives hold more false beliefs than progressives on a number of issues, including (1) the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2003–2004); (2) scientific evidence concerning anthropogenic climate change (e.g., Feygina et al., 2010; McCright & Dunlap, 2011); (3) the nature and extent of income inequality in the United States (Bartels, 2008); and (4) potential causes of the 2007–2009 economic recession (Kessler, 2010). There is also accumulating evidence from studies of mass communication that consumers of politically conservative news media outlets (especially Fox News) subscribe to erroneous political beliefs more than those who get their news elsewhere (Mooney, 2011). Although it is a topic for future research, we might conjecture that the co-occurrence of self-, group-, and system-serving biases on the part of conservative journalists and their audience members play a significant role in the creation and perpetuation of false beliefs.

The studies we have reviewed in this section suggest that, all other things being equal, conservative defenders of the status quo tend to display...
more evidence of motivated reasoning, bias, and distortion in judgment, in comparison with progressive challengers of the status quo. Such findings are consistent with the notion that in addition to self-serving and group-serving biases, many individuals engage in system-serving biases. Furthermore, the results we have summarized are congruent with Jost, Glaser, et al.’s (2003) analysis of political conservation as motivated social cognition, including evidence that individual differences in epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity and existential motives to manage anxiety and threat are associated with (1) directional motives to “seize” and “freeze” on immediate or preexisting beliefs and evaluations, and (2) the endorsement of conservative ideology.

Much as interventions that create opportunities for self-affirmation have been found to reduce self-serving biases in information processing (Cohen et al., 2000), it is conceivable that system-affirmation opportunities (such as occasions for expressing national commitment or patriotic allegiance) would reduce biased information processing that is caused by system-defensive motivation. Consistent with this possibility, Livianan and Jost (2012) found that exposure to system threat increases automatic (i.e., nonconscious) pursuit of the goal to perceive the status quo as legitimate and desirable—unless, that is, participants are given the opportunity to engage in system affirmation. Thus, research on system-serving biases is likely to suggest new and additional remedies for addressing the thorny, multifaceted problem of motivated political reasoning.

As noted earlier, some studies suggest that individuals who are more politically knowledgeable, sophisticated, and educated and who report greater understanding of the issues may be more rather than less likely to exhibit biased forms of reasoning (Bartels, 2008; Duch et al., 2000; Evans & Anderson, 2006; Kahan et al., 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006; but see Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Interestingly, two studies find that higher levels of education are associated with greater bias for conservatives but lesser bias for liberals. For instance, Berinsky (2011) observed that Republicans with more education were more likely to subscribe to anti-Democratic rumors (i.e., that President Obama’s health care plan includes “death panels”) but less likely to subscribe to anti-Republican rumors (i.e., that the U.S. government assisted in the 9/11 attacks). By contrast, highly educated Democrats were more likely to reject both anti-Democratic and anti-Republican rumors. Similarly, Kahan, Wittlin, et al. (2011) reported that scientific literacy was positively associated with skepticism about global climate change among hierarchical individualists (conservatives), but it was negatively associated with skepticism among egalitarian communitarians (progressives). In addition, scientific literacy was associated with less skepticism about nuclear power among egalitarian communitarians, suggesting that more education led progressives to update their beliefs in a manner that was inconsistent with their initial beliefs.

Concluding Remarks

In arguing for the utility of a social cognitive model of political judgment and decision making, Lane (1986) embraced the cognitive terminology of schemata to propose that citizens’ internal needs and values might shape their political realities (see also Sniderman & Citrin, 1971). Thus, what might look like inconsistency within an individual’s belief system from the perspective of an outside observer (e.g., Converse, 1964) might be internally consistent with the individual’s motives and desires (e.g., see Jost, 2006). Rational choice models would do well to take account of these (often nonconscious) psychological goals to better understand the ways in which citizens process political information (cf. Kuksinski & Quirk, 2000).

To the extent that political scientists have embraced the notion that political cognition is motivated, they have restricted their analyses to self-serving and group-serving purposes, which are at odds with accuracy motivation (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006). In this chapter, we have suggested that various system-serving motives—which maintain or preserve aspects of the status quo—also affect social and political cognition (e.g., Eidelman et al., 2009; Hennes & Jost, 2010; Jost et al., 2010; Kay et al., 2009; Ledgerwood et al., 2011; Moshinsky & Bar-Hillel, 2010). This suggestion is congruent with Lane’s (1986) observation that certain cognitive adjustments seem to maintain confidence in the overarching political system as legitimate:

Constitutional regime-schemata are likely to dominate (constrain) other schemata because when attitudes toward leaders, parties, and perceived government effectiveness turn sour, these regime-related attitudes are a protection against alienation, as well as apathy. … And in certain circumstances, especially war but also under real or feigned “threats” of subversion, it mobilizes defensive action and justifies sacrifice. (p. 314)
The research literature on system justification theory, which we have reviewed in cursory fashion here, upholds Lane's insights about the advantages and disadvantages of the motivation to defend and justify existing social systems (see also Jost et al., 2010; Kay et al., 2009). It is conceivable that the existence of system-serving motivation can help to explain why some studies find greater evidence of biased information processing on the part of conservative (vs. progressive) ideologues (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Hennes & Jost, 2010; Iyengar et al., 2008; MacCoun & Paletz, 2009; Mutz, 2006; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Sniderman et al., 1991).

Before concluding our review of the research literature on motivated political cognition, a few more caveats are in order. First, although we decided to organize our chapter around the tripartite classification of self-serving, group-serving, and system-serving motives (or, to borrow Lane's, 1986, terminology, purposes), other taxonomies may ultimately turn out to be just as useful—or even better. In addition, it is often challenging to distinguish empirically among the three motives. For instance, an individual's (false) belief that President Obama is a Muslim or was born outside of the United States may simultaneously reflect a self-serving desire to maintain and justify prior attitudes and behaviors, a group-serving desire to believe that Republicans are superior to (or more honest than) Democrats, and a system-serving desire to maintain the traditional racial hierarchy, whereby African Americans are denied powerful leadership roles. Most likely, such beliefs reflect some combination of these (and perhaps other) motives or purposes.

Second, we believe that many of the studies we have reviewed in this chapter rule out purely cognitive (i.e., nonmotivational) explanations for biased information processing. At the same time, we would never argue that all instances of bias in political cognition are due to motivational factors, such as self-, group-, or system-serving tendencies. Some of the discoveries we have summarized may be explained reasonably well from a purely cognitive perspective. From our perspective, the important point is that psychological motives almost surely influence judgment and decision making in the political sphere. Future work would do well to specify precisely when (and how) self-, group-, and system-serving motives impinge on the mental processing of political information—and also when they do not.

Evolutionary theorists and social psychologists have long debated the question of whether engaging in motivated forms of bias—including self-deception—is healthy and adaptive for the individual (e.g., Lockard & Paulhus, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). Some evidence suggests that holding unrealistically positive ideas about oneself and close others (such as relationship partners) can have beneficial consequences for mental health, relationship satisfaction, and goal pursuit (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, democratic theory presupposes that citizens are willing and able to process information about political issues and candidates in a reasonably accurate manner (e.g., Delli Carpini, & Keeter, 1996). Thus, from a normative philosophical perspective, it would seem that, when it comes to electoral politics, biased processing of information is harmful rather than helpful, at least for society as a whole. Or, as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan reputedly put it, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts." Future work might explore various intervention strategies, such as fostering accuracy motivation or creating opportunities for self-, group, or system affirmation (i.e., satisfying psychological needs or goals that contribute to biased information processing).

In much of the work we have reviewed, political psychologists have basically adapted constructs, methods, and paradigms from social and cognitive psychology to address applied questions having to do with information processing in overtly political contexts. However, political science need not follow behind psychology in its understanding, appreciation, or alleviation of motivated reasoning. Given that political issues, institutions, and elections frequently implicate the self, group, and social system, political psychologists should be at the forefront of scientific discovery when it comes to understanding the role of motivation in determining judgments, preferences, and decisions. Thus, we close by noting that research on "hot" or motivated political cognition has enormous potential to inform psychological theory with respect to motivation and cognition, thereby contributing to a political psychology that, in the words of Krosnick and McGraw (2002), is "true to its name."

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Notes
1. Kinder and Kiewiet (1979, 1981) expressed agnosticism about how individuals weigh sociotropic and pocketbook considerations, and they refrained from concluding that such effects are necessarily motivational in nature.

References


