Review Article



# Can Information Persuade Rather Than Polarize? A Review of Alex Coppock's Persuasion in Parallel

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#### Abstract

In Matthew Levendusky's review of Alex Coppock's Persuasion in Parallel, he praises, overall, the book's clear focus, rich data, and striking results, arguing that it makes an important contribution to the literature. He takes issue, however, with Coppock's treatment of theories of motivated reasoning, and he explores ways in which the literature might profitably move forward to better understand how citizens process political information.

**Keywords:** persuasion; information; motivated reasoning

In an age of polarization, does information have any effect at all on people's attitudes? Can people be persuaded when shown new information, or do they, instead, reject arguments that are inconsistent with their prior beliefs? Alex Coppock's excellent new book, Persuasion in Parallel: How Information Changes Minds about Politics, takes up this important question and shows that people update their beliefs in response to new information. Rather than rejecting counter-attitudinal information, people are persuaded by it—perhaps only a little bit, but they are persuaded nonetheless. This is a strikingly consistent pattern that occurs with issue after issue, with little evidence of heterogeneity throughout the public. The book's results demonstrate, as the title of the concluding chapter notes, that "persuasion is possible."

In the book, Coppock examines the effects of persuasive information (i.e., arguments) and not the effects of other related factors, most notably group cues, such as partisan cues. Indeed, the discussion in Chapter 3 of the book's scope conditions is remarkably clear and helps readers know exactly what is, and is not, included in the theory. Coppock's basic claim is that the effects of persuasive information on attitudes are "small, positive, and durable for everyone." Small here means that effects are modest, as most information "only adds a handful of considerations

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On the effects of such group cues, see Thomas Leeper and Rune Slothuus, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Public Opinion Formation," Political Psychology: Advances in Political Psychology 35, no. S1 (2014): 129-56; John Bullock, "Elite Influence on Public Opinion in an Informed Electorate," American Political Science Review 105, no. 3 (2011): 496-515.

Alexander Coppock, Persuasion in Parallel: How Information Changes Minds about Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 51, Table 3.2.

to the mix already present in a person's mind" (48). This is an important point that often gets lost when discussing experimental findings: we should not expect large effects of a small treatment, instead we should think about calibrating our studies to detect realistic effects, which is what is done here. Durable means that they do not dissipate immediately after treatment but instead endure in the medium term (up to 10 days; see the discussion on p. 49). That these effects are "for everyone" means that the effects will be similar across population subgroups—that is, treatment effects will be homogeneous rather than heterogeneous by race, gender, partisanship, ideology, age, and education.

Coppock's claims about the positive effects of information are, in many ways, his most important ones. Positive means that people move in the direction of the information provided, regardless of their prior belief. That is, if supporters of the death penalty and opponents see new information indicating that the death penalty reduces crime, they both will become more favorable toward the death penalty. Importantly, this rules out a backfire effect<sup>3</sup> or attitudinal polarization,<sup>4</sup> where seeing a piece of counter-attitudinal information makes people "double down" on their original view (i.e., the attempt to persuade backfires, and supporters and opponents of a policy move in opposite directions). Indeed, Coppock writes that "I hope to convince you that this idea from motivated reasoning theory [attitude polarization/backfire] simply does not describe how people respond when presented with persuasive information" (3).

A strength of the book, especially as a teaching tool, is the care Coppock takes in Chapter 4 in setting up his research design, using the model-inquiry-data-answer framework developed in Declare Design.<sup>5</sup> This makes it very clear what can and cannot be recovered from a given set of data and modeling choices. I have found this framework extremely useful for thinking about my own work, and so have many of my students. Having such a clear illustration of this process will be extremely helpful for those encountering these ideas for the first time.

To test his arguments about the effects of information, Coppock uses a set of 23 different experiments that vary whether people get information, and what kinds of information they receive. This includes both original experiments designed to test his arguments (including a set he developed with Andrew Guess<sup>6</sup>), as well as a reanalysis of numerous existing experimental results drawn from the perennially useful Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences archive. Rather than just rely on a small handful of experiments (as most books do), Coppock draws on a wide-ranging number of studies. This is a real strength of the book, in that the results do not hinge on any given sample, issue, treatment, and so forth. Indeed, the results are all the more impressive for their consistency.

The book's most important substantive claim is that backfire or attitude polarization effects effectively do not occur in response to new information. Coppock gives a lucid critique of two classic studies that purport to document this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2010): 303–30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Charles Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 755–69.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Graeme Blair, Jasper Cooper, Alexander Coppock, and Macartan Humphreys, "Declaring and Diagnosing Research Designs," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 3 (2019): 838–59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Andrew Guess and Alexander Coppock, "Does Counter-Attitudinal Information Cause Backlash? Results from Three Large Survey Experiments," *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2020): 1497–515.

phenomenon: that of Lord, Ross, and Lepper<sup>7</sup> in Chapter 2, and the study by Taber and Lodge<sup>8</sup> in Chapter 7. His argument (and replication of the Lord, Ross, and Lepper experimental design) will convince readers that the extant evidence supporting this argument has been overstated. But more persuasive are the empirical results. The book's results are extremely consistent on this point, and combined with other findings in the literature,<sup>9</sup> the case is clear: information itself does not generate attitudinal polarization, contrary to what one might expect from theories of motivated reasoning. Rather than generating polarization, counter-attitudinal information generates persuasion—often only a little bit, but persuasion nonetheless. In turn, this helps us make sense of the modest effect sizes of campaign communications and advertisements<sup>10</sup> and framing,<sup>11</sup> which also produce modest, though real, effects. Indeed, this book provides, in many ways, the micro-foundational argument for Page and Shapiro's<sup>12</sup> classic work about public opinion changes over time.

I greatly enjoyed the clean focus on a set of forced-exposure designs (where all participants receive the same messages). But seeing these results makes me wonder what happens when, as is often the case in the real world, there is more choice over which messages people receive. Once people can select receive messages or not, or at least pay less attention to them, we might see more variable effects of information. For example, as Druckman, Fein, and Leeper show, information search helps reinforce earlier messages, so building on these findings with more complex designs will undoubtedly help us better understand these persuasive dynamics both theoretically and empirically.

The finding that persuasion is possible also has important implications for the polarized state of the nation. To be clear, there is no quick fix for polarization: it is a hard, endemic problem that will likely plague our politics for the foreseeable future. But Coppock's findings underscore those of Kalla and Broockman, as well as some of my own, on the importance of dialogue and listening.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Charles Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098–109.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Taber and Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Most notably, see Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, "The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence," *Political Behavior* 41, no. 1 (2019):135–63.

See, among others, Richard Johnston, Michael Hagan, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundation of Party Politics* (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Alexander Coppock, Seth Hill, and Lynn Vavreck, "The Small Effects of Political Advertising Are Small Regardless of Context, Message, Sender, or Receiver: Evidence from 59 Real-time Randomized Experiments," *Science Advances* 6, no. 36 (2020): eabc4046; Josh Kalla and David Broockman, "The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (2018): 148–66.

Eran Amsalem and Alon Zoizner, "Real, but Limited: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of Framing Effects in the Political Domain," *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1 (2022): 221–37.

Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> See, most notably, Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> James Druckman, Jordan Fein, and Thomas Leeper, "A Source of Public Opinion Stability," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 430–54.

Josh Kalla and David Broockman, "Which Narrative Strategies Durably Reduce Prejudice? Evidence from Field and Survey Experiments Supporting the Efficacy of Perspective-Getting," *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 1 (2023): 185–204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Matthew Levendusky, Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Help Bridge the Partisan Divide (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

Obviously, these other studies are doing more than simply giving people short persuasive messages, but there is a commonality in that they are all focused on the possibility of persuasion, which underscores the role of messages, messenger, and so forth—in short, on the importance of persuasion more generally.<sup>17</sup> The findings here establish a crucial baseline, and knowing that persuasion is possible, the task now is to better understand what messages are more persuasive, in which settings, from which speakers, and so forth. This suggests a rich set of possibilities for future work.

To be clear, I enjoyed the book a great deal and think it makes a valuable contribution to the literature. Nevertheless, I disagree with one of its core substantive implications about the utility of motivated reasoning as a theory. I now turn to explaining why, and what implications I think this has the broader study of political behavior.

### Wither Motivated Reasoning?

One of the book's most provocative arguments comes in Chapter 7, in which Coppock draws substantive conclusions from his experiments. He contrasts two models of information processing: Bayesian updating and motivated reasoning. Bayesian updating argues that people use Bayes' Rule to update their beliefs: they have some prior beliefs, they see new evidence, and they update (following Bayes' Rule) in light of that new evidence given its perceived credibility. 18 Motivated reasoning, as I explain below, argues that people's responses to new information depends on the particular motives they have in a given context. Reviewing his results, Coppock argues, in essence, that because we cannot differentiate motivated reasoning from Bayesian updating, we should use the Bayesian updating paradigm because this approach is "correct enough to be useful" (138). On Twitter, he went a step further, claiming that the book's results likely implied that "motivated reasoning is not a good model of information processing." 19 Few would object that it is difficult to differentiate Bayesian updating and motivated reasoning; indeed, a number of past scholars have made exactly this point.<sup>20</sup> But the argument that motivated reasoning is inherently flawed is more objectionable. To explain why, it is useful to take a step back and consider several distinct, but inter-related, arguments about motivated reasoning.

#### What Are Motivations?

As Kunda,<sup>21</sup> Taber and Lodge,<sup>22</sup> and many others note, motivated reasoning is an argument that human reasoning is goal driven, that is, shaped by a desire to

James Druckman, "A Framework for the Study of Persuasion," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2022): 65–88.

For a more detailed discussion of Bayesian updating in the context of public opinion, see John Bullock, "Partisan Bias and the Bayesian Ideal in the Study of Public Opinion," *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (2009): 1109–24; Seth Hill, "Learning Together Slowly: Bayesian Learning about Political Facts," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 4 (2017): 1403–18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Alexander Coppock (@aecoppock), "But since the PiP pattern is common," 17 January 2023, https://twitter.com/aecoppock/status/1615381437145907201?s=20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> See, among others, James Druckman and Mary McGrath, "The Evidence for Motivated Reasoning in Climate Change Preference Formation," *Nature Climate Change* 9, no. 2 (2019): 111–9; Leeper and Slothuus, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Public Opinion Formation."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Taber and Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs."

achieve certain ends (i.e., motivations or goals). Scholars typically differentiate between two different types of goals: accuracy goals (the desire to form accurate and correct conclusions), and directional goals (the desire to protect some other preexisting belief or attitude, usually at the expense of accuracy). Although we all want to be accurate and reach the right conclusion, our directional goals lead us astray, even unconsciously, and hence our reasoning is biased. We want accuracy, but we typically do not get it.

But more specifically, what are these goals? They turn out to be quite complex. Although political scientists have often assumed accuracy is simply a desire to get the right answer, what is "right" in a given context is not always obvious.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, accuracy can be a product of many different goals, such as the desire to be a good citizen,<sup>24</sup> the need to explain one's reasoning to others,<sup>25</sup> and many other factors.<sup>26</sup> Directional goals are even more varied: most political scientists focus on partisanship (and hence adopt the label "partisan motivated reasoning," arguing that our beliefs are biased toward our party or prior attitudes), but they could also include many other factors, such as need for cognition,<sup>27</sup> belief in a just world,<sup>28</sup> and self-esteem.<sup>29</sup> And as Groenendyk and Krupnikov argue, the context in which individuals find themselves may further shape these goals (e.g., whether a scenario is more conflictual or cooperative).<sup>30</sup> This last point is important in that we all have multiple, often conflicting goals, and they can be more or less important in different settings. In short, our goals may be quite dependent on the setting in which we find ourselves!

Why so much emphasis on a point everyone reading this essay will already know? Because it lays bare a central point that gets ignored too often: to actually test a theory of motivated reasoning, one needs to show that motivations are, in fact, driving the process. "Evidence for directional motivated reasoning requires documentation that an individual possesses a directional goal and that information processing is tailored to achieve that goal...A constant missing link is the demonstration that a directional goal drives information evaluation, as opposed to variable assessments of what is accurate information." In brief, testing theories of motivated reasoning—and comparing them with theories of Bayesian updating—requires actually manipulating motivations. Otherwise, one has not, prima facie, actually tested this theory or generated evidence for or against it.

Coppock effectively dismisses this central point, arguing, "Personally, I don't find this defense [that motives shape cognitive processes, and hence manipulating

Leeper and Slothuus, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Public Opinion Formation," 140, footnote 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Eric Groenendyk, Competing Motives in the Partisan Mind: How Loyalty and Responsiveness Shape Party Identification and Democracy (New York and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Phillip Tetlock, "Accountability and Complexity of Thought," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 1 (1983): 74–83.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> For a lucid discussion of this multitude of factors, see Leeper and Slothuus, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Public Opinion Formation," 143–5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> John Cacioppo and Richard Petty, "The Need for Cognition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, no. 1 (1982): 116–31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Melvin Lerner, The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Steven Fein and Steven Spencer, "Prejudice as Self-Image Maintenance: Affirming the Self through Derogating Others," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): 31–44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Eric Groenendyk and Yanna Krupnikov, "What Motivates Reasoning? A Theory of Goal-Dependent Political Evaluation," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no.1 (2021): 180–96.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Druckman and McGrath, "The Evidence for Motivated Reasoning in Climate Change Preference Formation," 114–5.

motivation is needed to test these theories] convincing, since the whole difficulty is that both putative motivations and cognitive processes are unobservable" (131). Although it is correct to say motives, like any psychological process, are not directly observable, many, myself included, would object to the claim that this means we should not try to manipulate them to test this theory. Indeed, the core elements of Bayesian updating (priors and likelihoods) are not observable either, so the exact same critique applies to that theory as well. Why this is a critical limitation to one theory but not the other is not made clear in the book (beyond, effectively, personal taste).

What does a test of motivated reasoning look like? Bayes et al.<sup>32</sup> provide an example. In their study, they manipulate different goals—to be accurate, to defend partisan values or beliefs, and to adhere to descriptive in-group norms—and examine how this affects how people process information about climate change. They find that the types of messages that persuade differ depending on the motives that were primed: authoritative evidence with data works best when people have been primed to be accurate, but if people have instead been primed to adhere to group norms, then messages about those norms (e.g., most Republicans believe that climate change is real) are more effective. As Bayes et al. note, "treating 'motivated reasoning' as a monolithic concept can lead to inconsistencies and confusion—carefully defining and isolating particular motives likely will be critical for designing effective communication." In short, there is not one effective communication strategy but rather many different communication strategies that differ across people, issues, and contexts.

Other scholars manipulate motivations indirectly: rather than priming them explicitly (as in the Bayes et al. study), they assess how individuals evaluate the same piece of evidence when it is framed as identity protecting versus identity challenging.<sup>34</sup> A detailed comparison of these two approaches is beyond the scope of this essay, but the key point is that here, as above, motivations are at the core of testing the theory.

One objection to either strategy is that priming motivations might also then in-advertently prime other factors, as Tappin, Pennycook, and Rand argue.<sup>35</sup> This is, undoubtedly, true, but it is also true of almost anything scholars can manipulate experimentally; this is similar to the informational equivalence problem noted by Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey.<sup>36</sup> The solution is care in designing experimental treatments, careful theorizing, and manipulation checks, but this is hardly an issue limited to this one topic.

Robin Bayes, James Druckman, Avery Good, and Daniel Molden, "When and How Different Motives Can Drive Motivated Political Reasoning," *Political Psychology* 41, no. 5 (2020): 1031–52.

<sup>33</sup> Bayes et al., "When and How Different Motives Can Drive Motivated Political Reasoning," 1049.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> See, among others, Dan Kahan, "The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm, Part 1: What Politically Motivated Reasoning Is and How to Measure It," *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2016, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0417; Brian Guay and Christopher Johnston, "Ideological Asymmetries and the Determinants of Political Motivated Reasoning," *American Journal of Political Science* 66, no. 2 (2022): 285–301; Michael Thaler, "The Fake News Effect: Experimentally Identifying Motivated Reasoning Using Trust in News," *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 15 (forthcoming).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Ben Tappin, Gordon Pennycook, and David Rand, "Thinking Clearly about Causal Inferences of Politically Motivated Reasoning: Why Paradigmatic Study Designs Often Undermine Causal Inference," Current Opinion in Behavioral Science 34 (August 2020): 81–7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Alan Dafoe, Baobao Zhang, and Devin Caughey, "Informational Equivalence in Survey Experiments," *Political Analysis* 26, no. 4 (2018): 399–416.

This also underscores another important point about heterogeneous effects. Coppock correctly notes that, in most cases, there is effectively no evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects across age, gender, partisanship, and so forth. But a motivation-based approach also helps us hypothesize about which groups should have heterogeneous effects because they differ on the basis of those motivations. The findings of Bayes et al. offer some initial evidence of this; those authors show that the match between the motive and message is key, so the heterogeneous effects by a set of standard demographic variables (a likely fruitless enterprise), a better approach is to let the motives be our guide to thinking about how effects differ throughout the population. The answer may still be that effects are homogeneous in many cases (at least in part because we typically lack the power to detect heterogeneous effects), but this gives us a principled set of variables to search for in terms of looking for between-person differences. But more broadly, this general line of argument underscores the normative issues at stake.

The goal of understanding citizens' information processing is not simply to understand it for its own sake but rather to understand how to design persuasive messages about critical issues, such as climate change and election denialism. This discussion of motivation-driven communicative strategies also highlights the broader study of persuasion itself, which requires a focus on not just the message itself but on who sends it, in what context, and so forth. This also draws our attention to the critical task of unpacking argument quality and how it might differ across contexts. In short, a motivational approach helps us tackle not just one issue but rather a broader class of problems.

One could perhaps argue that a Bayesian perspective could accommodate all of the above through the use of, say, different priors or likelihoods. That may well be true, and efforts to differentiate these theories may, in the end, not be terribly fruitful (though see Thaler<sup>40</sup> for an approach to identifying scenarios where they are incompatible with one another). But there is, to me, another reason why we might not want to throw out motivational approaches just yet. To see why, we need to consider how individuals typically receive persuasive information.

## The Importance of Political Information Processing

The experiments that are the focus of Coppock's analysis focus on the purest version of information processing: simply providing people information with little attention to source, context, and so on. This is, of course, a completely reasonable decision and makes for a clean and important test of his argument. But in the real world, political information does not arrive in a vacuum; instead, it largely comes from political elites, delivered through journalists and the mass media. It is elites—in particular, partisan political elites—who provide the vast majority of messages

- Bayes et al., "When and How Different Motives Can Drive Motivated Political Reasoning."
- Druckman, "A Framework for the Study of Persuasion."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> See, for example, Kevin Arceneaux, "Cognitive Biases and the Strength of Political Arguments," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 2 (2012): 271–85; Kevin Arceneaux and Stephen Nicholson, "Anchoring Political Preferences: The Psychological Foundations of Status Quo Bias and the Boundaries of Elite Manipulation," *Political Behavior* 45 (forthcoming), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09847-6; Jack Blumenau and Benjamin Lauderdale, "The Variable Persuasiveness of Political Rhetoric," *American Journal of Political Science* 67 (forthcoming), https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12703.

<sup>40</sup> Thaler, "The Fake News Effect."

about political issues that voters receive. Coppock's theory covers an important part of the information voters receive, but only one part of it. To fully understand how voters process information, we must attend to the critical role of party cue-taking (which, as Coppock carefully notes, is outside the scope of his theory).

Indeed, given extant theories, we have good reason to suspect that people might behave quite differently when confronted with party cues versus the types of information Coppock studies. In John Zaller's classic model of public opinion, Coppock's informational treatments would be persuasive messages: "arguments or images providing a reason for taking a position or a point of view." But, as Zaller notes, persuasive messages are distinct from cueing messages, which convey the "contextual information' about the ideological or partisan implications of a persuasive message." Such cueing messages (or, more simply, cues) are crucial, because "they enable citizens to perceive relationships between the persuasive messages they receive and their political predispositions, which in turn permits them to respond critically to the persuasive messages." In short, cues are a crucial part of how citizens make sense of new information. Without studying cues, we are not really studying much real-world political communication (or, at a minimum, we are missing a vital part of it).

Understanding how people process information in the face of party cues is vital, because one might expect, given the documented power of party cues, that voters would simply follow where the party leads. <sup>44</sup> Voters might simply ignore arguments and instead just blindly adopt their party's position. <sup>45</sup> Fascinatingly, however, that is not what happens: even when cues are present, individuals process and respond to information. <sup>46</sup> Indeed, not only do people respond to new information, they respond in a fashion very consistent with the "persuasion in parallel" argument: Democrats and Republicans alike move in the same direction in response to information, even when they are told where their party stands on the issue. <sup>47</sup> That has a particularly important implication: people do not unquestioningly follow their party's lead, they use information to update their beliefs. Put differently, a cue is not enough to have directional motives dominate information processing and not enough to generate attitudinal polarization. This nicely underlines the prevalence of parallel persuasion among members of the public.

But are there ever scenarios where we see attitudinal polarization? I can think of three related cases from earlier studies, even if these authors do not present their results in those terms. First, partisan media exposure can generate attitudinal polarization: Druckman, Levendusky, and McLain show that exposure to like-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1992), 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Zaller, The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, 42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Zaller, The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, 42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> For example, see Gabriel Lenz, Follow the Leader: How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Geoffrey Cohen, "Party Over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 5 (2003): 808–22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Cheryl Boudreau and Scott MacKenzie, "Informing the Electorate? How Party Cues and Policy Information Affect Public Opinion about Initiatives," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 1 (2014): 48–62; Bullock, "Elite Influence on Public Opinion in an Informed Electorate."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Ben Tappin, Adam Berinsky, and David Rand, "Partisans' Receptivity to Persuasive Messaging Is Undiminished by Countervailing Party Leader Cues," *Nature Human Behavior* 7, no. 4 (2023): 568–82; Rune Slothuus and Martin Bisgaard, "How Political Parties Shape Public Opinion in the Real World," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 4 (2021): 896–911.

minded and cross-cutting media both moved respondents toward their party's positions (at least on the issue of oil drilling, the focus of their study). \*\*Second, several studies document that homogeneous political discussion generates more extreme attitudes, pushing partisans apart from one another. \*\*And finally, in some contexts, polarization itself—by leading people to down-weight persuasive arguments—can do the same. \*\*This is not an exhaustive list; no doubt there also others. But they all indicate a broader, and important, point: although information qua information does not polarize, and cues alone do not polarize, these more complex treatments can.

But it is worth thinking about why these cases might generate this sort of result when others do not. The argument, I suspect, goes back to the logic identified by Taber and Lodge<sup>51</sup> as well as Redlawsk:<sup>52</sup> the theoretical heavy lifting is being done via hot cognition and effortful processing of messages—motivated reasoning is hard work, and people only do it when some core identity or value is being challenged. What that suggests to me is that motivated reasoning is not the default but rather only occurs in particular cases.<sup>53</sup> It is not simply enough to encounter an argument, individuals need to engage with it or be put into a context where their identity and core values are threatened, to observe these sorts of effects. Backfire and polarization are not common occurrences; rather, we should see them as limited to cases in which people receive a strong dose of partisan communication.

Such effects are also likely concentrated among particular individuals. Take, for example, the case of Republicans and their belief in the "big lie" that Trump won the 2020 election (to use the language of the report from the House Select Committee).<sup>54</sup> Although the exact fraction of Republicans who believe this false-hood varies from poll to poll, in no case is it a minority; indeed, often a supermajority endorses some form of this belief. Not only is this a incredibly stable and impactful attitude,<sup>55</sup> efforts to correct this generally do not work.<sup>56</sup> Although there is some evidence that Republican leaders saying Biden won can persuade some voters,<sup>57</sup> this is likely a case of heterogeneous effects: weaker Republicans, who view this as a less central part of their identity, are willing to believe the truth,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> James Druckman, Matthew Levendusky, and Audrey McLain, "No Need to Watch: How the Effects of Partisan Media Can Spread Interpersonal Discussions," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 1 (2018): 99–112.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Druckman, Levendusky, and McLain, "No Need to Watch"; Samara Klar, "Partisanship in a Social Setting," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 3 (2014): 687–704; Bryan Parsons, "The Social Identity Politics of Peer Networks," *American Politics Research* 43, no. 3 (2015): 680–707.

James Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus, "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 57–79.

Taber and Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs."

David Redlawsk, "Hot Cognition or Cool Consideration? Testing the Effects of Motivated Reasoning on Political Decision Making," *Journal of Politics* 64, no. 4 (2002): 1021–44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Leeper and Slothuus, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Public Opinion Formation," 135, Table 1.

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<sup>57</sup> Katherine Clayton and Robb Willer, "Endorsements from Republican Politicians Can Increase Confidence in U.S. Elections." *Research & Politics* 10, no. 1 (2023): https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680221148967

but those more committed to President Trump, who see this as a more core part of their identity, will resist efforts to correct this incorrect belief. Indeed, for many Republicans, believing this is a core part of their identity: to be a Republican is to believe that Trump won the 2020 election<sup>58</sup>; hence, rejecting counter-messages is identity protecting. This, to me, ultimately highlights the value of an approach rooted in motivations: it helps us think about when and why we might observe these effects, and among whom. Before we conclude motivated reasoning is not valuable, we need to see that it fails not just in one particular case but more broadly.

Perhaps ultimately, much of this comes down to a matter of taste. All theories have limits and are highly imperfect abstractions of our underlying decision-making. Theoretical models are useful for helping us think through how to study important questions, but the questions are ultimately the key thing. No doubt, in the years to come, motivational theories will be supplanted by some other theoretical paradigm that helps us better answer the substantive questions of interest. We should keep our focus there, to better understand how citizens think through and process political messages. *Persuasion in Parallel* has certainly given us plenty of fodder to do just that.

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