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THE TWO CORE GOALS OF POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Defining Political Psychology

As a very broad definition, it is safe to say that the field of political psychology is concerned with explaining political phenomena from a psychological perspective. This means that political psychologists study political decision-making, political action, and political attitudes through the perspective of unobservable psychological processes unfolding in the minds of political actors. In doing so, scholars typically explain a political phenomenon with established psychological concepts. For most political psychologists, contributing to understanding the political context is the primary goal of their endeavor. Less frequently has work from political psychology also contributed to psychological theory formation in general (Krosnick, 2002).

Political psychology's focus on explaining political phenomena is partially due to the fact that political scientists have dominated the field for the last forty years. This is apparent in the ratio of political scientists compared to psychologists that have published in the seminal edited volumes in political psychology. For instance, ten of the 20 authors in Margaret Herman's (1986) book (*Political Psychology: Contemporary Issues and Problems*) were political scientists whereas only five were psychologists. Similarly, Shanto Iyengar and William McGuire's (1993) book (*Explorations in Political Psychology*) has chapters from nine political scientists and only five psychologists and the *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* by David Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis (2003) has chapters from 18 political scientists and only seven psychologists. A similar trend can be observed among the participants of the Summer Institute in Political Psychology (SIPP) that was created at Ohio State University and is now at Stanford University.

Since 1991, when SIPP was founded, there have regularly been twice as many applicants and participants from political science than from psychology (with the exception of a few years when the ratio was closer to 1.5). In 2006 and 2008, more psychologists than political scientists participated, but since 2009, political scientists have again outnumbered psychologists.

This dominance of political scientists might explain why political psychology—very much unlike other fields in psychology—seems to be predominantly *not* concerned with identifying pan-contextual principles of how the human mind works. Even though psychological theories are typically applied to understand political phenomena, this research rarely has attempted to advance our understanding of these psychological theories. Instead, much political psychological research is based on a genuine interest in understanding the political context.

For instance, many scholars in the field have applied psychological theories about human cognition and behavior to political decision-making or voting behavior. This approach has yielded useful insights for political science, but the explicitly stated benefit for psychology—and for understanding of the human mind in general—has been more limited. Research in political psychology may quite easily serve both purposes if researchers begin their projects by aiming to produce findings with implications of two sorts: (1) implications for understanding of politics *and* (2) implications for basic psychological theory. Research that focuses only on the first outcome may be better described as psychological political science but not as political psychology (Krosnick, 2002). In fact, the term "political psychology" implies that it is a form of psychology. As such, the field can contribute to the larger psychological endeavor of studying behavioral and mental processes to discover general laws if researchers choose to do so from the outset of their efforts and take the time to explain those implications in publications.

Conducting political psychology in the hope of advancing basic psychological theory is especially likely to help psychology, because more often than not, political psychologists step out of the laboratory and conduct their research in the real world. This is valuable partly because it maximizes the external validity of research findings. This benefit may not seem especially valuable to psychologists who place higher importance on internal validity than on external validity and who believe that internal validity can be maximized in context-free lab settings created by researchers. But a mix of lab and field studies can maximize both internal and external validity, and studies of the real world often enrich basic psychological work by pointing to processes, mediators, and moderators that would not necessarily find their way into theorizing about impoverished, constructed context-free lab settings. Experimental research might be best viewed as suggestive about how people make decisions and behave in similar situations in the real world. To quote Roderick Kramer (Chapter 4, this volume), "the failure of most experimenters to ever step outside the cloistered confines of the psychological laboratory and into the booming, buzzing and messy world of

the field has limited our knowledge about these important processes." Political psychology can fill this gap in psychology with its focus on real world behavior of humans in the political context.

In this light, it is interesting to note that this book spotlights political psychology done by psychologists or in the spirit of psychology. Thus, this book illustrates how the application of psychological theories to the political context can advance both our understanding of politics *and* our understanding of the underlying psychological processes. For instance, Laurel Harbridge and colleagues (Chapter 9, this volume) find that the application of theories of media priming enhances our understanding of people's approval of the U.S. president and yield new insights into the limits of media priming in general. Likewise, Joanne Miller and colleagues' (Chapter 6, this volume) study of political issue salience furthers understanding of which political issues are relevant for whom and enhances more general the psychological study of attitude strength. Visser and colleagues (Chapter 8, this volume) improve our understanding of attitude-(in)congruent political behavior and, at the same time, of the multidimensionality of the psychological concept of attitude strength.

The book is organized in three part. The first part shows four examples of analyses beginning with psychological theories and yielding new perspectives on various political processes. The second part addresses the question of what determines political cognition and behavior, with a special focus on the importance of policy issues to individuals. The third part consists of three examples of how application of psychological theories can challenge conventional wisdom in the political domain. Despite addressing a large variety of political phenomena, every article in this volume ends with a clearly visible contribution to psychology in general.

Content of This Book

Part I: New Theoretical Perspectives on Political Science Questions

In Chapter 2, Jonathan Bendor discusses limitations of classical Rational Choice Theory in political science and presents ways in which ideas from the psychological study of bounded rationality may overcome or ameliorate these limitations. Virtually all rational choice models build on the premise that people compare different strategies to each other. But this procedure is cognitively demanding when choice problems are complex; hence it may not be used often in such situations. Instead, people may adopt a strategy if its expected outcome is better than their aspiration level (reference point). Such heuristics are also much more broadly applicable than rational choice procedures when people have only partially ordered preferences. The author further argues that models that build on aspiration levels instead of a conscious rational comparison of

choice options offer new theoretical explanations of problems and puzzles that political science has faced.

With several examples, Bendor demonstrates how aspiration-based models offer new solutions to unresolved problems in political science (e.g., the paradox of voting). Along the way, the author shows how mathematical formalizations can help identify gaps in researchers' thinking, both in political science and psychology.

Importantly, Bendor concludes that both rational choice and aspiration-based models have their merits; neither should be used exclusively. The difficulty of the problem people are facing often determines whether they can decide rationally or not (i.e., whether the complexity of the task exceeds their cognitive constraints). It is the task of the political psychologist to identify whether ideas from rational choice theory or the bounded rationality research program are most applicable in the given situation. Bendor's chapter provides a great resource for making this decision.

In Chapter 3, Gregory Mitchell and Philip Tetlock present a so-far underutilized methodology that might advance theory formation in both political philosophy and social psychology. The so-called "hypothetical society paradigm" promises a solution to a problem both fields are regularly facing: that participants of real-world debates often invent facts to justify their opinions and conceal double standards. This prevents the possibility to disentangle value orientations from factual beliefs in people's ultimate assessment of a situation.

The hypothetical society paradigm combines the advantages of thought experiments with laboratory experiments to overcome this limitation. Participants are asked to react to concrete scenarios that describe hypothetical societies. Because all relevant facts are laid out in the description, participants cannot invent new facts to justify the scenario. Instead, they have to base their reaction purely on their value orientation, given the facts. By comparing, for example, different distributions of wealth and the relation between effort and pay-off, people's generic understanding of justice can be gauged. With this method, Mitchell and Tetlock show that people's attitude toward corrective justice is much less dependent on political ideology than previously assumed.

The authors also discuss how this method can be used to tease apart the underlying reasons for behaviors that are predicted by multiple social psychological theories. Psychologists sometimes face the problem that they have to deduce participants' psychological reasoning post hoc from their behavior. The authors discuss how the hypothetical society paradigm can be utilized to get a better understanding of the underlying psychological processes in order to advance psychological theories.

In Chapter 4, Roderick Kramer presents a psychological perspective on the decision making of political and business leaders. In particular, he focuses on situations in which leaders, either through their own mistakes or through external events, are confronted with threats to the way these leaders see themselves and

want to be seen by others (their identity). Kramer's psychological approach offers a new way to understand leaders' decision making in such situations. He suggests that threats to leaders' identity create a state of identity dissonance, which these leaders are motivated to reduce through strategies of attention diversion.

In three qualitative case studies, Kramer presents evidence in line with his concept of identity-based (re-)categorization that explains decisions and behavior of leaders facing assaults on their authority or legitimacy. In such identity-threatening situations, leaders tend to employ cognitive strategies to divert the attention to alternative identities of the leadership or the organization. One strategy is to highlight positive dimensions of one's identity through generating social comparison groups that make the organization or the leader look more favorable on seemingly more relevant dimensions. Another strategy is to cognitively focus on more flattering dimensions of one's identity while downplaying those dimensions that have been threatened.

This psychological perspective on political decision-making offers a promising new perspective for political scientists trying to understand why leaders sometimes make the decision they do. Kramer illustrates in his analysis of Lyndon Johnson's unexpected reactions to developments in the Vietnam War how an identity-threat perspective can lead to a new understanding of political leaders' behavior. In fact, the author concludes that few activities of leaders are as consequential to the vitality of an organization or the legitimacy of his leadership as the re-categorization of the identity in focus.

In Chapter 5, Doug McAdam challenges three widely cited "facts" about the origins, the development, and consequences of social movements. In his overview of the history of research on social movements, the author points out that the field originally was very psychological and ignored the more structured organizational and political dimensions of social movements. The subsequent sociological and political science research, in contrast, focused almost exclusively on the social structure and overlooked important psychological processes. For instance, McAdam makes the compelling point that participation in a movement is contingent on existing social ties (structure) but only if such ties and participation in the movement reinforce an identity (psychological) that is important to the individual. This argument is in line with the findings of Visser and colleagues (Chapter 8, this volume) who show that attitude-congruent behavior, such as joining a social movement, depends on the personal importance people attribute to the goal of that movement.

McAdam points out several shortcomings in the social movements literature. Most provocative is his observation that several widely believed "facts" about movements are based on research that betrays the cardinal methodological sin of "selecting on the dependent variable." This approach has probably exaggerated the link between certain factors and participation in, or the consequences of, social movements. This does not necessarily mean that the widely believed

facts are wrong, but that better research designs are needed to test these "facts" and to achieve a fuller understanding of the processes that might have led to the observed regularities. As such, this chapter is also meant as a call for more psychological research in social movements studies. McAdam suggests several promising paths that future research could follow.

Part II: Determinants of Political Behavior – the Role of Personal Importance

In **Chapter 6** at the beginning of Part II, Joanne Miller and colleagues build on psychological theories to improve our understanding of a widely used concept in political science: issue salience. Decades of research has shown that some people think more about certain issues than others and that people's attitudes toward theses issues can affect their behavior. However, the literature has been divided about the question which issues are most influential. Are these the issues of national importance or those that are of personal importance to people?

Based on nine studies, Miller and colleagues argue that personal importance is the ultimate root of issue salience and present evidence of its psychological consequences. Surveys and a laboratory experiment show that voting, writing letters, and making phone calls to express policy preferences, contributing money to lobbying organizations, and attending group meetings are all inspired by personal importance but rarely by national importance. A deeper look at psychological consequences allows the authors to provide an explanation for this finding: Personal importance is behaviorally consequential because it instigates vigorous cognitive and emotional issue engagement.

Contrary to some earlier assertions, this chapter suggests that issue salience is relatively stable. Whereas political events or media attention may easily and quickly increase or decrease people's perception of the national importance of certain issues, this is not true for personal importance. People think deeply about issues they find personally important, store information in long-term memory, and experience strong emotions. An increase in media coverage might affect the appearance of the national importance of certain issues, but these fluctuations will not be especially consequential for people's own preferences.

In Chapter 7, Joanne Miller and colleagues extend Douglas McAdam's (Chapter 5, this volume) theoretical criticism of widely believed "facts" about social movements. The authors challenge the notion that political activism is predominantly motivated by people's dissatisfaction with the current life circumstances. Building on psychological insights from Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), the authors argue that much more motivating than dissatisfaction with the status quo is the threat of an undesirable policy change. The fear that things may get worse in the future should be a stronger motivator for social action than the possibility that things may get better in the future.

Evidence from three empirical studies, two of which include experimental manipulations in nationally representative samples, makes the case for the authors' argument. In contrast to earlier research that relied on macro-level analyses such as time-series analyses, the results in this chapter allow teasing apart different factors that might motivate people to political action (contributing money to interest groups in the present study). Threat of an undesirable policy change had a stronger and more consistent effect than dissatisfaction with the current situation. This effect was stronger for those with the necessary financial resources and for those who attached greater personal importance to the policy at stake. This latter finding links this chapter directly to the other chapter by Miller and colleagues (Chapter 6, this volume). In that chapter, the authors found that personal importance of an issue increased the likelihood of political action, but not everybody with high personal importance actually participates. The findings of the present chapter suggest that a second condition for political action might be the threat people perceive to the issue they care deeply about. Exploring this link further in research on social movements and political participation seems a promising path for future research in political psychology.

In Chapter 8, Penny Visser and colleagues give another spin to the question raised by Doug McAdam (Chapter 5, this volume) and Joanne Miller and colleagues (Chapter 7, this volume): Why do some social movements receive broad support but only few people take action? To answer this question, the authors address a much more fundamental problem that makes predictions in political science difficult: people often do not behave in accordance with their attitudes. Visser and co-authors point to the social-psychological concept of attitude strength as a possible explanation. Building on an ongoing debate in social psychology on the dimensionality of attitude strength, these authors assert that some strength-related features promote attitude-congruent behavior in distinct ways. In line with the research by Miller et al. (Chapter 6, this volume), the authors focus on the personal importance of an attitude as one of these features. The second feature examined is people's attitude-relevant knowledge. The authors of this chapter assert that both may be necessary to understand when attitude-congruent behavior occurs.

Visser and colleagues test their assertion in four studies that combine experimental research with survey research on nationally representative samples. They focus on particularly important topics for political science, such as attitudes toward capital punishment, legalization of abortion, and global warming. Results show that personal importance increases participants' motivation, which leads to better performance in attention tasks, and a higher likelihood to express and defend their attitudes. Although knowledge also increases attitude-congruent behavior, this link seems not to be due to increased motivation and is instead likely to reflect increased ability. Advancing psychological theory in general, the authors concluded that knowledge and importance exert their influence

through distinct psychological processes. Simply increasing knowledge is not enough to promote a certain behavior. Building on these findings, the authors end the chapter with suggestions for future research and with guidelines on how to design more effective interventions.

In Chapter 9, Laurel Harbridge and colleagues consider the implications of theories of psychology by asking a typical political science question: How do prices of gasoline affect people's approval of the U.S. president? Gasoline prices may affect approval ratings because people are personally affected by rising or declining prices (pocketbook reasoning) or because they see the greater picture and take gasoline prices as indicators of current state of the economy (sociotropic reasoning). Each reasoning process has distinct implications for our understanding of the determinants of presidential approval, as well as for the focus of presidential election campaigns. Yet previous research on the influence of economic indicators on presidential approval struggled in teasing these two reasoning processes apart. To overcome this limitation, Harbridge and colleagues introduce psychological theories of media priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1988; Miller & Krosnick, 2000) to the study of determinants of presidential approval. If sociotropic reasoning underlies the link between gasoline prices and presidential approval, people would use the amount of media coverage of the gasoline prices as an indicator of their societal importance. If people base their evaluation of the president only on their personal economic burden through the gasoline prices, priming through the media should not affect this link.

Using a database of more than 20 years of monthly presidential approval ratings, the authors find evidence consistent only with the notion of pocketbook reasoning. Media coverage of the gasoline prices did not moderate the effect of these prices on presidential approval and had no effect on their own. These results suggest that people's individual economic positions and not their perception of the national economy link gasoline prices to presidential approval. The dominance of the personal connection to gasoline prices over the national importance of those prices is in line with findings of Joanne Miller and colleagues (chapter 5, this volume). These authors found that personal importance more generally predicted policy attitudes, candidate preferences, and political behavior.

Importantly, Harbridge and colleagues' conclusions go beyond the initially raised political science question. They suggest that the results indicate a new limitation to the psychological concept of priming: media priming seems to have no consequence if concepts are readily accessible and personally impactful.

Chapter 10 by Bo MacInnis and Jon Krosnick fits both in this part on determinants of political behavior as well as in the next part conventional wisdom about politics. Using various methodologies and an impressive number of data sources, the authors test opposing speculations in the literature on whether or not adopting a "green" position on global warming would help or harm political candidates in elections. Just as in the previous chapters, a special focus is on

whether these effects might be particularly pronounced among people who attach greater personal importance to the issue of global warming.

Across eight studies, the authors use survey experiments, content analysis, and a traditional political science regression approach to examine the link between a green position on global warming and electoral success. On one hand, the results suggest that political candidates—and in particular Democrats—can only gain votes by taking a green position. Moreover, a simulation building on an extensive content analysis of candidates' websites suggests that the outcomes of some races could have been flipped if candidates had spoken differently about global warming. On the other hand, the simulation also suggests that these changes would most likely not have altered which party controlled the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. In line with the three previous chapters, particularly those people who attached greater personal importance to global warming were more strongly inclined to vote for candidates that took a green position.

In sum, this chapter provides an answer to the question of whether green positions help or harm political candidates and makes a more general contribution to political science, as it serves as an illustration on how the coordinated application of several research methods can illuminate the impact of a single issue on candidate choice.

Part III: Challenging Conventional Wisdom about Politics

In Chapter 11, Theresa Vescio and colleagues present an intriguing new perspective on prejudiced people's opposition to affirmative action. Prejudiced white people, the authors claim, derive their evaluation of black people from simplistic reasoning that is mainly based on dispositional explanations: Not the situational circumstances determine black people's fate but the fact that black people lack the necessary abilities to succeed. This reasoning makes it difficult to see the merits of affirmative action, which are complex policies that require the understanding of long causal chains from cause to consequence. In contrast, individuals who are not prejudiced tend to base their judgment of blacks on situational explanations that require more complex causal explanations. As such, these people are more willing to support affirmative action policies.

In their empirical studies, Vescio and colleagues present evidence in line with their arguments. Prejudiced participants made more dispositional attributions about black targets they had to evaluate and such participants spent more effort finding dispositional explanations than situational explanations for a black target's behavior. Importantly, prejudiced participants developed less complex dispositional explanations for blacks' fate or behavior than did less prejudiced participants who tended to develop more complex situational explanations.

The chapter concludes with an extensive overview of the origins, practices, and consequences of affirmative action in employment and education. Starting

from Lyndon Johnson's vision of the "great society," that also lies at the hard of Kramer's analysis (Chapter 4, this volume), Vescio and colleagues make a compelling argument why understanding complex causal processes is needed to fairly judge affirmative action policies.

In Chapter 12, Randall K. Thomas and colleagues put a widely shared conventional wisdom to the test: that "everything has changed" in the U.S. following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Using a large database of 16 waves of online surveys that were spread out over eight years, the authors compared public opinion shortly after and a long time after 9/11 to the levels before the attacks. In line with results reported by Harbridge and colleagues (Chapter 9, this volume), the authors find an immediate increase in support for the government in general and for governmental measures related to the attacks right after 9/11. However, this support leveled off over time and then disappeared surprisingly quickly. Public opinion on other issues was unaffected. Only a few attitudes (e.g., about immigration) appeared to permanently change.

These results thus put bold question marks behind the conventional wisdom that "everything has changed." Importantly, these results challenge psychological theories about public opinion stability. The fact that some opinions snapped back to the original levels is in line with the notion of stable and durable opinions that only manifest temporary change (Cialdini, Levy, Herman, Kozlowski, & Petty, 1976). However, the finding that some opinions stayed at a higher level after the attacks challenges this notion and suggests that permanent opinion shifts can sometimes happen. Thomas and colleagues end their chapter with a call for two developments: (1) improved disconfirmability of theories of public opinion stability and change (current theories can be made to fit the observations making them difficult to disconfirm); and (2) more systematic research in political psychology that directly tests the specific predictions of the various theories of public opinion stability and change against each other.

Bo MacInnis and Jon Krosnick conclude the book in Chapter 13, in which they tackle a question of great political significance: what affects public perceptions of global warming? The focus of this chapter is on people's trust in climate scientists. Just as in the previous two chapters, the authors address an existing conventional wisdom—namely that controversies around the integrity of climate scientists have led to increasing disbelief in global warming among the general public. MacInnis and colleagues build on several social psychological theories to address both the effect of trust in climate scientists and the accurateness of the conventional wisdom.

The authors employed a large database and an experimental design to rule out alternative explanations of their findings. The accumulating evidence suggests that the effect of the controversies about climate scientists' integrity on the public's trust in scientists has been exceedingly small at best. Interestingly, people who did not trust scientists were not affected by statements of climate

experts that confirmed the existence of global warming, but they were also not affected by experts who were skeptical about global warming. Instead, these people seemed to have based their beliefs about global warming on their own experience with the weather.

Conversely, people who trusted scientists were more influenced by scientists of all types. Moreover, in line with evidence presented by Harbridge and colleagues (Chapter 9, this volume), trust in scientists was not influenced by media coverage of global warming. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research in political psychology on the link between trust in scientists and the effect on the public's belief in global warming.

Final thoughts

Every chapter in this book represents political psychology true to its name. The chapters address important questions within political science from a psychological perspective, and they simultaneously advance psychological theories. In fact, the careful consideration of the political context leads to new and sometimes unexpected insights into the human mind. Some chapters discovered situational circumstances that prevent or intensify psychological effects; other chapters identified classes of people who are more or less likely to be affected by such processes. In some cases, it was the step outside of the laboratory and into the real world that brought about these important contributions to well-established psychological theories. We hope that the studies in this volume inspire more work in political psychology that keeps both goals of our field in mind from the start of the work, to contribute to our understanding of politics in particular as well as to psychological theory formation in general.

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