Announcements

• Short Assignment 1 is due today!
• Remember that you must complete 1 reading commentary per week, submitted to TritonEd
• Office Hours: Tuesday 2:30-4:30 in SSB 341, or by appointment
Last Time

• How do we participate in politics? Voting, contacting representatives, discussing politics, campaigning, etc.

• Why do we participate in politics?
  – Resource model
  – Psychological correlates: personality, genetics, stress, emotions

• How do we choose a candidate?
  – Retrospective voting
  – Prospective voting
  – Information shortcuts (heuristics)
  – Partisanship
What questions do you have?
Today: Driving Questions

• How do individuals process political information? Why does it matter?
• Do individuals have enough information to make rational voting decisions?
• How do political rumors, conspiracy theories, and misinformation impact political behavior? Can we correct misinformation?
Today: Learning Outcomes

• Describe the main theories explaining how individuals process political information (e.g. online processing, motivated reasoning)
• Identify and explain the most common heuristics (information shortcuts) used in political decision-making
• Analyze whether individuals have enough information to make rational voting decisions
• Explain the psychological mechanisms behind misinformation
• Evaluate whether misinformation can be corrected
Information Processing
The Problem

• Too much information; too little time
• How does your brain decide what to process?
Two Important Notes on Information Processing

• People are often imperfect information processors
• People do not process information *tabula rasa*
Some Definitions

• Cognition: “a collective term for the psychological processes involved in the acquisition, organization, and the use of knowledge” (Bullock & Stallybrass 1977)

• Beliefs: “associations people create between an object and its attributes” (Eagly & Chaiken 1998)

• Cognitive processes: what happens in the mind while people move from observation of a stimulus to a response to that stimulus
Theories of Information Processing

1. Attribution Theory: we understand behavior by attributing a cause to others’ behavior
   – Use heuristics (mental shortcuts) in processing information about others
   – Often results in errors in determining what causes others’ behavior

2. Consistency Theory: people try to keep the components of their cognitive system in balance
   – Relieve inconsistencies by changing behavior, changing attitudes, or using cognitive strategies
   – Often results in selective perception, selective exposure, and selective attention
Attribution Theory: Common Heuristics

• Availability Heuristic: predict the likelihood of something based on how easy it is to think of examples of it
  – Example: If you just watched a news program about a local house fire, you’ll believe there is a greater chance of your own house catching fire
Attribution Theory: Common Heuristics

• Representativeness Heuristic: probability judgment. Evaluate the characteristics of another person and estimate the likelihood that that person has some other trait, behavior, or characteristic.
  – Example: Medical professionals are often seen with stethoscopes; if you see someone with a stethoscope, you will assume that it is probable that that person is a medical professional
Attribution Theory: Common Biases

• Fundamental Attribution Error: people are more likely to attribute others’ behavior to their general dispositions (personality traits, attitudes) than to the situation they’re in
  – Example: We attribute someone being unemployed to him/her being lazy, incompetent, bad at his/her job instead of attributing it to external factors like being laid off due to a bad economy
Attribution Theory: Common Biases

- Positivity Effect: tendency to attribute positive behaviors to dispositional (internal) factors and negative behaviors to situational (external) factors with individuals we like.
- Negativity Effect: tendency to attribute negative behavior to dispositional (internal) rather than situational (external) factors for people we dislike.
Attribution Theory: Common Biases

• Self-serving bias: tendency to take responsibility for successes more than failures
• Egocentric bias: tendency of individuals to accept more responsibility for joint outcomes than others attribute to them
Attribution Theory: Common Biases

• Confirmation Bias: tendency to favor information that confirms already existing beliefs
Attribution Theory and Politics?

• With 2-3 people around you, choose a notecard.

• The notecard will list one of the heuristics or biases from attribution theory.

• On the back of the notecard, write an example of this heuristic or bias in politics.
Consistency Theory

• People want to see their environment, the people in it, and their feelings about it as a coherent, consistent picture

• Dissonance: an aversive state of psychological tension that results when our behavior is inconsistent with our attitudes.

• Motivated to avoid cognitive dissonance through selective attention to information

• Once dissonance is experienced, we’re motivated to relieve it
Consistency Theory: Avoiding Dissonance

- Selective exposure: seeking consistent information not already present
- Selective attention: looking at consistent information once it is there
- Selective interpretation: translating ambiguous information as consistent
- Inconsistent information can be ignored or distorted so that it appears consistent with attitudes or cognitive categories
- **Motivated Reasoning:** Rather than search rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief, people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe
Consistency Theory: Relieving Dissonance

• Change your behavior
• Change your attitude
• Cognitive strategies to make it seem like your attitude and your behavior are in balance
  – Trivialization
  – Distort information
Consistency Theory and Politics?

In class activity.
5 minute break
Political Information Processing and Evaluations
How do we evaluate candidates?

- Rational Theorists: voters are “Bayesian updaters” considering new information in light of prior preferences and accurately updating those preferences.

- Political Psychologists: updating prior beliefs is subject to cognitive biases that make it harder for us to rationally update.
How do we evaluate candidates?

- **Theory 1: Online processing**: when asked to report an evaluation, only retrieve the ‘running tally’ that maintains the current affect toward the target.

  - Candidate A announces candidacy
  - Candidate A has a policy position I dislike
  - Candidate A is endorsed by my favorite celebrity
  - Candidate A is involved in a major scandal

  - I like Candidate A a lot
  - I like Candidate A a little less
  - I like Candidate A a lot
  - I like Candidate A a lot less
How do we evaluate candidates?

- Theory 2: **Memory-based Processing**: withhold evaluation until the moment of the decision, when the contents of memory are used to inform the evaluation
  - Not the default!
  - In order to activate, we need to be motivated to be *accurate*

---

Candidate A announces candidacy

Candidate A has a policy position I dislike

Candidate A is endorsed by my favorite celebrity

Candidate A is involved in a major scandal

I like Candidate A a lot

I like Candidate A a little less

I like Candidate A a lot

I like Candidate A a lot less

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐
Online Processing

- Memory for online processing contains cognitive information and the affective online tally
- “Hot cognition” – affect is automatically activated along with the cognitive node to which it is tied
- “How do I feel” Heuristic – when new information is encountered, the affect associated with existing knowledge interacts with affect toward the new information → instant assessment of new information
Potential Problems of Online Processing

• Can bias toward maintaining existing affect even in the face of disconfirming information
• Immediate evaluation of information can drive information search toward reinforcing existing affect → reach a pre-selected conclusion
• Discount, counter-argue, or ignore new information that challenges their existing evaluation and affect
• Information consistent with expectations is easily assimilated (no effort to accept what one already knows is true)
• Information inconsistent with expectations interrupts normal processing and forces us to expend effort to understand the world
Incongruent Information

• Congruent Information: consistent with your prior beliefs
  – I am a Republican, Candidate A is a Republican, I like Candidate A
  – New Congruent Information: Candidate A supports cutting spending on government programs

• Incongruent Information: inconsistent with your prior beliefs
  – I am a Republican, Candidate A is a Republican, I like Candidate A
  – New Incongruent Information: Candidate A opposes cutting spending on government programs
Incongruent Information

• Online processors engaged in motivated reasoning
  – Spend more time processing incongruent information (it takes more effort; might counter-argue)
  – Spend more time searching for information about preferred candidates (seek congruent information)
  – Support preferred candidates even more if they encounter incongruent information!
  – Sometimes make suboptimal decisions (vote for the ‘wrong’ candidate)

• Memory processors motivated to be accurate do not show these effects
Misinformation!
Misinformation

• Cases in which people’s beliefs about factual matters are not supported by clear evidence and expert opinion

• Recall: Individuals are likely to resist or reject arguments and evidence that contradict their opinions

• Misinformation is closely tied to political views
Obama Was Born Outside the US

Source: 2016 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project Data
Who believes misinformation?

- The most politically knowledgeable are the most likely to believe ideologically consistent misinformation! (Miller, Saunders, Farhart 2015; Flynn et al. 2016)
- Those who distrust the government (Miller, Saunders, Farhart 2015)
- Those with a psychological predisposition toward conspiratorial beliefs (Oliver & Wood 2014)
- Those who get information from other people instead of the media (Carlson, working paper)
- Those who rely on partisan media sources (Jacobson)
Why do people believe misinformation?

• Motivated reasoning!
  – More likely to believe and accept information that is consistent with prior beliefs
  – Actively resist and reject information that is inconsistent with prior beliefs

• Selective exposure
Why do we care? Is misinformation really a problem?

No! Misinformation is not that big of a deal.

- Bullock et al. (2015) show that when incentivized to be accurate, the par-san gap in misinformation diminishes.

- Maybe misinformation is really just "expressive responding" or "cheerleading".

Yes! Misinformation is a big problem.

- Misperceptions can distort public opinion and political debate on important policy issues (Kuklinski & Quirk 2000; Nyhan 2010).

- Rumors are more likely to spread through social networks and fake news is most often accessed on social media (Guess et al., working paper).

- Democratic theory suggests that the public should be well-informed...not misinformed.

- Misinformation can have behavioral consequences (e.g. Not vaccinating).

I don't know how to put this but...I'm kind of a big deal.

Not vaccinating)
Can we correct misinformation?

• Unclear.
• Really active area of research in the social sciences!
  – Political information
  – Climate change
  – Public health issues, vaccines
  – Communications research
• It’s really, really hard to correct misinformation
Correcting Misinformation

• Providing corrective information in mock news articles generally fails to reduce misperceptions for the strongest partisans (Nyhan & Reifler 2010)
  – Sometimes strengthen misperceptions! (Backfire effect)
  – More support for motivated reasoning
• The more misinformation is repeated, the more accessible it is in memory. Presenting the ‘fact and fiction’ side by side is ineffective
• Providing small monetary incentives for correct answers on surveys leads to fewer misperceptions (Bullock et al. 2015)
  – If people are motivated to be accurate, misperceptions could be reduced
  – Maybe people aren’t as misinformed as we think they are
Information Processing Summary

• Brains have to figure out a way to efficiently process information and filter out what’s unimportant

• Attribution Theory: we understand behavior by attributing a cause to others’ behavior
  – Heuristics (availability, representativeness, confirmation bias, etc.)

• Consistency Theory: people try to keep the components of their cognitive system in balance
  – Reduce dissonance (selective exposure, selective attention, change behavior, etc.)

• Typically evaluate candidates using online processing (running affective tally) instead of memory-based
  – Engage in motivated reasoning—spend more time processing incongruent information

• Cognitive biases in information processing can lead to misinformation!
Misinformation Summary

- Misinformation is largely driven by motivated reasoning—acceptance of information that is consistent with our views; rejecting information that is inconsistent
  - Strong partisan bias in misinformation acceptance
- Debate over how problematic misinformation is
- Misinformation is *really* hard to correct!
5 minute break
But how much information do people actually need?
Is the public well-informed?

UMM

NO
Political Knowledge in the US

• Decades of research shows that Americans have relatively little knowledge about politics
  – “Textbook” civics-skills knowledge
  – Knowledge of or interest in current events
  – Ability to identify political leaders

• Political knowledge is not evenly distributed throughout the public—those with the most resources are also the most knowledgeable
Political Knowledge in the US—Does it matter?

Yes. Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 1996
- Citizens need to be well-informed to make rational voting decisions and hold representatives accountable
- Those who are uninformed vote differently than they would if they were fully informed

- Citizens do not need to be fully informed to make rational voting decisions because they can use heuristics (cognitive shortcuts) to vote as if they were fully informed
Common Heuristics in Voting

• Party ID
• Ideology
• Endorsements
• Viability (Polls)
• Candidate Appearance
Heuristics: Pros and Cons

Pros
• A lot of research shows that heuristics help people vote as if they’re fully informed, so there’s no need to spend time and cognitive resources doing research
• Efficient information processing

Cons
• Heuristics help the most informed vote correctly, but can mislead the least informed (Lau & Redlawsk 2001)
• Uncomfortable thinking about individuals making important decisions using System 1 (peripheral route), easy processing instead of thinking critically
• Can be prone to errors
What do you think?

• Do voters have enough information to vote in line with their interests?
• How might candidates take advantage of cognitive biases in information processing to win over voters?
• Given our cognitive biases in information processing, how can we try to better inform the public?