Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?

Dan Cassino, Milton Lodge, and Charles S. Taber

The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter reviews recent work on implicit political attitudes, detailing how, when, and why unconscious processes impact the explicit expression of political beliefs, attitudes, and preferences. The authors begin by discussing thresholds of awareness, defining implicit attitudes and how the circumstances under which they reach conscious awareness. The ubiquity of unconscious effects in everyday life is considered, and two research paradigms for measuring implicit attitudes are discussed. The resulting dual-process model, in which influences can be either conscious or subconscious, allows us to understand how sensory input works its way through the mind to influence attitudes and behaviors in ways that are rarely evident to the individual. These influences often include factors that the individual would never consider as being important, but nevertheless hold enormous power over effortful decision-making.

Keywords: implicit attitudes, dual-process models, attitude priming, long-term and working memory, voting behavior, experimental priming paradigms

WE are witnessing a revolution in how social and behavioral scientists think about how people think and reason. Three decades of research in the cognitive sciences (Davidson, Scherer, and Hill Goldsmith, 2003), backed by hundreds of well-crafted behavioral studies in social psychology ( Bargh, 1999; Fazio, 1995), political psychology (Nosek, Graham, and Hawkins, 2010), and evidence from the neurosciences (Damasio, 1999; Gazzaniga, 2005), support affect-driven dual-process models of thinking and reasoning that directly challenge the way we social scientists think about, measure, and model the relationships among and between political beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

Central to this social-psychological perspective is the distinction between unconscious (“automatic,” “implicit,” “System 1”) and conscious (“controlled,” “explicit,” “System 2”) processing. Implicit processes are spontaneous, fast, relatively effortless, and typically operate below conscious awareness, whereas explicit processes are slow, deliberative, and effortful, with hundreds of experiments documenting pervasive effects of consciously
Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?

unnoticed stimulus events on virtually every aspect of our social and mental life (Gawronski and Payne, 2010; Petty, Fazio, and Brinol, 2009).

This chapter reviews recent work on implicit political attitudes, detailing how, when, and why unconscious processes impact the explicit expression of political beliefs, attitudes, and preferences. What especially attracts our interest as social scientists to this dual-process model is strong theoretical and empirical evidence showing how and why preconscious processes operate throughout the judgment process from the earliest sensory experience to the explicit expression of a belief, attitude, or goal-directed behavior, as well as demonstrations that unconscious processes are extraordinarily receptive to all sensory aspects of the environment, both internal and external, that escape conscious awareness. What is more, outcomes of implicit processing routinely diverge from conscious responses, and implicit effects appear to be most influential when a stimulus event—say upbeat music at a campaign event—is noticed but its influence on decisions is unappreciated (Dijksterhuis, 2004; Wilson, 2002).

Thresholds of Awareness

Because much of our everyday experience is experienced unconsciously, outside of awareness, it is difficult to assess directly by traditional survey methods. Current estimates (Norretranders, 1998) show the human capacity for processing sensory experience to be about 11 million bits per second, of which we are consciously aware of no more than 1/200,000 bps. More limited still is our capacity to consciously think and reason, where we are able to keep in mind about 7±2 chunks of information (Miller, 1957). This being so, much of what we experience, our very connections to the outside world, come and go unnoticed.

An objective threshold, as can be measured by brain wave patterns, must be passed for an external stimulus event to enter one of the sensory systems. A subjective threshold is passed if the stimulus event enters conscious awareness. When this occurs, there are three possible outcomes (Lodge and Taber, 2011, 5-6):

• If the objective threshold is not passed, perception does not occur and there is no registration of the event on the senses. Essentially, a non-event with no impact on information processing.

• If the objective threshold is passed but the subjective is not, we have unconscious perception—a sensory experience passes objective thresholds without ever entering conscious awareness. Such Consciously Unnoticed Events (Type 1 CUEs or interchangeably called Type 1 primes) escape notice; seen, registered, but consciously unnoticed. An objectively perceived stimulus may not reach conscious awareness for many reasons: because it occurred too rapidly or too peripherally to be noticed, or one is momentarily distracted.

• If the subjective threshold is passed, we have explicit conscious perception, the stuff of everyday experience. But we may “see” the stimulus without realizing its influence
on our thoughts, feelings, preferences, and choices. For such Consciously Unappreciated Events (Type 2 CUES or interchangeably Type 2 primes), the individual is consciously aware of the stimulus, say the American flag in the background of a candidate’s speech, but its impact on thought, reasoning, and choice is not seen as being influential.

Although unconscious processes are present from start to finish and will inevitably impact all thoughts and feelings that come consciously to mind, this sequence—unregistered-unconscious-conscious processing—implies a continuum. As we shall see, unconscious stimulus events are ubiquitous in the real world (Bargh, 1997), and this dual-process model holds great promise as well as many headaches for the study of political communication.

This dual-process model takes its roots in memory. Metaphorically, the mind has two main memory structures: long-term memory (LTM) and working memory (WM). LTM has an enormous capacity to store information, so much so that the mind requires highly complex structures and efficient processes to recover relevant information in a timely manner. Since pioneering research in the 1960s (Collins and Quillian, 1969), these structures have been visualized as a web in which related concepts are connected according to the strength of their association. So, for instance, while it is the case that President Obama is a Harvard Law School graduate and a Democrat, and both these statements are equally true, the concept Democrat is more strongly linked with him than is the concept Harvard. In semantic association networks, concepts become linked through a version of Hebb’s law (Hebb, 1949): concepts that fire together become wire together. When citizens encounter “Obama” and “Democrat” paired together time and time again, the two become closely linked, while the relatively smaller number of times Obama and Harvard are brought up together in the environment leads to a weaker connection between the two concepts.

In addition to these semantic relationships between concepts, LTM also organizes concepts in a parallel affective system (Bower, 1981; Forgas, 2001). Just as facts about George W. Bush, or any other concept in memory, are linked together based on their association to that object, they are also linked with other concepts of similar good-bad affective valence. So, for people who like Bush, the concept of “Bush” in LTM is linked with other things the individual likes about him, perhaps such directly related affectively charged traits as confidence and decisiveness. The strongest evidence for the existence of this parallel affective organization in LTM comes from priming studies where participants are exposed to a visual stimulus that is flashed so briefly that the individual is not consciously aware of having seen it, even though the brain is processing the stimulus. Researchers have normed a large number of words that have clear, population-wide positive or negative connections (Bradley and Lang, 1999): trait words such as ignorant and inarticulate, as well as such nouns as cancer, cockroach, and poison on the negative side, with handsome, honest, hugs, and joy on the positive side. When such affectively charged words are flashed on the computer screen—whether semantically related or not—concepts that are affectively related to the word become more accessible in memory. So, for
an individual who liked President Bush, flashing the word “joy” on the computer screen will dispose them to more quickly recall more positive information him and evaluate him more favorably. Similarly, flashing “cancer” will inhibit their recall of positive information and evaluation of Bush, despite the fact that there is no semantic relationship between Bush and the target words. This process—*an affect-congruence effect*—is reliable enough that, among other things, researchers in political psychology can used this priming effect to provide an implicit, unconscious measure of how much a participant likes or dislikes political figures, groups, and issues (Burdein et al., 2006; Cassino and Lodge, 2007; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Lodge, Taber, and Verhulst, 2011; Morris, Squires, Taber, and Lodge, 2003).

When an individual is exposed to a communication, the concepts in the message—whether consciously attended to or not—begin to activate the attendant concepts in long-term memory. Once a concept is activated, that activation spreads to all of the related concepts (Collins and Loftus, 1975), whether that connection is semantic or affective. This spreading activation moves through long-term memory: concepts that are part of the communication are activated, with that activation spreading almost instantaneously to all its related concepts. As political communications generally involve a large number of concepts coming into perception in rapid succession (think of television ads combining still images, words, or video with a voice over narration, all of which would simultaneously activate nodes in long-term memory), individual concepts become activated and reactivated in real time as they, and concepts related to them, are perceived. Over time, in a matter of moments, the activation level of the concept and its associated concepts decreases to make ready for what information comes next.

At this point in the process, the second type of memory becomes relevant. In contrast with long-term memory, working memory has a severely limited capacity: only about seven concepts can coexist in working memory simultaneously (Barsalou, 1992; Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977; Simon, 1967). These concepts in WM, in a very real sense, are what the individual is consciously thinking about at that time, and researchers have envisioned the process of moving concepts from long-term memory to working memory (as well as pattern recognition) through a pandemonium model (Neisser, 1967; Ratcliff, 1978; Larsen and Bundesen, 1996). In such models, activation is seen as a competition between all of the activated concepts, with those that are most activated, for whatever reason, being selected for further processing in working memory.

It is at this point that the parallel nature of the affective and semantic connections becomes critical. Those concepts that are most semantically implicated by the communication are of course likely to win the competition and to move into working memory. So, if an individual is reading a message about tax policy, the concept of taxes is going to be constantly activated and reactivated, as many of the concepts in the communication will either be about taxes directly, or about concepts closely related to taxes that will cause its further activation. However, the concepts related to taxes that are most likely to be brought into working memory—and therefore, potentially enter the conscious awareness of the individual as a relevant consideration—are those that are *both* semantically and af-
Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?

effectively related to the concept. Suppose that taxes are viewed negatively, but there are an equal number of positively and negatively evaluated concepts that are semantically related to taxes (public works projects and tax refunds might be seen positively, while IRS audits and tax preparation might have a negative affective connection). Since the activation of the concept of taxes spreads both affectively and semantically, those concepts that are both semantically and affectively connected with the concept of taxes will most likely pop into working memory. So, when a message mentions taxes, a negatively viewed concept, the other associations that come into working memory are going to be biased in favor of other negatively viewed concepts: IRS audits rather than positively perceived public works projects are likely to win out.

Individuals may well be able to make reasoned decisions about the accuracy or implications of communications, but they can only do so with the information at their disposal. The mismatch in capacity between working and long-term memory means that there is a significant difference between all of the information that an individual might have about a communication, and the information about it that enters into working memory and then into the decision stream. An individual may attempt to make a cold, rational, effortful evaluation of a communication based on the information in working memory, but the considerations are biased from the outset because the sampling of information in working memory is already biased by the affective congruence effect spurred by one’s prior attitude toward the object. Simply put, an individual can decide if a candidate is proposing good or bad ideas, but that evaluation is going to be largely based on concepts in working memory that are affectively congruent with one’s prior attitude of the candidate. A liked candidate is going to bring to working memory more positively viewed attributes and concepts, while a disliked candidate will promote the opposite. Affect precedes and contextualizes cognition. Moreover, this is not a bias that an individual can easily overcome by trying hard to be even-handed, for it is a consequence of hard-wired processes that govern the retrieval of considerations (Bechara, Damasio, Tranel, and Damasio, 2005; Damasio, 1994, 1999).

Implicit Attitude Defined

Two somewhat diverging definitions of implicit attitude dominate the field: Greenwald and Banaji (1995) define implicit attitudes as “introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experiences that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects” (8). Accordingly, an implicit attitude is an unconscious effect sparked by some immediate environmental event—perhaps the attractiveness of a candidate—on feeling, thought, or behavior. The key here is that the individual is not consciously aware of the stimulus events’ impact. Wilson et al. (2000) see implicit attitudes as “evaluations that (a) have an unknown origin (i.e., people are unaware of the basis of their evaluation); (b) are activated automatically; and (c) influence implicit responses, namely uncontrollable responses and ones that people do not view as an expression of their attitude and thus do not attempt to control” (104). Note that from this dual-attitude perspective implicit and explicit attitudes can coexist: an individual can—as is
commonly found in studies of stereotyping—simultaneously hold an explicit positive attitude and an implicit negative attitude toward the same object. Which one gets triggered is driven by context.

The Ubiquity of Unconscious Effects in Everyday Life

Unconscious priming effects have been demonstrated experimentally on virtually all higher mental processes (see the overviews in Gawronski and Payne, 2010; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; and Petty, Fazio, and Brinol, 2009). Of special interest to communication scholars are studies of attitude formation (Betsch, Plessor, Schwieren, and Gulig, 2001); the evaluation of political candidates and groups (Lodge and Taber, 2005); liberal-conservative ideology (Jost, Nosek, and Gosling, 2008); religious appeals (Albertson, 2011); the making of moral judgments (Haidt, 2001); group identifications (Perdue, Davidio, Gurtman, and Tyler, 1990); national symbols (Ferguson and Hassin, 2007); and a range of overt, goal-driven behaviors (Gollwitzer and Bargh, 1996), chief among them consumer preferences and behavior (Perkins and Forehand, 2010).

While much of this research involves experimentation inside a laboratory setting, more real-world demonstrations are coming to the fore. For example, Berger, Meredith, and Wheeler (2008) showed that budgetary support for education varied as a function of where people voted—whether in schools, churches, or firehouses—with voters more likely to favor raising state taxes to support education if voting in schools, even controlling for their political views. Clearly, the voters knew what building they were in, but they were not consciously aware of its influence on their vote choice. An extensive meta-analysis of ballot order effects (Schneider et al., 2008) found evidence of a primacy effect on ballot position, where being listed first increased the vote count for 80 percent of candidates. And for a final example of a Type 2 CUE, Achen and Bartels (2006) find that a string of shark attacks in the summer months before the 1916 presidential election cost Woodrow Wilson about ten percentage points in New Jersey beach communities, but produced no effect inland.

A major area of research on implicit attitudes focuses on facial attractiveness, with meta analyses reviewing over one thousand studies pointing to robust effects of facial attractiveness on multiple evaluations, attitudes, and behaviors (Eagly et al., 1991; Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000). Here, as in the stereotypic inferencing of traits from gender, age, and race, the visage is rapidly registered and spontaneously triggers stereotypic assumptions about the individual’s character, attitudes, and behavior. Averaging over a hundred studies, a mere glance at an attractive face promotes a one-half standard deviation enhancement on positive personality traits, the attractive seen as being more socially competent (70 percent vs. 30 percent), more worthy of attention (74 percent vs. 26 percent), and more successful (68 percent vs. 32 percent). What is important here is that
physical appearance is registered but its inferential impact on character perceptions, evaluations, and behavior is typically unappreciated by those making the judgments.

In an important series of experiments, Alex Todorov and his colleagues (2005) demonstrated that competence ratings based on a one-second exposure to two paired photos of competing congressional candidates predicted the 2004 House and Senate election outcomes at significantly better than chance levels (67.7 percent and 68.8 percent, respectively). Note here that competence ratings were made of unfamiliar candidates by naive experimental participants before the 2004 congressional elections, and the predictions were to the actual electoral outcomes, not vote intention. In other analyses, in addition to making competence judgments, participants evaluated the paired candidates on attractiveness, likability, trustworthiness, and other dispositional judgments, all well known to be important in the evaluation of political candidates (Kinder et al., 1980; Funk, 1999). The implication of this research is that people can make substantively important attributions on a mere one-second exposure to the facial photos of unfamiliar political candidates, and, what is more, these snap judgments (typically taking little more than one second) discriminate congressional winners from losers without any information or contextual cues. All this predictive power is accomplished without party identification, ideological proximity, or any of the traditional predictors of vote choice.

Numerous studies have replicated the general finding that both Type 1 and Type 2 CUES, when used in appearance-based judgments, predict election outcomes, while ruling out the alternative hypothesis that competence judgments simply reflect media-induced familiarity with the politicians (Lenz and Lawson, 2011). Antonakis and Dalgas (2009) pushed the research question deeper by asking 681 children aged 5 to 13 to play a computer game simulating a voyage on a difficult seagoing mission in which they chose which person (from the paired photos of French parliamentarians) they would want to captain the boat from Troy to Athens. The scenario for this study dates to Plato’s Republic (1894/2008: 153), in which he argues that the crew (voters) cannot select a competent captain (ruler) because the crew is beguiled by appearances. The children in Antonakis and Dalgas’s experiment predicted the French election outcome from their choice of ship captain with a correlation 0.71, which was indistinguishable from the adults’ predictive success. These findings tell us that appearance-based trait inferences develop quite early and are surprisingly stable across age cohorts. Both children and adults can use facial cues to inform their preferences without any conscious in-depth processing.

Going one level deeper, there are many experiments in developmental psychology that show the effects of attractiveness on infants and toddlers (Pascalis and Slater, 2003). In one of many such experiments, Langlois and colleagues (1987) showed 6-month-old infants images of female faces previously rated as more to less attractive. For each pairing of faces (none were “drop-dead gorgeous” or “grotesque”), they found that the infants fixed their gaze longer on the more attractive face. Pushing the paradigm to its limits, the Langlois team (1991) next examined the preferences of 3-month-old infants to four types of faces—black men and women, white men and women—all previously rated on attrac-
tiveness. Results confirm earlier, less well-controlled studies, in showing that preference for attractive faces holds across genders and race.

Judgments of competence are clearly related to vote choice, as is shown repeatedly in the National Election Surveys, but the spontaneous process of making competence judgments appears to be preceded by an even earlier automatic assessment of attractiveness. Given the emerging consensus that judgments of attractiveness have a biological basis, with specific brain structures engaged in the recognition of faces and facial expressions (Ekman, 2007), it is not surprising that these thin-sliced, one-second evaluations of political candidates presented pairwise are influenced by an even more primary evaluation of attractiveness. In addition to predicting higher levels of competence, physical attractiveness of politicians significantly predicts higher levels of likability, integrity, and trust, all of which have also been repeatedly linked to the evaluation of political candidates and vote choice (Kinder et al., 1980). Specific to the automaticity of snap judgments, there are compelling demonstrations that people respond spontaneously to the affective components of a broad array of attitudinal objects (people, groups, and issues), even when—as we will see—the priming events are presented below the threshold of conscious awareness.

Research Paradigms Measuring Implicit Attitudes

This distinction between conscious (“explicit”) and unconscious (“implicit”) beliefs and attitudes has led to the development of indirect measures and experimental procedures designed to tap predispositions that escape conscious awareness (see the review by Wittenbrink, 2007). As a consequence, implicit attitudes must be measured indirectly, that is, one cannot directly ask a respondent if he or she was influenced by X. In addition to the problem of strategic responding, direct and indirect measures do not necessarily cohere or predict the same behaviors, with the correlation between measures of implicit and explicit attitudes often varying in the 0.3 to 0.6 range, dependent on one’s strength of attitude, time constraints, context, and of course the individual’s history of reinforcement (Nosek, Greenwald, and Banaji, 2005). Following De Houwer and Moors’s (2005) analyses, a measurement strategy is implicit if responses are “uncontrolled, unintentional, goal independent, purely stimulus driven, autonomous, unconscious, efficient or fast” (188–189). While few measures satisfy all the criteria, indirect measures are proving to be extraordinarily sensitive and responsive to subtle environmental cues occurring outside conscious awareness. The key here is that indirect measures can assess a respondent’s unconscious, spontaneous response to a stimulus that is not mediated by conscious thought, thereby tapping into automatically triggered beliefs, attitudes, and habitual behaviors, and circumventing strategic responding. Two research paradigms dominate the laboratory study of implicit beliefs and attitudes.
Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?

Implicit Association Test (IAT).

The most popular method used to assess implicit attitudes is the Implicit Association Task (developed by Greenwald McGhee and Schwartz, 1998, and Greenwald and Banaji, 1995) and is widely used to measure the automaticity of social-psychological attitudes. Based on the basic premise of the associationist structure of long-term memory, which posits that cognitively accessible information is easier to respond to, thereby facilitating faster responses, the IAT employs an explicit categorization task to assess implicit associations. In a typical application to stereotyping, participants are presented with a set of words or pictures that vary along two separate dimensions; one dimension, perhaps, is of male and female faces, which can then be paired with an evaluative dimension comprised of a pleasant or unpleasant trait word, such as sensitive, hard-working, or emotional. The participant’s job is to simply categorize the stimuli as quickly as possible along the gender dimension. The closer the association of face to trait the faster the response to categorize the word or picture, with recent work extending the categorical concepts to ideology, party identification, and a variety of other politically relevant stimuli (Nosek, 2004; Nosek, Graham, and Hawkins, 2010). A detailed description of the IAT setup, method, and measures is available at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit.

The Sequential Priming Paradigm.

Sequential priming is a simple application of the classic memory-based associationist model. A prime word or picture activates a concept in LTM, with activation spreading along associative pathways to other related concepts. The length of time that it takes to respond to the target concept is the measure of the strength of the association between the prime and the target. Sequential priming can be used to effectively test the strength of association between semantic or affective categories. Researchers can test the automaticity or implicitness of the responses by precisely controlling the exposure time of the primes.

There are two types of sequential priming designed to measure the associative meaning(s) of concepts (Collins and Loftus, 1975; Collins and Quillian, 1969; Neely, 1976), one paradigm for measuring semantic associations, the other for measuring attitudinal responses. Lodge, Taber, and Vehhlust (2011) describe the two paradigms in detail with multiple examples. The semantic priming paradigm is based on a lexical decision task where, say, the prime “Obama” could be followed by a genuine English word, “Democrat,” or a nonword such as “paslow.” The participant’s task is to, as quickly as possible without making too many errors, press the Yes response key if the target word is a genuine English word, or the No key if not. Here too, the basic idea is that the closer the semantic association between the prime and target concepts in long-term memory, the faster the reaction time to say whether the target is or is not a word. Note, this is an indirect measure, as subjects are not being asked if Obama is a Democrat, but simply whether “Democrat” is or is not a word. For strongly associated concepts we expect a facilitation effect, that is, relatively fast reaction times to verify that “Democrat” is a real word because of the close, well-learned semantic association between the two concepts in LTM. If the participant responds significantly faster to one prime-target pairing than the
other, we can infer that the concept is more strongly (perhaps automatically) associated in long-term memory.

In the 1980s Fazio et al. (1986) adapted the semantic priming paradigm to study pre-conscious evaluations and test Zajonc’s (1984, 2000) primacy of affect hypothesis. Here, a prime, say “Hitler” or any familiar leader, group, or issue is presented, followed by an unambiguously positive or negative target word. The participant’s task is to indicate if the target word is a positive or negative concept. Assuming here we are not dealing with a psychopath, such affectively positive primes as “cockroach” will have a facilitatory effect, that is, promote a faster reaction time to indicate the target word “cockroach” is a negative word, while such affectively incongruent primes as “beautiful” or “healthy” promote an inhibition effect, a slower reaction time to identify a pleasant word as positive for disliked leaders, groups, and issues. Here, again, this is an indirect measure; we are not asking if Hitler is bad, but rather is the word cockroach a bad word. Affective primes make it easier (faster) for a participant to respond to affectively congruent targets and harder (slower) to respond to affectively incongruent targets. Given that the primes need not be substantively related to the target of evaluation, this affective-congruence effect is especially problematic, as the biasing effect easily escapes notice and is consequently less likely to be questioned.

In a major modification of the sequential priming paradigm, researchers have begun to gravitate toward the use of subliminal primes (Bargh, 2007; Lodge and Taber, 2005; Wittenbrink, 2007). By definition, subliminal primes are concepts (words or pictures) presented below the threshold for conscious perception, yet above the threshold for sensory perception. At prime exposure times from 14 to 100 milliseconds the prime appears as no more than a flicker on the computer screen. Thus, people are consciously unaware that they actually saw anything at all. When participants are subliminally primed, there is no opportunity for them to intentionally or consciously modify their response. A major finding of the affective priming paradigm is that a prime-valence by target-valence interaction holds here, even when there is no discernable semantic link between prime and target, say, terrorist and “toothache.” These subliminal priming results offer strong support for the prevalence of hot cognition in political information processing which cannot be explained by purely cognitive models. Moreover, these effects are clearly outside conscious awareness, and so provide the first step in the cascade of automatic affective processes that drive motivated reasoning.

Conclusion

Political science in general and political psychology in particular have largely come to reject the view of individuals as rational actors, with a tsunami wave of evidence demonstrating that individuals are more like lawyers than scientists, often striving harder to defend their attitudes than correct them in the face of contrary facts and figures. The theoretical and empirical grounding for motivated reasoning models posits the primacy of emotional or affective responses on preference and choice. Still, many in political science
have adopted a cognitively based dual-process model positing that individuals can jump from hot and cool reasoning, depending on their motivation and circumstances. The implication of this view is that although affect may dominate the evaluation process when individuals either don’t care much about the outcome or aren’t paying attention, the individuals can, with effort, override these tendencies and act rationally (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981), or at least use heuristic and similar strategies to approximate rational acting (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006).

Contrary to the way we routinely model how people form, update, and express their attitudes, individuals do not typically analyze their attitudes in a deliberative, conscious manner (Dijksterhuis, 2004; Wilson, 2002). Rather, their thoughts, feelings, and expressions of attitude are guided by a spontaneously activated semantic and instantly available affective appraisals. Whereas traditional questionnaires typically measure consciously constructed attitudes, implicit measures can index the automatic evaluation of social-psychological objects and so are particularly suited to the prediction of behaviors that are difficult to control, or behavior in situations where subjects are not strongly motivated to deliberate, or—this we think most common—in situations where the individual is aware of the stimulus event but unappreciative of its influence on thoughts and feelings.

Unnoticed and unappreciated “priming” events are ubiquitous in political communications and have been shown to significantly impact stated beliefs and attitudes. The affective organization of long-term memory running parallel to its semantic organization means that countervailing messages will have less impact on judgments when affectively incongruent with one’s prior attitude. What is new here is that spontaneously activated semantic and affective inputs appear to enter the decision stream first, anchor the evaluation, and bias what considerations subsequently enter the decision stream. If people are made aware of this affective-congruence bias, it is possible, albeit difficult, to override its influence on perceptions and evaluations (Devine, 1989; Mendelberg, 2001). But when priming events go unnoticed or happen outside conscious awareness, there may be no registration of the event and hence no dissonance to motivate a correction. We see no easy way to fully overcome this bias, other than by repeated exposure to messages that activate countervailing considerations. One problem of course is that many of us live in an echo chamber that reverberates with attitudinally congruent beliefs and attitudinally reinforcing messages, with each congruent message strengthening one’s prior semantic and affective associations.

References


Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?


Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?


Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?


Implicit Political Attitudes: When, How, Why, With What Effects?


---

**Dan Cassino**

Dan Cassino (Ph.D., Political Science, Stony Brook University) is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, New Jersey, as well as the Director of Experimental Research for the Public Mind Poll. He conducts research in American politics, institutions (Congress and Presidency), youth politics, and political psychology and is the author of *Consuming Politics: Jon Stewart, Branding and the Youth Vote in America.*

**Milton Lodge**

Milton Lodge (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is a Distinguished University Professor of Political Science and Co-Director (with Charles Taber) of the Laboratory for Experimental Research at Stony Brook University. He is the author of numerous articles and books on political cognition.

**Charles S. Taber**

Charles S. Taber (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is a Professor of Political Science, Dean of the Graduate School, Vice Provost of Graduate Education at Stony Brook University. His research interests include political psychology and public opinion, international relations and foreign policy decision-making, and computational models of political cognition. Most recently, Taber has worked on emotions and political information processing, the formation and updating of preferences, and psychological reactions to terrorism, race, and immigration. Taber's recent articles have appeared in *The American Political Science Review, The American Journal of Political Science, Political Psychology,* and *Political Analysis.*