

*A Motivation-Based Approach towards Understanding the Causes and Consequences of  
Selective Exposure*

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**ABSTRACT:** Scholarly interest in the phenomenon of selective exposure to political information has peaked over the past decade with the dawn of the information age. While much of this research has focused on the extent to which we are witnessing a shift towards selectivity amongst the electorate, the literature to this point has been devoid of additional theoretical development that aids in our understanding of what motivates selective information-seeking practices as well as what implications such practices have for political attitudes and tolerance. This paper proposes an evolution in our thinking regarding selective exposure, arguing for a more dynamic model of the mechanisms that underlie information choice and accounting for how these same mechanisms are also expected to influence how new information is processed and integrated into individuals' existing attitudes. The details of this model, which applies principles from the theories of motivated reasoning and elaboration likelihood, are presented, followed by a discussion of the hypothetical implications of this alternative arrangement as well as its impact on our understanding of political information effects more generally.

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## **Introduction:**

The ways in which we engage with the political information environment - and the consequences of our information-seeking strategies for political attitudes and tolerance of alternative viewpoints - continues to be a question of utmost importance for those concerned about the democratic well-being of our citizens. Perhaps at no point in time has this question been of more concern than at the present, with many scholars and pundits ruing the shift towards partisan selective exposure that is thought to have been accompanied by the dawn of the information age. Our preference for political information sources with which we agree and aversion towards those with which we do not have led many to voice concerns that we may be slowly descending into a regrettable state of polarization and intolerance (e.g. Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Sunstein 2001).

While we have undoubtedly witnessed a shift in our political information-seeking practices over the past few decades, I argue that those fearful of a citizenry rife with polarization and intolerance as a consequence of selectivity have arrived at such concerns prematurely. In order to fully comprehend the implications of our information exposure practices for democratic citizenship, advances must be made in how we conceptualize information choice and the consequences of political media exposure. More specifically, emphasis must be placed on understanding why political information is being sought in the first place - which, according to theories from cognitive psychology, also informs what types of consequences we can expect to result from information exposure. In light of studies that have suggested a variety of motives for political information-seeking behaviors beyond an aversion to dissonance, the possibility exists that the effects of selective exposure are not uniform, instead conditional on the reasons why one is seeking out pro-attitudinal information in the first place. Furthermore, the remedial effects of

cross-cutting exposures (Mutz 2006), namely in developing tolerance and understanding, may also be partially dependent on the underlying intent beneath the exposure decision as well.

Mindful of these possibilities, this paper advances an alternative theoretical approach in an attempt to better understand the phenomena of political information choice and exposure consequences by accounting for the role of motivation. The remainder of this paper will proceed in four parts. First, this paper will offer a brief review of dissonance theory, the current paradigm through which information choice generally and partisan selective exposure specifically have long been understood. A number of recent studies and developments will then be reviewed that have introduced doubt that dissonance theory is sufficiently complex to explain both the causes and consequences of selective exposure. Next, a process-based theoretical model will be presented that applies the theory of motivated reasoning in proposing a number of hypotheses for how motivations influence information preference as well as moderate the effect of information exposure on political attitudes, followed by a broader discussion of how these anticipated relationships are expected to reframe our understanding of the consequences of exposure to political information. Finally, a methodological approach towards testing this alternative model is presented.

### **Dissonance Theory and Selective Exposure:**

The idea that people seek out information which confirms their attitudes and avoid information that challenges their existing beliefs is one that has transcended many generations. Our predilection towards that which we agree has been noted in the observations of Sir Francis Bacon, the literary works of Leo Tolstoy, and even the poems of Dante. However, most identify the seminal work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) on voting behavior as one of the

first empirical examinations of selective exposure in the modern age. In a survey analysis of Erie County, Pennsylvania, the now-classic study found that around two-thirds of likely voters received more information in support of their preferred candidate during the 1940 presidential election than information that challenged their preference.

With an empirical foundation behind an idea long thought to be true, emphasis - specifically within the field of psychology - shifted towards understanding the reasons why we behave in such a confirmatory fashion. The most important theoretical development in our understanding of selective exposure emerged from this period was Festinger's (1957; 1964) dissonance theory. Concerned with how individuals dealt with decisions after they had been made, Festinger defined the state of dissonance as the inconsistency between a made decision and the perceived implications of that decision as well as the implications of any perceived alternatives. Simply put, an individual would be considered in a state of cognitive dissonance if the negative aspects of a decision amongst several alternatives were inconsistent with having chosen it, and the positive aspects of one or several of the alternatives were inconsistent with the decision to pass them up (Frey 1986).

Festinger proceeded to characterize dissonance as a "negative drive state," meaning that individuals would be motivated to alleviate its arousal through pursuing a variety of means relative to the intensity that one feels a sense of cognitive dissonance. Upon experiencing extreme dissonance - for example, discovering that one's decision is completely incompatible with what would be considered a desirable outcome - individuals may resort to accommodate their conflicting cognitions by changing their decision. Slight levels of dissonance, on the other hand, are unlikely to elicit much of a reaction at all, since low levels of incompatibility between a decision and its implications are unlikely to motivate one into take some course of remedial

action. However, in response to experiencing moderate levels of post-decision dissonance, individuals may be motivated to self-select into an information environment where decision-contrary exposures are anticipated to be low. In other words, individuals may cope with the threat of dissonance by actively seeking out decision-reinforcing information (confirmation bias) while avoiding exposure to decision-contrary information (defensive avoidance).

The application of dissonance theory towards understanding information preference was not without its early detractors, whose criticisms stemmed from alleged theoretical limitations and empirical irregularities. Sears and Freedman (1967) took dissonance theory - as it pertained to information choice - to task for not distinguishing between dissonance avoidance as an active process versus perceived dissonance avoidance as a byproduct of the social context within which people found themselves, known as *de facto selectivity*. In other words, citizens may be perceived as avoiding dissonance not because of some conscious decision to screen out information from the other side but because the social environment acts as a filter, presenting them with a biased sample of information with no action on their part. Others criticized the applicability of dissonance theory due to the fact that it only explained information choice under rather narrow circumstances: the search for information after a decision has been made (Frey 1986). Worse yet, empirical studies on the role of dissonance in fostering congenial information searches yielded unconvincing, even disconfirming, results. While a variety of experimental studies demonstrated only slight or inconsistent effects in influencing information preferences (e.g. Bartlett et al. 1974; Feather 1962; 1963), others offered evidence that people may actually pursue inconsistent information in their post-decision search, albeit in contexts of relatively low decision importance (Freedman 1965; Sears 1965).

One of the most common explanations for why dissonance theory failed in its early attempts at explaining selective exposure practices - and the relatively low levels of selectivity amongst the masses more generally - involved the nature of the information environment during the middle of the 20th century. The media market was defined by a relative few players, and the news coverage that was available was driven by the norm of objectivity. The combination of these factors resulted in consumer access to a small collection of news voices determined to provide citizens with unbiased, representative coverage (Allen and D'Alissio 2000; Iyengar and Hahn 2009) - an environment which did not allow for meaningful choice among sources. However, the end of the 20th century brought with it sweeping changes that transformed the contemporary news environment, both technological and philosophical. Cable news and the internet increased exponentially the avenues through which individuals could seek out information. Eager to capitalize on the profit potential of these new media, news executives began to develop niche news markets aimed at solidifying desired demographic bases in order to generate higher revenues (Bennett 2011).

What emerged from these developments was an information environment that provided a near-unlimited degree of choice to the news consumer, along with it a renewed interest in the topic of selective exposure by scholars convinced that it was merely inappropriate to expect selective consumption patterns in earlier time periods. The past decade has brought us numerous research examples of a profound shift in our political information consumption patterns, both in the context of survey research (e.g. Chafee et al. 2001; Nie et al. 2010; Stroud 2008) and experimental studies (e.g. Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009).

Central to most of these studies is the paradigm established by dissonance theory a half century earlier; past generations simply did not have at their disposal adequate options for choice

in eluding the state of dissonance, a problem that no longer plagues the modern news consumer. Dissonance theory remains the lens through which we understand selective exposure to political information, indicated by its prominent position in many of the most recent theoretical explanations of selectivity (e.g. Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Iyengar et al. 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009; Nie et al. 2010).

### **Evidence of an Aging Paradigm:**

Long before the renewed interest in selective exposure, cracks had begun to emerge in the foundation of dissonance theory as the explanation behind citizens' information-seeking practices. Most notably, experimental studies that demonstrated little (and even contradictory) evidence that dissonance avoidance inspired a preference for the pro-attitudinal at the expense of the counter-attitudinal raised serious doubts about the value of its application to understanding information choice. The emergence of recent studies that have demonstrated a preference towards that with which we agree and an aversion towards that which we do not have led these concerns to be brushed aside, with little more than a mention of how the role of dissonance has been subject to challenges in the past. However, a more thorough review of dissonance theory as the dominant paradigm through which we understand political information-seeking behavior suggests a series of theoretical limitations - many of which echo some of the same concerns expressed decades ago, others of which come in light of further theoretical and empirical examination - that leave much to be desired in understanding both information choice and, perhaps more importantly, the consequences of information exposure.

In a series of studies in the 1960s, Sears and Freedman suggested that dissonance avoidance played little to no role at all in fostering information preferences, even in the post-

decision context in which Festinger argued that dissonance would play its greatest role. In an experimental study that asked participants to levy a judgment in a fictional criminal trial, Sears (1965) found that participants were likely to choose information sources that ran counter to their initial judgments. In a similar experiment, Freedman (1965) found that participants who were asked to evaluate job candidates behaved in nearly identical ways as suggested by Sears' study. Upon forming their judgments and being provided with the opportunity to read the evaluations made by others, participants in Freedman's study chose to read those evaluations that ran counter to their conclusions.

Taken in tandem, the studies of Sears and Freedman challenged the fundamental principle of dissonance theory with regards to selective exposure; instead of seeking out those sources that agreed with one's predisposition, participants instead chose to seek out incongruent information. One may note that these early studies involved issues and decisions for which participants were not heavily invested and thereby are not as damning of an indictment on dissonance theory as some may suggest; to note, it is established in Festinger's theory that dissonance avoidance is a more salient motivation on those issues for which we are strongly attached, thereby providing an alternative explanation for the lack of an effect in these studies. However, at minimum these studies suggest that dissonance is limited in its applicability with regards to information choice. Dissonance theory assumes that the utility we ascribe to potential information sources is predominantly a function of whether or not information is expected to conform with or run counter to our prior decisions and beliefs. These studies, however, introduced the notion that the utility we attribute to potential information sources is a more nuanced process than simply a function of our goal to avoid dissonance.



Perhaps due to the lull in the selective exposure literature until the end of the century and accompanied by the subsequent discovery of new evidence that demonstrated the existence of partisan-motivated selective exposure, the implications of Sears and Freedman's findings were not given much in terms further attention until decades later. However, more recent work has begun taking up the question of how context, loosely defined, may serve to affect information utility calculations and subsequently influence exposure decisions. Valentino and colleagues (2009) utilized an experimental design to understand how information utility impacted individuals' exposure practices, focusing on the emotional context. Prompting the emotion of anxiety in participants by informing them that they were to defend their opinions, the study showed that individuals ascribed utility to - and subsequently were motivated to use - sources that served to alleviate the state of anxiety, *regardless* of whether or not the information was pro- or counter-attitudinal in nature.

Additional research has approached the role of information utility in influencing information choice as it pertains to the related concept of uncertainty - a state commonly associated with heightened levels of anxiety. An experiment by MacKuen and colleagues (2010) found that when faced with novel circumstances - in their case, an unfamiliar political issue - participants were motivated to engage in a more deliberative style of citizenship with regards to their information-seeking practices, characterized by the consideration of information from sources thought to represent the other side of the political spectrum. Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman (2012) utilized a quasi-experiment in order to determine whether the electoral context could lead information utility to trump a confirmation bias in participants' exposure practices. The researchers found that when a shift in governmental power was perceived as likely and respondents' preferred party candidate was thought to have a low chance of election, participants

were motivated to engage with counter-attitudinal information, a consequence attributed in the researchers' minds to information utility.

Collectively, these studies suggest that the selective behavior of political information consumers appear to be more dynamic than previously thought. For one, it would appear that the role of dissonance avoidance on information choice is by no means universal as utility can be defined by the information seeker across a number of dimensions aside from the extent to which one expects to experience the psychological discomfort associated with holding conflicting cognitions upon exposure. For example, the extent to which the source is expected to reduce political anxiety or uncertainty or even provide insights into one's political opponents may lead information consumers to actually seek out that which challenges their prior beliefs. This is not to say that dissonance avoidance is unimportant towards understanding political selective exposure patterns, only to suggest that the drive to avoid dissonance is but one potential motivation of the political information consumer, varying in its degree of impact on information choice across individuals and contexts, and should be treated as such.

Perhaps just as important, these studies also demonstrate that people could be engaging selectively with the political information environment in nearly indistinguishable fashions but for very different reasons. In the few studies that were outlined above, we see individuals exhibiting a greater willingness to engage with counter-attitudinal political information across varied ends - to equip one's self to better defend their opinions, to familiarize themselves with novel political circumstances or to understand the opposition. These are just a sampling of the motivations behind seeking out counter-attitudinal political information, as there potentially exists various other drives for such behavior as well. With regards to our tendency towards pro-attitudinal information, it is not difficult to imagine other reasons aside from avoiding the unsettling state of

dissonance that drive our preference for agreeable sources such as to accrue evidence in our attempts to persuade others or to reduce the cognitive load associated with processing multiple political perspectives, just to name a few.

The importance of this insight extends beyond understanding the motivations that underlie our political information preferences and into our understanding of the consequences of exposure to political information. The selective exposure literature, at least within the political context, has been concerned primarily with the idea that consuming a consistent flow of pro-attitudinal information and avoiding those sources that may conflict with prior political attitudes may create a society of extremists, resulting from information practices that bombard them with messages that confirm their preexisting views (e.g. Sunstein 2001). In addition to polarization, many lament the absence of so-called "cross-cutting" exposure in our political media diets, thought to foster tolerance and understanding of competing political perspectives (Mutz 2006), due to our aversion to disagreeable sources.

However, the relationships between political information exposure and political attitudes and tolerance no longer seem so simple when we conceptualize political information choice to be a process determined by a variety of motivations as opposed to the sole motivation of avoiding dissonance. Insights from psychology - most notably the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; 1999) - have established that motivations are not only influential with regards to our information-seeking behavior but also how we subsequently come to process and understand the information we are consuming. Using examples from the studies outlined above, a person looking to develop an understanding of an unfamiliar political situation and another looking to prepare against potential challenges to their political views may both exhibit a greater willingness to seek out counter-attitudinal information but to serve very different objectives,

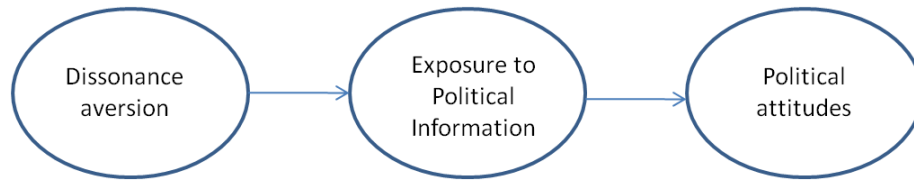
objectives that not only inform their information choices but also influence how they process and integrate the new information into their existing belief structure. In other words, the polarizing effect of exposure to confirmatory sources and the tolerance-promoting effect of exposure to cross-cutting sources may be conditional on the reasons why such sources are being sought in the first place.

Given this conclusion, it thereby becomes advantageous to conceive of citizens' selective exposure practices within a dynamic, process-based framework, cognizant of the role of various motivations in driving information choice as well as the influence of these motivations in the relationship between information exposure and attitudes, tolerance and even political behavior. Allowing for variance in the reasons behind our political information seeking practices in our theories of selective exposure should provide for a more comprehensive understanding of what drives our exposure decisions and, more importantly for scholars concerned with democratic engagement and society, how we respond to new information in forming and maintaining our judgments about the political world.

### **A Motivation-Based Approach toward Understanding Selective Exposure:**

As outlined above and represented graphically in Figure 1, the traditional theoretical approach towards studying and understanding selective exposure practices involves our desire to avoid the state of dissonance. Identifying dissonance avoidance as the primary motivating factor in driving political information choice, this approach implicitly assumes that exposure should have a uniform effect on individuals' political attitudes, most notably polarization as a consequence of consistently exposing ourselves to information that is consistent with our prior predispositions. This assumption stems from the fact that the dissonance-based approach

**Figure 1: Dissonance-Based Approach towards Understanding Selective Exposure**

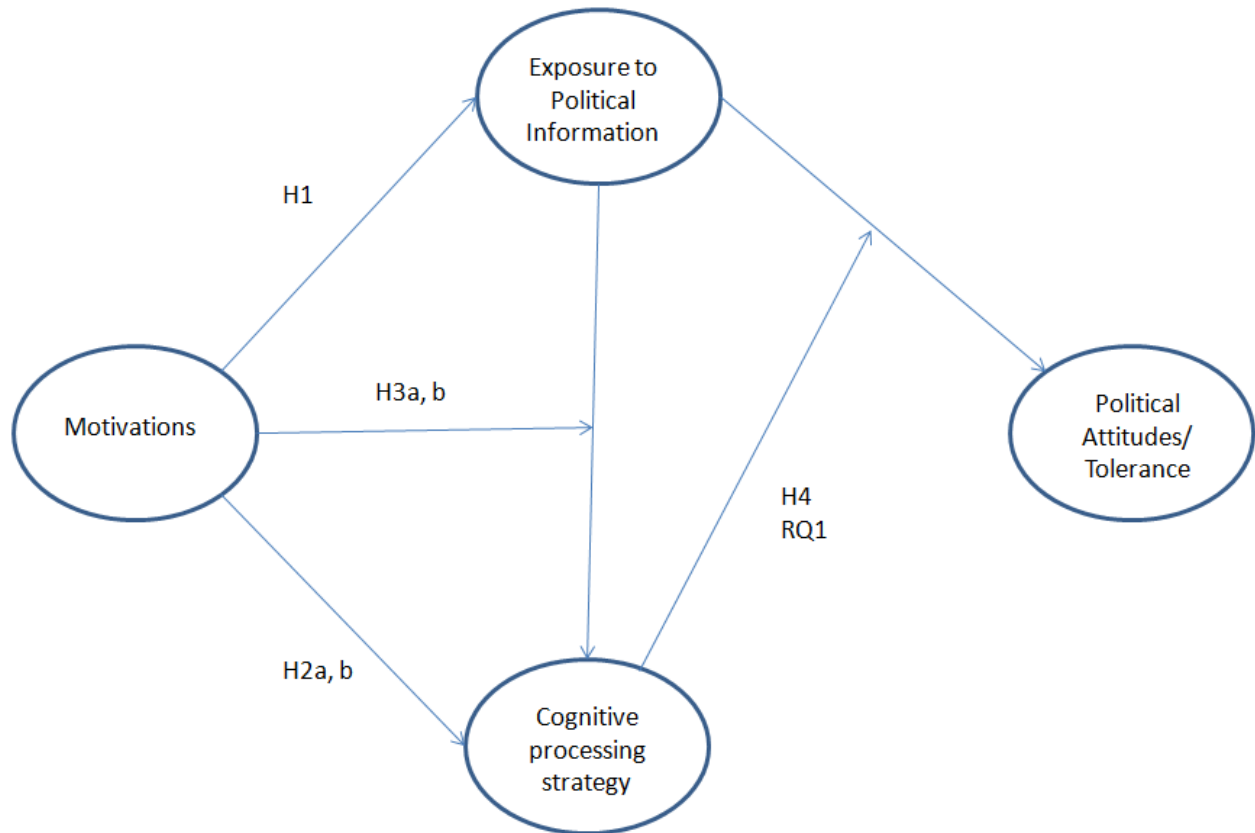


towards understanding selective exposure either does not account for variance in how information is processed or, in accordance with psychological theories on the cognitive processing implications of the dissonance-avoiding motivation (e.g. Kunda 1990), that selective information consumers will process new information in the same way - to passively accept that with which we agree and to actively counter-argue against that which challenges our prior beliefs.

However, the empirical evidence detailed above suggests the need to reconsider our approach towards understanding selective exposure. Past research has suggested the need to account for a multitude of motivations in affecting political information choice beyond dissonance avoidance, and subsequently consider the possibility that these various motivations are exerting an impact on how newly-acquired information is being processed as well. Given this, a dynamic process model towards understanding selective exposure is proposed in Figure 2.

This model provides an improvement in our approach in two important ways. First, this approach allows for variance in the objectives and motivations behind citizens' search for political information in accordance with recent developments in the selective exposure literature suggesting varied motivations for political information searches. Second, this approach explicitly acknowledges the role of how information is processed on affecting political attitudes, with the specific cognitive processing strategy employed by the information-seeker being a function of the objectives one is seeking to accomplish in their political information searches and

**Figure 2: Motivation-Based Model of Selective Exposure**



the nature of the information (pro-attitudinal versus counter-attitudinal) being consumed. While information processing has been implied in earlier conceptualizations of information effects within the context of selective exposure, it has not been allowed to vary as a consequence of the reasons why the information is being sought in the first place. What results from this approach is a slightly more nuanced model that considers more fully the entire selective exposure process, taking into account how motivations come into play both as the catalyst for source selection and as a moderator in the relationship between information exposure and political attitudes through influencing how new information is processed.

### *The goals of motivated reasoning*

As much of the recent literature has identified, a number of different motivations have been shown to exert an influence on which types of information one prefers to seek out. Further, one can speculate that these are merely a sampling of the potential objectives that people seek to accomplish as part of their political information diets, and each of these many potential motivations are likely to have very different implications for how the acquired information is subsequently processed and integrated into existing belief structures. However, a series of motivations have been identified within the psychological literature - specifically from the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; 1999) - that have clear implications for cognitive processing and logically extend into information preferences as well, thereby making them suitable candidates for further application within the context of the causes and consequences of selective exposure.

Characterized as "hot cognition," motivated reasoning is the theory that the goals and objectives that one wishes to accomplish affect reasoning by prompting individuals to rely on a biased set of cognitive processes (Kunda 1990). The theory posits that depending on the desired outcome that one wishes to achieve (i.e. one's motivation), individuals may utilize different strategies for accessing, developing and evaluating beliefs and attitudes. While designed as a theory that explains how motivations affect information-seeking processes in developing and maintaining judgments, several experimental studies have suggested that some of the same goals specified by motivation reasoning theory also exert an impact on information exposure decisions as well (Hart et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2007).

Specifically, motivated reasoning denotes three primary information-processing goals that drive how we come to form judgments about the world around us. The first of these is

*accuracy goals*, which are characterized as the desire of the individual to achieve the best or most correct judgment possible. Given the drive to be "right," the accuracy motive tends to promote deep, deliberate cognitive reasoning; accuracy-driven individuals tend to exert more cognitive effort in reaching judgments, elaborately processing any and all available information. When motivated by accuracy, the reason for utilizing such an exhaustive cognitive strategy in formulating judgments is simple: Hasty, cursory reasoning strategies are likely to result in errors in judgment. Careful, balanced and thorough reasoning strategies, on the other hand, are more likely to result in the "right" answer. For this reason, it could be argued that accuracy goals are most desirable for democratic engagement – especially in the deliberative sense – as many political science scholars express the benefit of a well-informed electorate driven to develop the best possible judgments regarding the political world.

The second type of goals defined by motivated reason is *directional goals*, which refer to the desire of the individual to arrive at a particular conclusion, not necessarily the right or best conclusion. In other words, individuals motivated by directional goals engage in a reasoning strategy designed to ensure a desirable judgment or conclusion. For these individuals, engaging in exhaustive, deliberative processing is not as important as processing information in a way conducive to some desired outcome (or avoiding some undesired outcome), creating room for significant biases to emerge as individuals process and subsequently form judgments and conclusions based on new information.

The literature on motivated reasoning has identified several different desires that may lead respondents to have directional goals. First of these involves what Kunda (1999) has identified as outcome dependency – the desire to process information in a way that is likely to justify some expected or actual outcome. For example, the outcome dependency desire often



emerges with regards to one's opinions; when encountering information – congenial or uncongenial – relevant to the opinion object, individuals will often process that information in a way that provides support for their pre-existing opinion. Therefore, the desired outcome – i.e. reinforcing one's prior opinion – biases the reasoning process when individuals are exposed to new information.

Second, individuals are often motivated by the directional goal of avoiding the dissonant state – a familiar concept within the selective exposure literature. Festinger's (1957; 1964) early work on dissonance theory suggested that individuals were persistently driven to avoid inconsistencies among cognitions, beliefs or behaviors. A commonly cited example (see Kunda 1999) involves individuals being prompted to support a position on which they actually disagree; upon engaging in a behavior perceived to be in conflict with one's actual position, these individuals engage in an information-processing strategy that reduces the associated tension involved with the perceived inconsistency by either modifying one's attitude (to bring one's position in line with one's behavior) or shifting the blame for an attitude or behavior to some other source (thereby keeping one's cognitions intact while reducing any threat that the behavioral inconsistency poses to one's self).

The final set of goals established within the framework of motivated reasoning is *closure goals*: the objective of arriving at a clear judgment. In other words, individuals motivated by closure are in search of finality, seeking to complete the task of judgment formation quickly. This stands in stark contrast to accuracy-driven (motivated to achieve the *best* judgment) and directionally-driven (motivated to arrive at a *specific* judgment) individuals; closure-driven individuals wish to arrive at *any* clear judgment. Several factors have been identified as promoting a high need for closure, such as time pressures and the desire to move on to more

enjoyable activities. Closure goals are perhaps especially common with regards to citizens' engagement with the political world. Individuals – already spread thin in their commitments due to their personal and professional lives – are perhaps less likely to invest the necessary time and attention into understanding the nuances of the political world, instead settling for a lowest common denominator approach towards understanding and developing judgments regarding politics (Arceneaux & Johnson 2011; Bennett & Iyengar 2008).

According to Kunda (1990; 1999), closure goals create the potential for cognitive biases to cloud the processing of political information. Specifically, the need for closure may lead individuals to come to flawed, incomplete judgments due to the potential for carelessness in evaluating information. Instead of taking a deliberative approach towards assessing new information like those motivated by accuracy, closure-driven individuals engage in “dirty” processing strategies which introduce the possibility of errors to emerge in individuals' reasoning. Some of these strategies involve relying upon heuristics (Lau & Redlawsk 2001) or “reasoning shortcuts” such as a strict reliance upon easily-accessible prior beliefs in making sense of new information.

#### *Motivations as traits or states?*

The theory of motivated reasoning speaks to how the above-mentioned goals and motivations may impact our reasoning strategies in making judgments about the world that surrounds us. However, one distinction that does not clearly emerge within the theory involves the character of these information-processing goals; are they stable dispositions that transcend context or far more malleable and dependent on context? For example, is a person who is determined to be driven by accuracy goals likely to be so consistently across topics and

circumstances or are their situational factors that may lead them to pursue other goals in their cognitive processing strategies? In short, there exists reasons to believe that truth lies in both characterizations of information-processing goals, that they involve a combination of both stable character traits and context-dependent states, thereby making an emphasis on both important in studying the role of motivations regarding the causes and consequences of political information-seeking practices.

In describing how motivated reasoning influences how information can be processed, Kunda (1999) provides an anecdote involving her mother, a life-long heavy smoker who was resistant to an article claiming that smoking during pregnancy could lead to developmental issues for one's children. In attempting to reason in a way that allowed her to reach the desired conclusion that smoking was not as harmful for unborn children as suggested - a sure example of a directional goal - her mother cited her own healthy, fully-grown children as evidence that went against the article's claims. However, when confronted with the reality that her children suffered from bronchial issues early on, her mother dismissed the claims based on such a small sample size.

This example is recalled because it indicates that character traits determine how we are likely to perceive and understand new information throughout the duration of our lives. In this regard, one should expect a great degree of consistency in how we process new information, particularly on those topics and issues that we consider either a key aspect of our identities or of significant importance. Moving to a more political-specific example, individuals who have identified as ideologues of one persuasion or the other - and have held strongly to these philosophies throughout most of their lives - are likely to process information in a way that conforms to these identities. Furthermore, people who are politically interested and subsequently

place importance on coming to correct conclusions about the political world should be expected to demonstrate consistency in processing information more critically and centrally in order to achieve accuracy. In this sense, our motivations for how we process information certainly seem to be largely defined by our long-term traits and characteristics.

However, traits are not all that matter in determining the motivations behind our cognitive processing strategies. In referring back to Kunda's example, her mother definitively exhibited a directional motive in how she made sense of the information on smoking and fetal development, but would she respond similarly to an issue with which she had little personal involvement, familiarity or interest? While motivational dispositions are likely to transcend any particular context to some degree - we all have family members, friends or colleagues who insist they are right on every issue, even those they know little about, regardless of the many mountains of evidence that suggest otherwise - there does seem to exist a role for context as well.

First and foremost, we should expect some variation in information-processing goals across different issues. Those topics for which one feels a strong sense of interest or attachment are likely to elicit a different cognitive response in the face of new information (likely directional or accuracy goals) than those for which there is a low level of interest or attachment (likely closure goals). Furthermore, situational factors may also exhibit an influence on which specific motives are at play. For example, closure goals have been shown to become more salient in various experimental studies when individuals have been placed under time pressures in forming judgments (e.g. Kruglanski and Freund 1983; Webster 1993), and accuracy goals seem to be activated in situations of high accountability, such as when subjects are faced with defending their judgments after the fact (e.g. Smith et al. 2007). The theoretical distinctions between motivations-as-trait versus motivations-as-state are non-trivial, as they have significant

implications for how we should go about studying the role of motivations on what political information sources people prefer as well as what consequences these exposures have for political attitudes.

### *Motivations and exposure to political information*

Accuracy goals, described above as the desire to achieve the most correct judgment, should lead information-seekers to weigh the potential value of information according to the utility provided towards achieving the best possible conclusion as opposed to the ideological congruence of potential information sources. As a result, individuals motivated by accuracy are likely aware of the benefits of weighing diverse viewpoints or considering evidence from each side of a debate in making their decisions or formulating their attitudes. In other words, individuals motivated by accuracy goals should demonstrate a greater willingness to engage with counter-attitudinal political information sources.

*H1a: Accuracy goals should be associated with a greater reliance on counter-attitudinal political information sources, ceteris paribus.*

Contrary to accuracy, directional goals involve the desire to achieve a particular judgment. Instead of attempting to reach the most correct judgment based on the consideration of various perspectives, individuals motivated by directional goals seek to engage with the information environment in a way that leads them towards some predetermined conclusion deemed by the individual to be desirable, such as affirmation of a pre-existing attitude or belief or avoidance of the dissonant state. In serving these objectives, directionally-motivated individuals are likely to assign value to information sources according to the extent to which they conform to prior predispositions or ideological preferences. This impetus placed on congruence

should lead those driven by directional goals to disproportionately favor pro-attitudinal information sources in their exposure practices.

*H1b: Directional goals should be associated with a greater reliance on pro-attitudinal political information sources, ceteris paribus.*

Lastly, closure goals – which involve the motivation to arrive at any clear judgment – should also exert an influence on the exposure practices of the electorate. Unwilling or unable to invest significant effort into understanding the political world, those motivated by closure goals are likely to engage with political information in a manner that allows them to swiftly complete the judgment task with minimal effort. Certain information exposure practices are more or less conducive to this objective than others; specifically, exposing one's self to a body of political information that is characterized as representing a myriad of diverse viewpoints is likely to increase the cognitive effort required to make sense of the information, thereby making the judgment formation task longer and more difficult. Furthermore, exposure to opposing viewpoints may create a circumstance where increased cognitive effort may be required to either make sense of unfamiliar arguments or reduce the dissonance associated with counter-attitudinal exposure (though not a primary motivating force). Therefore, we should expect information seekers motivated by closure to demonstrate a greater reliance on a homogenous set of information sources that are consistent with one's political predispositions.

*H1c: Closure goals should be associated with a greater reliance on pro-attitudinal political information sources, ceteris paribus.*

### *Motivations and cognitive processing strategies*

Having established the anticipated relationships between motivation and political information exposure practices, the question now shifts to how these motivations influence how individuals process and subsequently make sense of the information they choose to consume. As established in the motivated reasoning literature are borrowing from the language of Petty and Cacioppo's (1979) elaboration likelihood model on how people assess the veracity of persuasive messages, individuals driven by accuracy goals have been shown to centrally process new information, carefully assessing the veracity of claims presented by each information source they encounter (Kunda 1990; 1999). This tendency towards central processing is because the objective of reaching the best possible conclusion is best served by carefully weighing the arguments and evidence in support of (and in opposition to) both sides of a political debate.

*H2a: Accuracy goals will promote the utilization of a central, deliberative processing strategy for individuals exposed to political information.*

Closure goals, on the other hand, should facilitate a very different reaction in terms of processing new information. Driven by the goal of completing the judgment task quickly, closure-driven individuals are likely to exert minimal cognitive effort into making sense of new information. According to this logic, need for closure should therefore lead information consumers to engage with political information in a peripheral, less critical way as central processing requires that the individual exert a higher degree of cognitive effort.

*H2b: Closure goals will promote the utilization of a peripheral processing strategy for individuals exposed to political information.*

### *The special case of directional goals*

Unlike accuracy and closure goals, directional goals are not expected to have a uniform effect on the processing strategies enacted by individuals trying to make sense of new political information. Instead, the relationship between directional goals and cognitive processing strategies is expected to be moderated by the character of the information consumed by the individual. This relationship emerges in the proposed model in Figure 2, demonstrating that in some instances, cognitive processing strategy is a function of the interaction between motivation and the nature of the information being consumed.

As posited within motivated reasoning theory, the cognitive implications of directional goals vary depending on whether the newly-acquired information is consistent or inconsistent with the desired conclusion that the individual wishes to achieve. In the case of consistent (or pro-attitudinal) information, directionally-motivated individuals are expected to process the information in a peripheral way. The reasoning behind this prediction is simple; given that pro-attitudinal information already conforms to the desired outcome, it is therefore accepted at face value and easily integrated into one's existing cognitions.

*H3a: When faced with pro-attitudinal political information, directional goals will promote the utilization of a peripheral processing strategy.*

While the earlier hypotheses suggest that individuals motivated by directional goals should be inclined to seek out pro-attitudinal information, it is not unreasonable to believe that such individuals are not avoiding opinion-challenging information altogether, while some are perhaps using these sources with some regularity. However, individuals driven by directional goals are expected to have significantly different cognitive reactions to counter-attitudinal information than the uncritical acceptance expected upon exposure to pro-attitudinal information.



Specifically, research has demonstrated that directional motivations inspire a more central, critical processing strategy in an attempt to counter-argue against information that runs counter to one's predispositions; opinion-challenging information leads to the generation of more thoughts regarding the topic of dispute as well as more refutations that explain the discordance between the new information and one's prior beliefs.

*H3b: When faced with counter-attitudinal information, directional goals will promote the utilization of a central, critical processing strategy.*

#### *Implications for attitudes and tolerance*

The question now shifts to what these processing strategies mean for the formation and maintenance of political attitudes. In explaining the potential routes to persuasion through their elaboration likelihood model (ELM), Petty and Cacioppo (1979; 1986) posit that shifts or changes in individuals' attitudes will be greatest and most stable when newly acquired information is processed in a central manner – defined as the exertion of significant effort in critically analyzing and carefully considering new information during the processing stage. Along with cognitive ability, one of the principle factors that determines whether or not a central processing strategy is engaged by the individual is the extent to which one is motivated to engage in the more arduous task of weighing the arguments and evidence advanced within the information source. Conversely, the consequences of information exposure are expected to be less significant if the individual is utilizing a more peripheral processing strategy, characterized as assessing the newly acquired information according to more superficial qualities or in line with preexisting belief structures. While some fluctuation is expected to take place, the strength and stability of attitudes formed and changed as a result of peripheral processing are expected to be rather modest and short-term.

As determined above, certain objectives (and combinations of objectives and the type of information being consumed) facilitate central processing of political information; specifically, accuracy goals are expected to promote central processing across all exposure types, while directional goals are expected to promote central processing (though of a more critical, counter-arguing nature) upon exposure to counter-attitudinal information. These circumstances, therefore, should be those situations in which we see the greatest shifts in political attitudes as a consequence of political information exposure – either in the direction polarization or moderation. Simultaneously, closure goals and directional goals – upon exposure to pro-attitudinal information sources – are expected to promote peripheral processing strategies, which suggests that individuals with these motivations should experience relatively modest (or perhaps little to no) shifts in their political attitudes.

*H4: Individuals motivated to engage in central processing strategies upon exposure to political information should experience larger shifts in their attitudes relative to those motivated to engage in peripheral processing strategies.*

With regards to tolerance, the implications of information-processing goals and the cognitive processing strategies they promote become less clear. While many scholars have noted that exposure to the other side is a necessary precondition of developing an understanding of alternative viewpoints (e.g. Mutz 2006), it is not immediately apparent if the tolerance-promoting function of exposure to counter-attitudinal political information may be conditional on the motivations driving information choice, as is predicted to be the case for political attitudes. On the one hand, the case could be made that any exposure to the other side regardless of the motivational forces at play at minimum promotes some degree of understanding of alternative political perspectives, which could enhance tolerance even if the counter-attitudinal

exposure does not facilitate acceptance or attitude change. This line of thinking suggests that what matters for tolerance is that the individual is simply seeking out the other side, regardless of the reasons why they are choosing to do so.

However, given the prediction that polarization may occur as a result of exposure to counter-attitudinal information for those motivated by directional goals, it also seems possible that cross-cutting exposure may not have a uniformly positive effect on tolerance, perhaps even leading to greater intolerance in tandem with attitude extremity as directionally-motivated information consumers reason in a way that serves to confirm their prior judgments. Specifically, the predicted tendency of directionally-motivated individuals to seek flaws in the claims and evidence within counter-attitudinal news sources as well as generate refutations that serve to reinforce one's existing attitudes may ultimately lead to the conclusion that the opposing side lacks merit in their position. In light of this uncertainty, the moderating role of motivations in the relationship between exposure to counter-attitudinal information and tolerance of alternative political perspectives is posed as a research question.

*RQ1: Do motivations exert a moderating impact on the relationship between exposure to counter-attitudinal political information and tolerance of alternative perspectives?*

*Implications for democratic society?*

If the theoretical expectations above prove to be an accurate depiction of how information exposure decisions impact political attitudes, the way in which we understand the threat of selective exposure – as well as the potential benefits of cross-cutting exposures – with regards to attitude polarization and tolerance must be reframed into a conversation which accounts for the role of motivations. While polarization as a result of citizens selecting

themselves into one-sided information networks consistent with prior predispositions is expected to some degree across all groups, the potential harm of a confirmation bias in political media exposure would appear to be more concerning for some individuals relative to others according to the motives behind their exposure practices. Most notably, those driven by accuracy – arguably the most democratic goal for purposes of creating an informed, deliberative electorate – may experience the greatest polarizing effects as a result of a consistent exposure to pro-attitudinal information relative to the other groups due to their tendency towards central processing. The threat of polarization for those driven by directional or closure goals, however, may be exaggerated due to the tendency of these groups to process pro-attitudinal information more passively. While they may not be receiving a fair understanding of the other side through such exposures, they may also not be shifting their attitudes in more extreme directions either.

Furthermore, cross-cutting exposures may not have the often-anticipated effect of moderating political attitudes, as this also would depend on what underlying motivations are driving such exposures. In fact, the outcome of attitude moderation only seems to be likely for individuals who are motivated by accuracy goals. For directionally-motivated individuals, exposure to counter-attitudinal information may actually foster greater levels of polarization due to the tendency of these individuals to counter-argue with competing viewpoints and evidence, subsequently allowing them to explain away the opposition in buffering up their own arguments for why they believe the way they do.

While there are no firm theoretical expectations with regards to the role of motivations in the relationship between political information exposure and tolerance, the potential exists for some relationships to emerge that challenge our conventional wisdom regarding the value of cross-cutting exposures. First, it could be the case that information-seekers exhibit a greater

understanding of alternative viewpoints as a result of exposure to counter-attitudinal information *regardless* of their information-processing goals. If so, and the predicted consequence of polarization holds for those motivated by directional goals as a consequence of cross-cutting exposures, it would appear that scenarios exist where individuals could become more extreme in their attitudes *and* become more understanding of alternative perspectives as a consequence of exposure to counter-attitudinal information. In other words, the inclination of the directionally-motivated to successfully counter-argue the other side may lead them to be more assured that their own opinions are "right" but simultaneously acknowledge that reasonable alternatives to their own views exist. As such, polarization and tolerance, which are often thought to be mutually exclusive, could both occur as a result of cross-cutting exposures.

Alternatively, it could be the case that directional goals function in congruence by fostering both polarization and intolerance as a consequence of exposure to counter-attitudinal information. The logic for this congruence is simple: If motivated to counter-argue with the other side in attempting to affirm one's pre-existing beliefs, one may be able to rationalize in a way that leads to the perception that the other side's arguments and evidence are weak, unreasonable or just plain wrong, thereby creating the belief that there exists no reputable opposition to one's existing opinion. If directional goals do function in this manner, the implications for the deliberative benefits of cross-cutting exposures in creating a tolerant electorate seem to be far more conditional than previously believed.

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