Commentary: On the Dynamic and Goal-Oriented Nature of (Candidate) Evaluations

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The three preceding chapters offer important conceptual and methodological insights for the study of candidate evaluation. Moreover, they provide information relevant to social evaluation processes in general, regardless of the nature of the target being evaluated. In this chapter, we shall offer some comments and ideas elicited by these chapters. These comments emerge from our own perspective as researchers interested in evaluation processes primarily in the context of consumer advertising campaigns. Thus, we seek not to evaluate the chapters in light of the literature on political psychology or political science, but instead to offer some integrative observations regarding the relation between the present formulations and those used in the study of consumer judgments, as well as the study of social judgments more generally.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The chapter by Lau and Redlawsk approaches the issue of candidate evaluation from the perspective of behavioral decision theories (e.g., Abelson and Levi, 1985; Einhorn and Hogarth, 1983; Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein, 1977). These are models that focus primarily on choice processes and for which choice decisions are often the central dependent variables. In contrast, the chapters by Taber, Lodge, and Glaubhar and by McGraw approach candidate evaluation primarily from the perspective of attitude models such as information processing theory (McGuire, 1968, 1972) that focus on appraisals of individual targets. For these types of models, absolute judgments are typically the dependent variables of interest.

Perhaps these approaches all succeed because candidate judgments can be effectively conceptualized both as absolute judgments and
ultimately, in the voting booth, as choice situations. Indeed, we observe the same research distinctions in other social judgment domains including consumer psychology, where some models focus on factors that influence evaluations of individual brands (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Petty and Cacioppo, 1983) and other models focus on choices between brands (see Bettman, Johnson, and Payne, 1991, and Meyer and Kahn, 1994, for reviews).

Lau and Redlawsk’s work draws attention to the fact that the information environment in which candidate judgments take place is highly complex. Their research reminds us that citizens are busy people with things to do. Even the most motivated citizens are functioning in a media environment that is a blooming, buzzing confusion of messages, issues, and candidates.

The fact that Lau and Redlawsk have been able to simulate many of the complexities of the typical campaign information environment in an experimental context is a valuable contribution in itself. Moreover, their work provides an important demonstration of the impact of this dynamic environment on people’s information processing strategies and, in turn, on the quality of the decisions they make. Lau and Redlawsk’s work highlights the need for more attention to how the information environment drives candidate choice processes.

Taber, Lodge, and Gla-thar outline a dynamic “constructive” theory of candidate evaluation in which candidate judgments are continually brought into working memory for updating and revision. The authors describe their refinement of the Stony Brook model (Lodge, 1993; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989; Lodge and Stroh, 1992) — a model that was already impressively integrative before it was broadened to consider processes of motivated reasoning. The model that the authors present provides a unifying framework for conceptualizing ongoing evaluation processes, drawing as it does on models of categorization, memory, evaluation, and now motivation. Moreover, its focus on specific cognitive underpinnings gives this model the power to make precise predictions about candidate evaluations.

Finally, McGraw’s program of research draws upon attribution theories and persuasion models to investigate the effects of political accounts (politicians’ explanations for their actions) on constituents. McGraw provides a cogent conceptualization of accounts as persuasive messages and analyzes the impact of these accounts using a multistage persuasion model, information processing theory (McGuire, 1968, 1972).

One of the most useful aspects of this research is that it distinguishes between the effects of political accounts on attributions of responsibility, on perceptions of distinct dimensions of political character, on satisfaction with the accounts (i.e., their persuasiveness), and on global
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evaluations of politicians. In differentiating these effects, McGraw’s work provides insight into the processes by which constituents are influenced by officials’ accounts.

COMMON THEMES

Although these chapters deal with substantively different aspects of candidate judgments, some common issues emerge across them. First, all three chapters address the importance of accounting for motivational influences on the candidate evaluation process.

As noted earlier, Taber, Lodge, and Glazebrook broaden the Stone Brook model to address the impact of motivation on political cognition. Their approach focuses on how motivation affects reasoning at every stage of information processing, including information retrieval, interpretation, and evaluation. Basing their motivational typology on the work of Kunda (1990) and Kruglanski (1980), Taber et al. examine “accuracy goals” and “directional goals” as potential biases in the reception and processing of political information (see also Chaiken, Liberman, and Tally, 1989, and Petty and Cacioppo, 1986, for reviews of how these goals impact attitude-formation processes). In the model that Taber et al. present, the motivated political perceivers acts to forestall a change in his or her attitudes. The model describes the mechanisms by which accuracy goals and directional goals are likely to function to preserve prior political beliefs. We shall return to this issue later.

Lau and Redlawsk conceptualize citizens as purposeful and strategic in their selection of candidate information to be processed. Although they recognize that voters are often exposed to political information in an uncontrolled and haphazard manner, Lau and Redlawsk focus on what voters actively choose to learn about candidates. Their results suggest that the information-search and decision strategies that voters use may depend upon their election decision goals (i.e., selecting a candidate in a primary campaign versus in a general election).

Finally, McGraw considers the motivations driving both politicians and their constituent audiences in “blame-management” episodes. In particular, McGraw recognizes that political accounts serve a social identity function in that they are designed to obtain or maintain social support among important constituencies. Her view of political accounts is grounded within the broad scope of strategic activities in which politicians engage in order to shape constituent opinions.

Another common theme emerging across these chapters is the need to approach candidate evaluation as a dynamic process. Indeed, a variety of recent psychological studies suggest that the expression of attitudes and other social judgments is quite malleable and easily influenced by
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salient and often temporary internal or external cues (see Martin and Tesler, 1992; Wilson and Hodges, 1992; see also Shavitt and Fazio, 1991, for evidence regarding the malleability of consumer judgments; but see Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler, 1999, for detailed consideration of the possibility that explicit expressions of attitudes exaggerate the ease with which people change their habitual implicit attitudes).

As noted earlier, Taber et al. take a constructivist view of candidate evaluation, noting that for many citizens "political attitudes appear to be constructed on the spot from currently active knowledge structures." The authors' work focuses on the crucial fact that candidate evaluations reported by voters in one context need not be based on the same considerations or information underlying their evaluations in another context. Their model describes the cognitive mechanisms by which candidate evaluations are brought into working memory, compared to currently salient information, and, if appropriate, updated.

McGrady's research on political accounts focuses on the ongoing goal-driven relationship between politicians and their constituents. Her analysis underscores the fact that "attributions processes are inherently dynamic, constantly under revision as new information - such as accounts - becomes available." McGrady's studies demonstrate that citizens are indeed responsive to new information in updating and revising their perceptions of specific dimensions of a politician's character.

Lau and Redlawsk's work focuses on the ever-changing information environment often faced by voters. As the authors point out, most studies of voter decision making utilize static survey designs that cannot fully address the real-world decision processes used by voters. The dynamic process-tracing methodology they develop emphasizes the changing nature of the media information environment and enables continuous monitoring of evaluative responses to that information.

All of the foregoing chapters highlight the need for techniques that capture the dynamic nature of candidate evaluations. The importance of theory and methods that provide insight into this ongoing evaluation process cannot be overstated. We turn now to some questions raised in addressing the dynamic, goal-oriented nature of candidate evaluation.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As Taber et al. point out, the notion of attitudes as static and enduring has been the traditional view in the attitude literature. In deviating from this assumption, a variety of new questions need to be considered. One of the key questions is, What are the conditions that will prompt a voter to reevaluate his or her existing attitude?
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Previous research in social psychology has suggested that people sometimes retrieve an existing attitude and reapply it (e.g., Srull, 1989), even in situations that merit a new judgment (Tingle and Ostrom, 1979). Other research has suggested that people sometimes compute a new judgment of an issue or a candidate even though they already possess a relevant attitude toward it (e.g., Krosnick and Schuman, 1988; Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988). Is there any regularity to when each strategy is used?

What will be the role of motives in prompting the reevaluation of attitudes? It is particularly important to consider motivational influences on these evaluation processes. Because attitudes are formed in the service of particular goals or functions (see Katz, 1960; Kelman, 1958, 1961; Smith, Bruner, and White, 1956), these goals should also influence the likelihood that an attitude will be updated or changed when making a subsequent judgment.

Another important and related issue concerns how individual attributes or considerations will be weighed when evaluating or reevaluating a candidate. Will there be differences in the weights assigned to individual attributes? And will those weights change when reevaluation occurs? The weights assigned to candidate attributes are likely to vary across attributes and across evaluation occasions. One reason this may happen is that the goals or purposes underlying the evaluation may change from the time an initial attitude is formed until the opportunity to reevaluate comes along.

When one turns to the domain of product evaluation, one sees how easily this can happen. Picture your evaluation of restaurants in your community: When taking a visiting colleague out to dinner, your primary goal may be to create a positive social impression and have a pleasant social interaction (this is related to the social identity goal that McGraw describes). In this case, your evaluation will be based on such attributes as a restaurant’s ambience, the quality of its food, and the professionalism of its staff.

In contrast, when going out for lunch in the middle of a busy day, your goal may be to obtain a quick meal at the lowest possible cost (in terms of time and money). In this case, your evaluation will be based on speed of service, low price, and adequacy of the food (i.e., is it edible?).

As this illustrates, the attributes that enter into an evaluation may vary, depending on the purpose or goal one has in mind when making that evaluation. Moreover, the weights assigned to these attributes may vary (e.g., the weight assigned to food quality would likely be much lower in the second scenario). As a result, one’s evaluation of a restaurant would likely be computed quite differently in these two contexts (see Shavitt, Swan, Lowrey, and Wanke, 1994).
Similarly, in the political domain, voters' decisions may be driven by a variety of motives. Indeed, election campaigns often attempt to frame voting decisions in terms of particular goals. A presidential campaign that suggests that you “ask yourself, are you better off now than you were four years ago?” would likely make salient different goals than a political campaign that urges you to “vote your conscience.”

The goals that are salient in evaluating a politician may vary across evaluation occasions as a function of such campaign slogans, as well as media reports and other contextual stimuli. Thus, the reevaluation of one's candidate tally may be driven by different motives than were prior evaluations of the candidate. This makes it likely that some considerations and attributes of the candidate will receive greater or lesser weight in a reevaluation than they did in the initial attitude.

A WORKING MODEL

Kim and Shavitt (1993) outlined a working model of “attitude reuse versus recomputation” that attempts to address some of these issues concerning reevaluation processes (see Figure 8.1). It shares with several other processing models the view of individuals as “cognitive misers” (Taylor and Fiske, 1981). For this reason, the model is set up with the assumption that it is fairly difficult to trigger the generation of a new attitude (recomputation) when an already formed and accessible one exists. It takes motivation, ability, and consideration of the basis for the attitude, as well as a recognized change in goal contingencies, in order for recomputation to occur. The model consists of several stages or decision points that direct the individual away from the more effortful path leading to recomputation and toward the less effortful path of reusing an existing attitude. These stages can be thought of as defenses not only against the task of recomputing the attitude, but also against changes in related attitudes that may be necessitated by the recomputation.

As noted earlier, the model proposed by Taber et al. also assumes that attitudes will resist recomputation. Interestingly, however, their model puts greater emphasis on the ego-defensive motive underlying this resistance. Perhaps this is a reflection of the different attitudinal domains (political vs. consumer) for which the two models were developed. Changing one's key political beliefs would likely be more ego-threatening than changing one's product evaluations.

Cognitive Effort

As with Taber et al.'s model, Kim and Shavitt (1993) highlight the role of judgment importance in motivating attitude recomputation: if an
already existing attitude has been activated, it would be especially likely to guide one's subsequent judgment if that judgment is not considered particularly important. Reconsideration of the attitude would take effort. Thus, whether any further processing occurs (as opposed to opting out at this point and reappraising one's existing attitude) depends on the perceived importance of the judgment task, including the level of involvement or personal relevance associated with the task.

Cognitive capacity will also play an important role. In capacity-limited situations – such as the dynamic, scrolling presentation format used by Lau and Redlawsk or the complex real-world media environment to which voters are often exposed – one would expect attitudes more often to be reused without reconsideration, regardless of task importance. For
example, studies have shown that social stereotypes function to preserve cognitive resources (Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen, 1994), and thus are more likely to guide evaluations of members of a stereotyped group when processing is constrained by time limits or task complexity (e.g., Bodenhausen and Lichtenstein, 1987; Bodenhausen and Wyer, 1985; Jamieson and Zanna, 1989; Kruglanski and Freund, 1983).

**Attitude Relevance**

In our view, the perceived relevance of the attitude for current goals is one of the most important factors in prompting recomputation. If task importance and cognitive capacity are sufficiently high to motivate recomputation of the attitude, then one proceeds to assess whether there is a need to do so, that is, whether one’s initial evaluation is sufficiently relevant for current purposes. The model proposes a number of factors that can influence this judgment of relevance.

The relevance judgment is based on information that one can access about the beliefs on which the initial attitude was based (e.g., beliefs about the attributes or benefits of the target) or about the goals that were salient when the attitude was formed. This does not necessarily mean detailed information about the content of one’s beliefs (e.g., Wood, 1981; Wood, Kallgren, and Prieser, 1985), but more likely a summary “tag” describing the criterion for the initial attitude (e.g., I liked the restaurant because of the food or I liked the candidate because of his views on the environment).

A judgment of relevance is made along a continuum, not as a yes/no judgment. When a certain threshold is surpassed, the initial basis for the attitude is likely to be rejected as insufficiently relevant for one’s current goals (e.g., I liked that candidate when he last ran for office, but I was younger then and cared more about the environment than about my taxes). Again, the perceived importance of the judgment will play a key role in determining the height of the threshold. The more important the judgment, the lower the threshold. The lower the threshold, the more likely one is to reject the basis for the initial attitude and, thus, to reject the initial attitude itself as insufficiently relevant to one’s current goals.

A variety of other factors can also affect the relevance judgment, including the salience of concepts that may influence how one interprets the basis for one’s existing attitude. For example, let’s say that an initial attitude toward a restaurant was based on its food quality. Now one needs to decide whether to take an important visitor to this restaurant, so one’s new goal is to judge whether the restaurant would make a good impression. Whether food quality will be perceived as relevant to the
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New social identity goal will depend on whether such concepts as "gourmet" are salient. If such concepts are salient in the judgment context, then the initial restaurant attitude (based on food quality) will likely be reused to evaluate the restaurant. Otherwise, one may look for relevant evidence with which to recompute the evaluation.

As Zanna and Rempel (1988) and Wood (1982) have pointed out, people are not always able to access the informational basis for their initial attitude (e.g., I agreed with that tax policy, but I can't remember why). In such cases, one may be reluctant to base a current judgment about the topic on the existing attitude because the relevance of that attitude cannot be determined. Instead, one may seek evidence on which to base a recomputation that is specific to one's current goals.

**Evidence Availability/Accessibility**

If one perceives the need for more evidence, one will consider new information that one is exposed to or seeks and/or existing knowledge in memory that one can retrieve. Whether a piece of information will be perceived as evidence that is specific to one's current goals is a relevance type of judgment, and is determined by the same factors that affect the judgments of relevance discussed earlier.

Assuming one has evidence that is perceived to be relevant, how will that evidence be dealt with? The answer may depend on why the additional evidence is being sought. If it is because the informational basis of the initial attitude is not accessible, and thus the relevance of that attitude cannot be established, then the directional goal processes reviewed by Taber et al. will likely bias the search for and interpretation of evidence. That is, the perception of new evidence will be filtered through the initial attitude, leading to the selective interpretation processes that have been described by Fazio (1989). Also, any evidence retrieved from memory will be subject to known biases of retrieval and reconstruction. Overall, then, these directional biases will lead to assimilation of the new judgment to the initial attitude. McGraw points to similar processes in describing how a politician's previously established reputation can bias the evaluation of accounts offered by that politician.

On the other hand, if additional evidence is being sought because the basis for the initial attitude has been accessed and judged to be irrelevant to one's current goal, then the processes described by Martin (1986) and by Tourangeau and Rasinski (1988) may apply. That is, in evaluating the evidence, one will consciously adjust for the presumed influence of the existing evaluation. This could lead to contrast of the new judgment away from the initial attitude.
Recomputing an attitude does not necessarily mean abandoning the existing attitude (see Wilson et al., 1999). But recomputation may involve an adjustment of updating of that attitude. The valence of the new judgment may be similar to or very different from that of the initial attitude.

Recomputation may occur through different processes, depending on the earlier decision points. The new judgment could be formed systematically and deliberatively, or through more peripheral or heuristic processes (Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), depending in part on the perceived relevance of the initial attitude and the perceived importance of the judgment task (i.e., the degree to which they surpassed the threshold to prompt recomputation). The greater the perceived relevance, importance, and so on of the attitude, the more effort and deliberation will go into the recomputation.

Reuse of Attitude

Reapplication of one's initial attitude may also occur through different processes. Reuse of the attitude may be relatively automatic and effortless, as when the new judgment task is not perceived to be important and the existing attitude is accessed and used without evaluating its relevance. Alternatively, reuse of the attitude may be a fairly deliberate decision made upon comparing that attitude to the new situation and evaluating its relevance to current needs. In some cases, the evidence needed to perform a recomputation may be sought but not found, and the decision to reuse the initial attitude may then follow.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This working model is presented in an attempt to raise issues that reinforce or complement the important points addressed in the previous chapters. In describing the model here, we hope to stimulate research that sheds additional light on the dynamic, goal-oriented nature of candidate evaluations.

Unfortunately, our model does leave some important issues unresolved. For instance, it fails to address the information-driven nature of the candidate evaluation process. As the three foregoing chapters illustrate, candidate evaluations (or reevaluations) are often prompted by information encountered in the media (facts about candidates, political accounts, or other coverage). In contrast, the approach we have outlined here attempts to model situations in which the need to make a judgment or decision (e.g., in response to a pollster, in the voting booth) serves as
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the prompt to reevaluation. More work is needed to broaden this approach to contexts in which new information is encountered that may call into question one's initial candidate evaluation.

On the other hand, the model offers a number of important implications for studying the reevaluation of candidate judgments. For example, it suggests that the decision to reevaluate an initial candidate evaluation when making subsequent judgments or decisions may not be less effortful than the decision to reevaluate (recompute). Also, when the judgment is deemed important, highly accessible attitudes may not necessarily be reused unless the basis for the attitude is accessible and is judged to be relevant to current goals.

Finally, the model suggests that the goals or attributes made salient by the judgment context can have important effects at a number of points in the candidate evaluation process, facilitating access to existing attitudes in memory, affecting judgments of the relevance of those attitudes for meeting current goals, and influencing the access to and interpretation of additional evidence during the recomputation of candidate evaluations.

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