CHAPTER 11

PUBLIC–ELITE INTERACTIONS*

Puzzles in Search of Researchers

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The dynamics of public–elite interactions has been the focus of one of the most progressive research agendas in political science over the past twenty years. Under this rubric, scholars have studied how elites influence public opinion, elaborated on the conditions promoting or constraining elite influence, identified strategies motivating elite behavior, and explored the impact of mass media on the relationship between elites and the public. Considering the advances made on these topics, we feel Bartels’s (1993, 267) indictment, made over fifteen years ago, that research in this area is “one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science” no longer applies.

Nonetheless, important questions remain to be addressed. In this chapter, we identify the most pressing puzzles in research on the effect of elite rhetoric on public opinion. In particular, we discuss theoretical and empirical issues in four realms: (1) the conceptualization of communication effects, (2) elite strategies of communications, (3) conditions that moderate elite influence, and (4) the implications of political communications research on democratic theory. For each topic, we offer our perspective, frequently citing examples from our own work, and then present what we view as key questions deserving further exploration. We acknowledge that, like most others, we give disproportionate attention to how elites shape public preferences compared to how the public’s opinions affect elite

* Parts of this chapter come from Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007c, 2010) and Druckman (2010). We adapted our subtitle from D. Druckman’s (2005) paper. We thank Thomas Leeper for research assistance.
behavior (which is a topic treated by a somewhat distinct literature on responsiveness). We will discuss the implications of this asymmetry, especially for normative theory.

**Defining Communication Effects**

Our interest ultimately lies in understanding how public opinion is affected by elite communications. A useful basis for comparing types of communication effects is the expectancy value model of an attitude (for example, Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997). In this model, an attitude toward an object equals the weighted sum of a set of evaluative beliefs about that object. Specifically, \( \text{Attitude} = \sum v_i w_i \), where \( v_i \) is the evaluation of the object on attribute \( i \) and \( w_i \) is the salience weight (\( \sum w_i = 1 \)) associated with that attribute. For example, suppose one’s overall attitude, \( A \), toward a new housing development consists of a mix of negative and positive evaluations, \( v_i \), of the project on different dimensions \( i \). An individual may believe that the project will favor economic growth by creating jobs (\( i = 1 \)) but harm the environment by impinging on existing green spaces (\( i = 2 \)). Assuming this individual places a positive value on both the economy and the environment, then \( v_1 \) is positive and \( v_2 \) is negative, and his attitude toward the project will depend on the relative magnitudes of \( v_1 \) and \( v_2 \) discounted by the relative weights (\( w_1 \) and \( w_2 \)) assigned respectively to each attribute (Nelson and Oxley 1999).

The following examples illustrate how this conceptualization of an attitude applies to any object of evaluation: (1) a voter’s preference between two candidates may vary according to whether the voter evaluates them on economic or foreign policy issues (see Enelow and Hinich 1984). In the 2008 US presidential election, a voter might have preferred John McCain to Barack Obama when evaluating them on their foreign policy positions, but preferred Obama to McCain when comparing their economic platforms. (2) An individual’s attitude toward welfare recipients may depend on the extent she believes their plight is explained by their personal failures or by social and economic disadvantages (see Iyengar 1991). (3) One’s tolerance for allowing a hate group rally may hinge on the value one places on defending free speech versus maintaining public safety. Ultimately, the attitude or preference in each of these situations depends on the valences and weights given to the competing considerations.

Individuals typically base their evaluations on a subset of dimensions, rather than on the universe of possible considerations. In the simplest case, they focus on a single dimension (\( w_i = 1 \)) such as foreign policy or economic affairs in evaluating a candidate, free speech or public safety when considering a hate group rally request, or lives saved or lives lost in assessing medical programs. Even when they incorporate more than one dimension, cognitive limitations and economies of thought may cause most individuals to rely on no more than a few considerations (for example, Simon 1955). The dimensions underlying one’s attitude are available (i.e., an individual comprehends the meaning and significance of the dimension), accessible (i.e., the consideration...
unconsciously enters the individual’s working memory), and applicable or appropriate (i.e., the individual consciously views the dimension as a relevant or important basis of opinion) (see Althaus and Kim 2006; Chong 2000; Chong and Druckman 2007a; Price and Tewksbury 1997; Winter 2008).

Two points are particularly noteworthy. First, accessibility increases with chronic use of a consideration over time or from temporary contextual cues—including repeated exposure to communications. Second, individuals assess the applicability of a dimension only when motivated by incentives (e.g., a desire to make the correct decision) or by contextual factors such as the presence of directly conflicting or competing information.

Conceptual Clarification

This model of attitude formation can be used to compare alternative conceptions of communication effects. We refer to the dimension or dimensions, \( i \), that affect an individual’s evaluation as an individual’s frame in thought. For example, an individual who believes economic considerations trump all other concerns in making decisions about the proposed housing development has an “economic” frame in thought on that issue. Or, if free speech dominates all other considerations in deciding a hate group’s right to rally, the individual’s frame would be free speech. Individuals may also constitute issues using more complex frames in thought that combine multiple considerations, such as concern for free speech, public safety, and the community’s image in contemplating whether a hate group should be allowed to hold a rally.¹

The frames on which an individual bases his or her attitude have their origin in past experiences, ongoing world events, interpersonal discussions, and so on. Of particular relevance, given our focus, is the impact of communications from politicians and the media—whom we label “elites” (see Zaller 1992, 6). The importance of elite communications to citizens’ opinions is clear, and perhaps most powerfully demonstrated by Vavreck’s (2009) recent book that shows that even the impact of the economy on vote choice—a dimension of evaluation that may seem to require no external prompting to be employed—depends on exposure to campaign messages.

As we will discuss, elites employ a variety of approaches to purposefully influence the public’s opinions. The most obvious strategy they employ is using rhetoric to affect how citizens construe political issues and candidates. A speaker emphasizes one interpretation of an issue to encourage the public to evaluate the issue on the same terms; for example, a news outlet states that a hate group’s planned rally is “a free speech issue,” or a politician describes welfare in terms of its humanitarian effects rather than its impact on taxes. When such frames in communication influence an individual’s frame in thought, it is called a framing effect.

¹ We focus exclusively on what scholars call “emphasis” frames, “issue” frames, or “value” frames, and not equiivalency or valence frames (for discussion, see Druckman 2004, forthcoming).
Political communication scholars often distinguish framing effects from "priming," "agenda setting," and "persuasion" (for example, Scheufele 2000; McCombs 2004). The term "priming" entered the field of communication, from related psychological work, when Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 63) defined it as follows: "By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged. Priming refers to changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations." For example, individuals exposed to news stories about defense policy tend to base their approval of the president on their assessment of the president's performance on defense. If, in contrast, these individuals watch stories about energy policy, their overall evaluations of the president's performance will tend to be based on his handling of energy policy. Clearly, political elites will have strategic incentives to prime the public to think in terms that are most favorable to themselves.

The expectancy value model presented above can be generalized to priming by assuming each consideration constitutes a separate issue dimension or image (J. N. Druckman and Holmes 2004) used to evaluate candidates. When a mass communication places attention on an issue, that issue will receive greater weight through increased accessibility and, possibly, applicability. If this is correct, then framing effects and what communication scholars have called "priming effects" share common processes and the two terms can be used interchangeably.

A similar argument applies to agenda-setting, which occurs when a speaker's (e.g., a news outlet or politician) emphasis on an issue or problem leads the audience to give higher priority to the issue (for example, McCombs 2004). For example, when a news outlet's campaign coverage focuses on the economy, viewers come to believe the economy is the most important campaign issue. Agenda-setting therefore refers to the change in weights (w_i) given to different issues. We thus view framing, priming (as used by communication scholars), and agenda-setting as equivalent processes, which we prefer to uniformly call "framing." Much of the remainder of this chapter focuses on framing, with the understanding that we view it as enveloping these other processes.

A final conceptual distinction concerns framing and persuasion. Nelson and Oxley (1999) differentiate framing from persuasion by referring to the former as a change in the weight component, w_i, of an attitude in response to a communication, and the latter as a change in the evaluation component, v_i (W. Wood 2000). For example, in assessing a candidate, framing takes place if a communication causes voters to give more attention to the candidate's economic positions than to her foreign policy platform. Persuasion occurs if the communication alters one's evaluation of the candidate on one of those dimensions. In practice, framing and persuasion strategies often go hand in

\(^2\) We prefer the overarching term "framing effects," in part because priming refers to a related but distinct procedure in psychology (used strictly to increase accessibility; see J. N. Druckman, Kukinski, and Sigelman 2009), and agenda-setting is widely used in political science to refer to institutional agendas (e.g., in elections or in Congress; see Cox and McCubbins 2005).
hand, as campaign communications simultaneously steer voters to focus on certain issues in the campaign while also trying to persuade them to believe the candidate has a strong (or weak) record on those issues.

Puzzles

The political science and communication literature on framing, priming, agenda-setting, or persuasion is immense. A search of thirteen prominent disciplinary journals, from 1994 through August 2009, reveals 308 articles that mention one or more of the concepts in the title and/or abstract. Yet, a number of basic issues remain unresolved. First, our argument about the equivalency of these concepts contrasts with common portrayals (for example, McCombs 2004; Scheufele 1999). More research is needed, particularly to determine whether the concepts involve distinct mediators and moderators (evidence to date suggests they do not; see Miller and Krosnick 2000; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). Along similar lines, the extent to which persuasion and framing differ remains unclear; the current distinction stems in part from a focus in most persuasion research on the evaluation component of an attitude. Do the processes (i.e., mediators and moderators) underlying changes in the weight and evaluative components of an attitude differ?

Second, more work is needed to document the psychological processes of the expectancy value model. Two important recent contributions accentuate the need for and difficulty of such research. Bullock and Ha (forthcoming) show that the conventional (Baron–Kenny) approach to documenting psychological mediation generates statistical bias, leading to misestimates. They emphasize the need to manipulate potential mediators as part of the experiment protocol—a task which they admit is not straightforward. Third, Lenz (2009) shows that the bulk of observational evidence for priming effects (e.g., increases in the weight attached to a dimension) is not priming at all, but rather reflects individuals changing the evaluation component of their attitude (for example, people change their own preference or their perception of the object’s position) (also see Slothuus 2008).

Not only would resolving these puzzles signify a considerable advance, but it would have practical implications. First, if the concepts are the same, research should be merged and redundancy avoided. Second, identification of precise psychological processes facilitates the specification of conditions under which effects take place, an empirical question with significant normative implications.

Scholars and pundits have long recognized the role of frames in shaping public opinion (Riker 1966; Schattschneider 1960, 70). The power of framing is also not lost on politicians, who spend considerable time determining the frames most advantageous to them (Bai 2005; Lakoff 2004).

The process by which speakers determine which frames to employ is often called "frame building" or "agenda building" (for example, Scheufele 1999). Here we provide three examples of how political elites choose frames (i.e., dimensions of emphasis). Our point is to highlight the driving role of strategic incentives. We then briefly discuss media framing and what we see as the key puzzles when it comes to work on determining elite rhetoric.

Our first example comes from Druckman and Holmes's (2004) study of President Bush's first post-2001 State of the Union Address (delivered on January 29, 2002). According to the January 2002 Gallup poll, 35 percent of respondents named terrorism or related problems as the most important problem facing the nation compared to 33 percent who named some sort of economic problem (followed by education at 6 percent). Prior to Bush's address, analysts predicted that he would focus equally on terrorism/homeland security and the economy. For example, CNN predicted that Bush would "focus on war, economy," while MSNBC described Bush as preparing for a "balancing act . . . [dealing] with terrorism, recession" (Druckman and Holmes 2004:760).

These predictions seemed to ignore that Bush's issue-specific approval on security (roughly 86 percent) was substantially higher than on the slumping economy (roughly 31 percent) (Druckman and Holmes 2004). There was much greater incentive therefore for Bush to emphasize an issue that he was perceived to be managing well. Contrary to pre-debate expectations, but consistent with his strategic incentives, Bush framed the bulk of his policy discussion (49 percent based on content analysis of policy statements) in terms of terrorism/homeland security. In contrast, he devoted only 10 percent apiece to the economy and to the war in Afghanistan. The New York Times headline the day after the address reinforced the President's theme: "Bush, Focusing on Terrorism, Says Secure U.S. Is Top Priority."

Additional evidence suggests that Bush's behavior reflects a general pattern. Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier (2004) examined Nixon's rhetorical choices during his first term in office (1969-72). The authors coded a large sample of Nixon's public statements and counted the amount of space devoted to distinct issues (e.g., welfare, crime, civil rights). Linking the rhetorical data with polling results from Nixon's private archives, they find that, on domestic issues, Nixon chose to accentuate issue positions that attracted public support. For example, if public support for Nixon's position on a particular domestic issue (e.g., Nixon's tax plans, which a large percentage of the public supported) increased by 10 percent over the total average, then, holding other variables at their means, Nixon increased attention to that domestic issue by an average of 58 percent (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004, 1217-18). Nixon was not, however,
responsive to changes in the public’s issue priorities, choosing instead to prime those issues that worked in his favor (for example, he would promote his tax policy even if most of the public did not see taxes as an important problem). As Nixon’s chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, explained, using frames that highlight “issues where the President is favorably received” would make “Americans realize that the President is with them on these issues” (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004, 1218).

Congressional candidates also follow predictable rules in framing their election campaigns. Because incumbents enjoy up to a 10 percentage point advantage (Jacobson 2004), they have a strategic incentive to highlight their experience, ties to the district, and benefits they have brought to constituents. In contrast, challengers will frame their campaigns around alternative considerations that tend to matter in congressional elections, including their issue positions, partisanship, endorsements, and viability.

Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin (2009) tested these predictions by content-analyzing candidate websites from a representative sample of US House and Senate campaigns from 2002, 2004, and 2006. They find clear evidence of strategic framing: incumbents play their strong suit by emphasizing their experience in office, familiarity to constituents, and district ties, while challengers frame the campaign in alternative terms. The normative implications are intriguing, since campaign frames that often establish subsequent policy agendas (for example, Jamieson 2000, 17) are driven, in no small way, by strategic considerations that may bear little relationship with pressing governmental issues.

All three examples focus on the framing tactics of a single elite actor without taking account of strategic interactions among competing elites or between elites and the media. Following Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address, Democrats predictably emphasized the troubled economy in their public statements, just as they tried, during Nixon’s presidency, to turn public attention to issues that reflected poorly on Nixon. While congressional incumbents champion their experience, congressional challengers will attempt to exploit any perceived weakness in the voting records or personal reputations of the incumbents they are trying to unseat. To measure the extent to which competing frames are represented in news coverage of political issues, Chong and Druckman (forthcoming a) content-analyzed major newspaper coverage of fourteen distinct issues over time, counting the number of frames put forth on each issue (as well as other features of the frames). While the data do not provide insight into strategic incentives, the findings reveal a complex mix of frames for each issue.

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Chong and Druckman computed a score to capture the weighted number of frames used on a given issue (for example, frames employed more often receive greater weight). Across the fourteen issues, the average number of weighted frames is 5.09 (standard deviation = 1.19). The issue for which the fewest weighted frames were employed was coverage of a 1998 Ku Klux Klan rally in Tennessee (with 3.03 weighted frames including free speech, public safety, and opposing racism). The issue with the most frames was coverage of the 2004 Abu Ghraib controversy concerning prisoner abuse by members of the United States Armed Forces (with 6.9 weighted frames, several of which centered on different attributions of responsibility).

On each issue, there were competing frames that implied or explicitly recommended positions on the issue. For example, framing the Abu Ghraib incidents in terms of either renegade individual actions or the policies promulgated by the administration or military may contribute to widely varying public perceptions of responsibility. How individuals process these mixes of frames is a topic we address below.

Although competition proliferates alternative approaches to framing issues, it does not appear that issue frames change significantly over time. Baumgartner and his colleagues (2009) explored the rate at which ninety-eight issues on which lobbyists were active (for a full list, see Baumgartner et al. 2009, 17) were reframed (i.e., understood using a wholly or partially new frame) by interest groups, media, and other elite sources during a two-year period. They report that, "The results are surprising. Of the 98 issues that fell into our sample, we judged just 4 issues to have undergone some degree of re-framing over the period studied" (2009, 176). They point to several challenges of reframing elite understandings including limitations in resources, political constraints (e.g., political alignments), and failed lobbyist strategies. The lack of change also is consistent with macro-level studies that show that "system-wide definitions of most issues remain relatively constant through time" (B. D. Wood and Vedlitz 2007, 553). A question to explore further on this subject is: what proportion of issues would benefit from reframing from the perspective of competing parties? This requires examining the subset of issues for which there were elite incentives to engage in reframing. Of this smaller subset of cases, how frequently did elites have the necessary resources to attempt to reframe the issue? And when elites possess both incentives and resources, are they able to accomplish their objective? Answers to these questions would suggest whether limitations on reframing of issues can be explained by the absence of elite incentives, shortages of resources to carry out the task, or entrenched public opinion on the issues.

Puzzles

The evidence thus shows that political elites strategically choose their frames and that the media offers competing frames on most issues. Beyond these intuitive findings, a number of issues remain unclear. First, in addition to anticipating the public's response, how do elites incorporate expectations about other relevant actors, such as opponents, interest
groups, and news outlets? Campaigns for candidates or policies typically prepare for elite debate by using polling to test opposing messages in order to gauge how the public will respond to competing frames. If support does not waver substantially following exposure to the strongest arguments of the opposition, this is taken as evidence that the campaign message can withstand the pressure of competition (Stonecash 2003).

While there is work on communication strategies (e.g., the media bias literature, the media indexing literature, ethnographic studies), there is scant theory of how political actors interact with the media to ensure that their chosen frame receives coverage (see Entman 2004). For example, the evidence about Nixon shows he was responsive to the public, but did he also consider likely media coverage? One promising area worth pursuing is explicit integration with the somewhat distinct literature on interest group framing (see Polletta and Ho 2006).

Second, how does new media proliferation (and more direct communication opportunities) affect strategy? This is an interesting dynamic insofar as cable television initially stripped prominent politicians of predictable access (Baum and Kellner 1999), but now the Web and other direct communication technologies may restore opportunities to address limited publics. This may, in turn, increase precise targeting when frames are chosen.

Third, the bulk of work on elite influence takes a unidirectional approach: elites take actions that influence public opinion. Even if they anticipate that response, the elites are influencing the public. A separate literature explores whether elite actions, such as policy or roll-call votes, reflect public opinion (for example, J. N. Druckman and Jacobs 2009; Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002), which is treated as an exogenous influence on elites’ choices. There is undoubtedly a reciprocal process in which elites influence opinion, opinions influence policy choices, policy choices influence opinion, and so on. We are certainly not the first to recognize this dynamic (for example, Page and Shapiro 1992), but we continue to have a limited understanding of it (although see Soroka and Wlezien 2009). For example, when do elected officials treat opinions as given and respond to them as opposed to trying to change opinions? Or do politicians “respond” to the public simply by framing their policies to make them consistent with the public’s values (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000)? Elites are likely to employ mixed communication strategies geared toward different audiences depending on their susceptibility to persuasion and framing. It is also worth exploring how framing and persuasion strategies differ across issues of varying salience. More generally, work on elite influence could benefit from considering the conditions that tend to affect responsiveness (for example, see J. N. Druckman and Jacobs 2006).

Determining Influence

The history of research on elite influence on the public’s opinions has followed a well-known evolution, from maximal effects to minimal effects to “strong” effects, and a possible return to minimal effects (see Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Understanding the
conditions under which elite rhetoric shapes opinions depends, to a large extent, on the psychological processes at work and the context of the communication. The psychological model we posited above—based on availability, accessibility, and applicability—leads straightforwardly to predictions about when influence occurs.

As explained, a consideration highlighted by a communication frame cannot impinge on an attitude unless it is available in memory (i.e., it can be comprehended). By definition, this requires knowledge, and thus, all else constant, framing will have a greater effect on more knowledgeable individuals (for evidence, see J. N. Druckman and Nelson 2003; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Slothuus 2008; although see Togebby 2007). The proviso that everything else be held constant is critical to this prediction because knowledgeable individuals are more likely to hold strong prior opinions that resist the influence of framing (for example, Brewer 2001; Iyengar 1991). Therefore, it is necessary to control for the strength of prior opinions when examining the influence of knowledge on framing.

In addition to individual factors that qualify elite influence, the nature of the message matters. All else constant, increased repetition will enhance a frame's effect, because repetition can facilitate learning and increase the accessibility of a consideration (for example, Bless, Fiedler, and Strack 2004, 61). The impact of repetition, however, is reduced when individuals evaluate the applicability of frames. As mentioned, this occurs either when an individual is motivated or when competition between contrasting messages stimulates more deliberate processing of information. Therefore, in competitive political environments, a frame's impact tends to increase with an individual's perception of the frames' applicability or strength (for evidence, see Chong and Druckman 2007b; J. N. Druckman 2010; also see J. N. Druckman 2004; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). The effect of competition highlights the importance, when studying elite communications, of looking beyond individual psychology to take account of the context of elite–public interactions (Schattschneider 1960). That individuals tend to resolve competing frames in favor of the stronger frame also reiterates the importance of a frame's strength in determining its effect.

Puzzles

There are many unresolved puzzles concerning the conditions of elite influence. First is the obvious question of what factors make a frame strong. Chong and Druckman (2007a) explain that strong frames emphasize available considerations; a frame focused on unavailable considerations cannot have an effect (i.e., it is inherently weak). The other factor is the judged persuasiveness or effectiveness of the frame. This is commonly assessed, in both political science (for example, Chong and Druckman 2007b) and psychology (for example, Petty and Cacioppo 1986) by asking respondents who do not participate in the main part of the study to rate the effectiveness of different frames or arguments, with more effective frames being treated as stronger. But, why are some frames perceived as strong and others weak? Even the large persuasion literature
provides limited insight: “Unhappily, this research evidence is not as illuminating as one might suppose… it is not yet known what it is about the ‘strong arguments’… that makes them persuasive” (O’Keefe 2002, 147, 156). A parallel question applies to priming and agenda setting as it cannot be assumed that elites can elevate with equal ease the priority given to any issue. At any given time, some issues are undoubtedly easier to prime or place on the agenda and in this sense are “stronger” than other issues.

The slight evidence to date on the underpinnings of strength is not encouraging as it appears individuals often ignore criteria seen as normatively desirable (e.g., logic, facts) while focusing on factors that are more difficult to justify. For example, Arceneaux (2009) finds that “individuals are more likely to be persuaded by political arguments that evoke cognitive biases.” Specifically, he reports that frames that highlight averting losses or out-group threats resonate to a greater extent than do other, ostensibly analogous arguments. J. N. Druckman and Bolsen (2009) report that adding references to scientific studies to frames does nothing to enhance their effectiveness in influencing opinions. Other work suggests frame strength increases with activation of specific emotions (Aarøe 2008; Petersen forthcoming), use of multiple repetitive arguments (Baumgartner et al. 2008), attribution to a credible source (Chong and Druckman 2007b), and familiarity (Edy 2006).

The initial studies on frame strength make clear that one should not confuse “strength” with superiority on rational or normative grounds.

A second puzzle of elite effects concerns the role of time. Political campaigns and debates over issues occur over extended periods in which citizens receive continual messages. Research, however, has concentrated overwhelmingly on the immediate impact of communications and paid little attention to the dynamics of public opinion formation over time. Most studies that have monitored respondents over time find rapid decay of communication effects (for example, De Vreese 2004; J. N. Druckman and Nelson 2003; Mutz and Reeves 2005, 12); however, these studies have largely ignored individual variation and not examined how attitudes respond to the pressure of competing messages received over the course of a campaign. A likely source of heterogeneity is how individuals process information (Chong and Druckman forthcoming b; Druckman, Hennessy, St Charles, and Weber 2010; Matthes 2008). Those who engage in online formation of opinions update their opinions when they receive a new communication (e.g., a frame) and are able to retrieve the summary evaluation subsequently. These individuals are more likely to express stable attitudes because past learning extends into the future and each additional piece of information has a smaller marginal effect. In contrast, the effects of past communications tend to fade rapidly among memory-based processors who draw disproportionately on immediately accessible considerations. A related process that affects attitude stability is motivated reasoning: simply put, the stronger one’s opinions, the more one is motivated to dismiss communications that contradict those opinions. Therefore, online processors will have more stable opinions not only because their attitudes reflect cumulative exposure to information, but also because they increasingly resist new information that might change those attitudes (see Lodge and Taber 2000).
A third area that would benefit from further research is the analysis of other relevant political factors (for example, Togeby 2007). A paradigmatic example of this type of work comes from Slothuus’s (2009) study of party frames. He notes that framing research has not adequately investigated how party sources qualify the impact of frames. In an ingenious study that exploits a shift in frames among parties in Denmark on the issue of early retirement benefits, he finds that while people are more influenced by frames sponsored by their preferred party, they do not automatically adopt their party’s frame. Rather, the frames must also be consistent with their more general beliefs (also see Lecheler, De Vreese, and Slothuus 2009). Other relevant dynamics that are in need of further study include competition with distinct types of communication such as direct endorsements (J. N. Druckman, Hennessy, St Charles, and Weber 2010) and interpersonal discussion (for example, J. N. Druckman and Nelson 2003). Also important is the need to devise research strategies that account for ongoing technological and social transformations. Bennett and Iyengar (2008) state: “it is clear we are entering another important turning point not just in communication technologies [e.g., increased media choice, outlets] but in social structure and identity formation [e.g., decline of group memberships and the rise of multiple identities] that affect the behaviors of audiences” (2008, 716). The authors then provide a blueprint on how researchers can begin to address these new political realities.

Finally, more research is needed on how self-selection of information affects the impact of communications. Most communication studies take exposure as given (for example, in an experiment, participants are captive audiences who view the stimuli), whereas in reality people can and do ignore information. Arceneaux and Johnson (2008) show that when participants in communication experiments can choose whether to receive a communication (i.e., the captive audience constraint is removed), communication effects are diminished (also see Barabas and Jerit forthcoming).

**Normative Puzzles**

We raise two normative puzzles that follow from the work on elite influence we have reviewed: (1) what are the normative implications of elite influence over public opinion? and (2) what do the results imply for normative theory itself?

**Normative Implications**

Early research on elite influence, particularly on framing, suggested that political elites can manipulate popular preferences to serve their own interests. It is this perspective, with all the negative connotations it entails for democratic processes, that led researchers to search for mechanisms that condition effects (e.g., source credibility, deliberation, competition) and make individuals less vulnerable to framing (Sniderman and
Levendusky 2007). More recently, researchers have come to recognize that framing and related communication effects are intrinsic to the formation of attitudes. Indeed, public opinion formation involves the selective acceptance and rejection of competing frames that contain information about candidates and issues. Discussion and debate over the appropriate frames for conceptualizing an issue ultimately lead to common perceptions and judgments about the consequences of a policy (Chong 2000).

Framing effects, however, undermine the validity of public preferences if individuals never acquire a basis for discriminating among frames and remain constantly vulnerable to changing representations of issues. Alternatively, individuals who are impervious to framing because they refuse to consider alternative perspectives suffer from closed-mindedness, or "motivated reasoning," which might be as problematic as unstable preferences (for example, J. N. Druckman and Bolsen 2009; Lodge and Taber 2000). In short, at one extreme are citizens without sufficiently strong attitudes and cognitive defenses to resist elite manipulation, while at the other extreme are citizens whose attitudes are held so rigidly that they seek only to reinforce their existing views. The ideal public is surely somewhere in between, capable of differentiating between relevant information and misleading arguments.

No consensus, however, exists about the standards that should be applied to evaluating the quality of public opinion. Features of superior or more sophisticated opinions that have been suggested include choices that are ideologically coherent, based upon deliberation, consistent with individual interests, or consistent with values (see J. N. Druckman 2001 for discussion). The most noted standard against which public opinion is compared is a decision that takes account of full, unbiased, or the best available information (for example, Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Page and Shapiro 1992, 356; Zaller 1992, 313). In the absence of clear standards, discussions about ways to improve the quality of public opinion can produce conflicting conclusions. For example, according to some researchers, voters who use cues or cognitive shortcuts make better decisions than those who are uninformed (Popkin 1994), but others have argued that relying on cues produces poor decisions by most normative standards (for example, Kinder 1998; for extended discussion, see J. N. Druckman, Kuklinski, and Sigelman 2009). Likewise, when Dynes and Kinder (1987) introduced priming to the discipline in experimental studies, it was construed as a form of manipulation that undermined the public's role in keeping elected representatives in check; more recently, however, Lenz (2009) laments the limited evidence for priming effects in actual political campaigns on the grounds that priming can lead people to base their opinions on issues rather than on less substantive criteria (e.g., images and symbols).

These reflections on framing and priming lead us to conclude that normative assessments of communication effects must evaluate details of individuals' psychological processing and the substantive basis of their decisions. In terms of process, it is important to be realistic in one's normative standards for the public (see, for example, Schattschneider 1960, 134). Citizens will use a mix of shortcuts and substantive information depending on individual and contextual circumstances, but generally fall well short of possessing full information (however we define this ideal). In addition to
studying what information people process, scholars also need to assess how people evaluate information. It is again not straightforward what standards should apply in judging whether people’s preferences are the product of good procedures; for example, although motivated reasoning is problematic because it can negate the influence of relevant information, a realistic theory of reasoning must recognize that the beliefs underlying people’s preferences will usually reflect some degree of motivated reasoning, especially in polarized political settings (for example, Lodge and Taber 2000). Identifying the substantive basis on which citizens should form their preferences is challenging, lest theorists end up making unrealistic, ill-defined, and elitist demands on citizens. As Lupia explains, “those who write about voter competence might recognize the differences between their interests and the interest of the people whom they study” (2006, 219).

Our perspective leads us to focus on the nature of the frames on which individuals base their opinions. We introduced the distinction between strong and weak frames, with the exclusive focus being on the citizens’ perceptions of strength. One could apply an analogous distinction between normatively desirable and undesirable frames. Desirable frames presumably have some logical basis and are correlated with an objective reality—for instance, to return to the example of the proposed housing development we began with, those who frame their support in terms of future economic benefits should be willing to alter their judgments if no valid studies can support claims that the project will have an impact on local employment.

Implications for Normative Theory

Identifying clear guidelines to assess frame quality requires engagement with normative theory. This, in turn, may require a reorientation of dominant normative approaches. Canonical theory treats citizens’ preferences as exogenous to the political process and focuses on whether elites respond to these preferences, whereas the entire corpus of framing research shows that public preferences are highly contingent on how alternatives are represented to citizens and, as such, are far removed from the consistent individual preferences assumed in economic theory (Bartels 2003).

A democratic theory based on exogenous public preferences ignores the issue of where citizens are supposed to obtain information on which to form preferences. It is perhaps implicit that they are supposed to rely on some objective experiences, but in an age of mass communication the theory seems dated. In other words, we posit that normative theory move beyond what Disch describes as “the ‘bedrock’ norm of representative democracy: the commonsense notion that political representation is democracy only to the extent that it takes citizens’ preferences as the ‘bedrock for social choice’” (2009, 2). A democratic theory needs to recognize the reality of endogenous preferences that depend on the actions and rhetoric of politicians even if, as Bartels notes, a “successful normative resolution may require a style of theorizing unfamiliar to political philosophers and political scientists alike” (2005, 74).
We are not the first to recognize this normative–empirical disjuncture and the concomitant challenges (for example, Disch 2009). The issues we encourage others to consider are neatly captured in Schattschneider’s lament:

It is an outrage to attribute the failures of American democracy to the ignorance and stupidity of the masses. The most disastrous shortcomings of the system have been those of the intellectuals whose concepts of democracy have been amazingly rigid and uninvective… Unless the intellectuals can produce a better theory of politics than they have, it is possible that we shall abolish democracy before we have found out what it is! The intellectuals have done very little to get us out of the theoretical trap created by the disparity between the demands made on the public by the common definition of democracy and the capacity of the public to meet these demands. The embarrassment results from the reluctance of intellectuals to develop a definition that describes what really happens in a democracy. (1960, 132–3)

CONCLUSION

As technological and societal changes continue, mass communication researchers face a host of challenges. Addressing how these transformations affect elite–public interactions will be imperative (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). However, it also is important that researchers consider various other longer-standing challenges that have yet to be resolved. We identified many of these, including puzzles revolving around basic conceptual questions and mediational processes, elite strategy, political context, and the normative implications of proven communications effects. In pursuing some of these research questions, scholars should recognize that some of the technological transformations that may interest them from a substantive perspective can facilitate methodological applications as well. For example, the profusion of new media offers researchers novel opportunities to measure elites’ and citizens’ behaviors (for example, J. N. Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009). We have little doubt that progress will continue and hopefully it will do so at a rate approaching that of the last fifteen years.

REFERENCES


