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A Framework for the Study of Persuasion

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Abstract

Persuasion is a vital part of politics—who wins elections and policy disputes often depends on which side can persuade more people. Given this centrality, the study of persuasion has a long history with an enormous number of theories and empirical inquiries. However, the literature is fragmented, with few generalizable findings. I unify previously disparate dimensions of this topic by presenting a framework focusing on actors (speakers and receivers), treatments (topics, content, media), outcomes (attitudes, behaviors, emotions, identities), and settings (competition, space, time, process, culture). This Generalizing Persuasion (GP) Framework organizes distinct findings and offers researchers a structure in which to situate their work. I conclude with a discussion of the normative implications of persuasion.

INTRODUCTION

The study of persuasion has a long and storied history dating back to Aristotle (Barnes 1984). In the twentieth century, social scientists joined modern philosophers and rhetoricians in the pursuit of better understanding persuasion (Habermas 1984, Booth 2004). Like the ancients, modern social scientists focus on how speakers' characteristics, what they say, and how recipients think determine whether a given persuasive attempt is successful. But what, exactly, do we know about persuasion? On the one hand, an enormous knowledge base provides insight into when persuasion may or may not work, and there is clearly no silver bullet that always works. On the other hand, the vast literature remains disconnected, sometimes contradictory, and without a structure to facilitate connecting one study with another.

This article aims to remedy the situation by offering a framework for the study of persuasion: the Generalizing Persuasion (GP) Framework. By placing their work within the GP Framework, scholars will help the field resolve inconsistencies, identify and address open questions, and ensure collective progress. This does not require that researchers account for the multiple dimensions I discuss but instead asks that they be explicit about which elements they study and how. While I focus primarily on political persuasion, the approach can be applied across domains.

POLITICAL PERSUASION

Persuasion is "a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom" (O'Keefe 2016, p. 4). The focal approach entails exploring how characteristics of the speaker/source, message, receiver/audience, and channel/medium determine persuasive outcomes (Lasswell 1948, McGuire 1969). Theories have integrated these dimensions by identifying psychological variations that explain the relative influence of each factor. Most notable are the dual-process Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo 1986) and Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chen & Chaiken 1999). These posit that motivated and able individuals evaluate details of messages while others rely on cues (e.g., source credibility).

Political persuasion scholarship partially owes its circuitous evolution to two books published in 1960. First, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) put forth an influential approach (i.e., the funnel of causality) that excludes "nonpersonal" factors such as communications. Second, Klapper's (1960) review of the early scientific literature concluded that mass communication effects are minimal, undermining researchers' incentives to explore them.

Slowly but surely theoretical orientations evolved, and evidence accrued such that by the mid-1990s, scholars studied the influence of mass communications and interpersonal exchanges. Mutz et al. (1996) made the case that political persuasion should be a sui generis topic of study. The subsequent quarter century has seen substantial advances, culminating in handbooks (e.g., Suhay et al. 2020) and meta-analyses (e.g., Amsalem & Zoizner 2020). Further, the politicization of various areas of social life led scholars to expand the study of political persuasion to consumer choices (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2014) and science (Bolsen & Druckman 2015).

Despite these developments, the field lacks a coherent theoretical structure. The guiding theory continues to focus on the speaker-message-receiver-channel framework (Holbrook 2011, p. 150; Sydnor 2019, p. 9; Lau 2020; Suhay et al. 2020, p. 3). Despite occasional calls for attention to context, systematic study of competitive scenarios with strategic persuaders is rare. This is the case even though these settings define much of politics (Druckman & Lupia 2006). We also know little about how political persuaders construct their messages in the first place, even though "opinion leader" was one of the first concepts in the field (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944).

The lack of an overarching framework contributes to ostensibly contradictory conclusions. Consider the following statements:

- Politicians are "relatively unconstrained by public opinion and able to shape it merely by announcing their positions" (Broockman & Butler 2017, p. 208).
- "Our results indicate that participants are more likely to stick with their initial decisions than to change them no matter which reasons are considered" (Stanley et al. 2020, p. 891).
- "The results from this analysis show quite clearly that campaigns are persuasive" (Flores 2019, p. 189).
- "Sizable persuasive effects from campaign activities seem very unlikely to be observed" (Nickerson & Rogers 2020, p. 1181; also see Kalla & Broockman 2018).
- Evidence "points to the fairly short duration (or rapid decay) of most persuasion effects" (Tesler & Zaller 2017, p. 79).
- "Media can have durable effects on public opinion that subsequently may influence policy" (Markovich et al. 2020, p. 25).

Thus, persuasion is unconstrained or extremely limited by prior opinions, campaigns are persuasive or they are not, and persuasion effects taper or endure. To be clear, the above quotations accurately represent conclusions of exemplary studies, and the authors do not overgeneralize their claims. Nonetheless, taken together, the statements portray a fragmented field—one without an organizing framework that identifies the reasons why studies arrive at distinct conclusions.

THE GENERALIZING PERSUASION FRAMEWORK

Even foundational process theories such as the ELM ignore crucial components of persuasion including competition and speaker intent. This approach makes sense for a single study, but "the task of creating dependable generalizations from such research can be more challenging than might appear at first look" (O'Keefe (2016, p. 184).

I propose the GP Framework (**Table 1**) based on what we know about external validity—that is, confidence that a relationship holds over variation in actors, treatments, outcomes, and settings (Shadish et al. 2002, p. 38; Druckman 2022). The GP Framework is not meant to compete with other theories (such as the ELM) but rather to fill in two gaps. First, it allows one to consider how individual persuasion studies connect to one another and why studies may arrive at contradictory conclusions. Second, it highlights the sources of variations that should be studied. Progress will come if scholars of persuasion place their findings in the context of the GP Framework. This can be done by stating the elements under study and the aspects being held constant. In what follows, I review each element independently. The collective power of the framework will become clear upon revisiting the above-listed ostensibly contradictory conclusions.

ACTORS

Speakers

Speakers come in a host of forms including media, opinion leaders, friends and family, and elites who devote themselves to politics. Most studies treat the speaker's message as exogenous, focusing on the audience's reactions. This approach ignores whether the specific identity of the speaker (e.g., an elite) has an impact (Minozzi et al. 2015) and sidesteps the motivations behind the speaker's messaging. The latter omission reflects the difficulty of studying communicators' decisions.

Table 1 Generalizing Persuasion Framework

Dimension	Components
Actors	Speaker(s) ■ Types (e.g., elites, media, opinion leaders, friends/family) ■ Motivations in crafting messages
	Receiver(s) ■ Assessments across weighted dimensions ■ Effort, motivation, prior attitudes
Treatments	Topic ■ Persons/groups, issues, institutions, products ■ Variation within a topic (e.g., different policy issues)
	Message content ■ Argument strength (and inadequacy) ■ Framing and evaluations ■ Matching to receivers' goals ■ Altering receivers' motivations (e.g., using narratives)
	Medium ■ Alters frames, processing goals, and/or effort ■ Interactions with other persuasion variables
Outcomes	Attitude ■ General evaluation of an object (where the "object" is broadly construed)
	Behavior ■ Does not always follow from an attitude ■ Depends on attitude attributes, injunctive and descriptive norms, behavioral control, and emotions
	Emotion ■ Can inform conscious evaluations or override them
	Identity ■ A dimension of evaluation ■ Often activated when threatened
Settings	Competition ■ Number of speakers ■ Number of receivers ■ Observers
	Space ■ Attitude or behavioral change in one setting may not generalize to other settings
	■ TimePretreatment effects—what happened prior to the persuasive message ■ Posttreatment duration—how long an effect lasts ■ Time between exposure and outcome measurement
	Process ■ Threatening settings ■ Political (conflictual) settings versus deliberative settings
	Culture ■ Shapes understandings of topics ■ Alters salience of different values

Consider Druckman & Jacobs's (2015) study of presidential rhetoric. They obtained private polls from three presidents (Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan) and explored how polling results informed the presidents' public statements. They find that presidents choose their rhetoric to prime the salience of issues on which they are favored and to cater to issue publics (e.g., taking positions on family value issues that align with religious voters) (also see Hager & Hilbig

2020). Yet, elite polls are private for a reason and do not always become publicly available for analyses.

Other researchers look at the decisions of media outlets, exploring the influence of market pressures (Bovitz et al. 2002) and ideology (Groeling 2013). It is notoriously difficult, however, to pinpoint the drivers of media decisions (Druckman & Parkin 2005; cf. Lelkes 2020). Looking at readers, owners, reporters, and local politicians, Gentzkow & Shapiro (2010) find scant evidence of supply-side incentives shaping the slant of US newspapers. Yet, there are exceptional cases. For example, newspapers with ownership interest in 1996 television deregulation covered the issue in a skewed fashion, which suggests that under some conditions, ownership preferences can shape news coverage (Gilens & Hertzman 2000; also see Martin & McCrain 2019).

This work evolved with the media ecosystem to study social media. A robust literature studies the impact of social media on opinions (Settle 2018) and how users engage with one another (Bail 2021). Again, what is missing is research on *why* a speaker produces a particular message. This lacuna can be traced back to work on opinion leaders "to whom. . .the rank-and-file voters typically 'delegate' the main burden of political discussion" (Berelson et al. 1954, p. 109). Scholars explore how to identify opinion leaders based on self-reports of engagement (Ahn et al. 2014). They also study opinion leaders who strictly engage on social media or "prosumers" (Weeks et al. 2017).

Whether people choose the prototypical opinion leader when gathering information seems unclear, at best. Minozzi et al. (2020) use panel network data to show that people tend to incidentally discuss politics with others who share their demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, religion) rather than with politically interested and knowledgeable opinion leaders. This, in turn, could affect what people learn; for instance, Carlson (2019) shows that people learn less from nonideal informants than from "ideal informants" who resemble knowledgeable and trustworthy opinion leaders.

Regardless of these choices, little is known about how opinion leaders or incidental discussion partners (or other types of speakers) formulate their messages. A starting point is to recognize that speakers have goals, such as objectively informing, persuasion/advocacy, self-expression, self-presentation, or mutual understanding (Cionea et al. 2017). Some recent scholarship identifies the correlates of advocacy. For example, the likelihood of advocacy increases with confidence in one's opinions (Cheatham & Tormala 2015) and a belief that the receiver is open-minded (Teeny & Petty 2021). A next step would be to further unravel what generates self-expression and self-presentation (Hillman 2010). Along these lines, Kraft et al. (2020) show that the tone of stories differs across media: News stories that are viewed on news web sites are more negative than those chosen to be shared on email, Twitter, and Facebook**.** The authors explain that this media distinction stems from speakers being motivated by self-presentation.

How these distinct speaker motivations influence the success of persuasive efforts remains unclear. It may be that those motivated by advocacy are less successful, as receivers often have an aversion to those who actively pursue change (Bashir et al. 2013). Ultimately, the hope is to move the study of persuasion from a perspective that sees a one-way transmission (speaker to receiver) to one that sees an exchange between the actors—the reality in many modern political contexts. Moreover, speakers may be more persuasive when they engage in interactions with receivers, as such interactions enhance receivers' feelings of self-efficacy (Levine 2021).

Receivers

A common starting point is characterizing the target of a persuasive attempt, classically the receiver's attitude about (i.e., evaluation of) an object. A useful approach, termed the summative

or expectancy value model (Chong & Druckman 2007b, Fishbein & Ajzen 2010), holds that an individual's attitude toward an object is the weighted sum of a series of evaluative beliefs about that object. Specifically, $Attitude = \Sigma v_i{}^* w_i$,, where v_i is the evaluation of the object on attribute i and w_i is the salience weight ($\Sigma w_i = 1$) associated with that attribute. For example, one's overall attitude, A, toward a new housing development might consist of a combination of negative and positive evaluations, v_i, of the project on different dimensions i. An individual may believe that the project will favor the economy ($i = 1$) but harm the environment ($i = 2$). If this individual cares about both the economy and the environment, then v_1 is positive and v_2 is negative, and his or her 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 & Oxley 1999). This conceptualization applies to any object of evaluation (e.g., issues, candidates, institutions, products) as well as behaviors (e.g., voting, donating, purchasing).

Whether a persuasive attempt succeeds depends on how the receivers assess the message. I highlight three main factors: effort, motivation, and prior attitudes. First, receivers put forth a certain amount of effort in assessing a communication. Dual-process models identify effort as a key determinant of whether a receiver scrutinizes the content of the message (high effort) or relies on a cognitively simple cue such as the perceived credibility of the speaker (low effort) (Chaiken & Trope 1999). Effort depends on opportunity, ability, and the salience of the topic. For example, Arceneaux & Vander Wielen (2017, pp. 98–105) exposed individuals to mixes of party cues and arguments about whether the federal or local government should control environmental policy. They find that those who put forth greater thought are swayed by the arguments, whereas those who exert less effort rely on the party cues. On the more salient issue of government health care, low-effort individuals relied on the arguments rather than the cues (also see Boudreau & MacKenzie 2014). Even though politics remains distant for many people, they still assess message content on salient topics.

Second, receivers have a motivation or goal: "a cognitive representation of a desired endpoint that impacts evaluations, emotions and behaviors" (Fishbach & Ferguson 2007, p. 491). Nondirectional goals are independent from specific conclusions, involving broad objectives such as forming an accurate opinion in light of evidence/arguments (Lodge & Taber 2013). Directional goals, in contrast, involve confirming a specific desired conclusion (e.g., that climate change is a natural process over which humans have little control, or that it is not occurring at all). Many scholars point to directional goals as a reason why persuasion efforts fail (Cotter et al. 2020).

Stanley et al. (2020) first measured people's opinions on five low-salience policy issues (fracking, laboratory animal testing, drone strikes, the gold standard, and standardized testing of students). They then (randomly) asked participants to assess affirming arguments, conflicting arguments, or a mix of arguments, after which the authors again queried their opinions. They find that "no matter which set of reasons was evaluated, participants were more likely to stick with their initial decisions than to change them" (Stanley et al. 2020, p. 901). Stanley and colleagues conclude that individuals are motivated to protect their initial opinions, leading them to evaluate contrary reasons negatively and affirming reasons positively.

Directional reasoning takes a variety of nonexclusive forms (Bayes & Druckman 2021). For instance, Stanley et al. (2020) posit a belief consistency–seeking motivation with the goal to maintain a standing belief, regardless of the strength of an argument put forth. One might ask, though, what respondents would do if the contrary messages had come from their party. Would they stick to their prior beliefs or follow their party (Mullinix 2016)? The latter would indicate a motivation of social identity protection aimed at maintaining a feeling of identity or status within a social group (e.g., agreeing with your party on an issue even if the argument on the issue is poor) (Leeper & Slothuus 2014). In other situations, individuals are motivated by value affirmation. For example,

Feinberg & Willer (2013) show that messages framing environmental issues in terms of purity and sanctity lead conservatives who typically oppose environmental legislation to become more supportive; this argument resonates with cherished conservative values (Feinberg & Willer 2019).

Extant work rarely theorizes motivations a priori or directly documents the presence of a given motivation (e.g., accuracy, belief consistency, social identity protection, value affirmation). Druckman & McGrath (2019) refer to an observational equivalence problem: Scholars infer a directional motivation when a persuasive message fails, even though it could be that the message simply was not compelling. For instance, evidence suggests that persuasion during high-salience (e.g., presidential) campaigns rarely occurs (Kalla & Broockman 2018). One could conclude that this failure stems from partisan motivated reasoning where voters seek to agree only with their party (i.e., their social group) (Nickerson & Rogers 2020, p. 1181). Alternatively, it is possible that voters aim for accuracy but hold strong prior beliefs, with an increasing share being "likely to agree with their party on any issues on which they have opinions in the first place" (Kalla & Broockman 2018, p. 150; cf. Hillygus & Shields 2008).

It matters which process occurs. In the former case successful persuasion requires altering voters' motivations, whereas in the latter it entails convincing voters that candidates share their perspectives. Isolating the motivation requires manipulating it or directly measuring it (Tappin et al. 2020). For instance, Bayes et al. (2020) distinguished between accuracy motivation, social identity protection, and a value affirmation goal by experimentally inducing each before providing participants with climate change messaging designed to appeal to one of the motivations. They find that Republican participants were more likely to believe in in climate change when they received a message that facilitated the pursuit of the specific induced motivation. For example, those with an accuracy motivation were more persuaded by scientific information, while those with a value goal were more persuaded by a moral value message.

The final key construct influencing receivers is their prior attitudes. Stronger prior attitudes—i.e., those held with more certainty, confidence, importance, or extremity—are more difficult to change (Boudreau & MacKenzie 2014, Howe & Krosnick 2017) because accuracy-motivated individuals have less uncertainty around their beliefs and thus hold a higher threshold to change them (Druckman & McGrath 2019). For example, Druckman & Nelson (2003) find that individuals who hold stronger prior attitudes about campaign finance reform are significantly less likely to be swayed by messages that frame reform as an issue of free speech or minimizing special interests. However, just how great an impact prior attitudes have remains unclear; for instance, Guess & Coppock (2020) offer consistent evidence of persuasion on gun control, the minimum wage, and the death penalty regardless of attitude importance or extremity.

Beyond prior attitude strength, scholars might consider the salience of directionally relevant constructs such as social identities, values, and normative expectations. For instance, Girvan et al. (2010) show that information about a normative social consensus (e.g., opinions of friends, family, celebrities) has a particularly strong influence on the vote decisions of high self-monitors—individuals who are likely to base decisions on social cues (i.e., they value normative expectations). That said, Coppock (2021) finds that political persuasion often occurs "in parallel," meaning that people respond the same way (i.e., in the same direction, by the same amount) to persuasive information. This is the case across categories such as partisanship, age, education, race, and gender.

In summary, the result of any political persuasion effort hinges on the receiver's effort, motivation, and prior attitude strength (although, as noted, there is some debate on the latter feature).[1]

[1]Some readers may note the exclusion of sophistication from the discussion. While this surely is a causal factor in shaping attitude change, it typically operates through more proximate variables including effort (e.g., via

Existing studies rarely consider all three. Some even rely on stereotypical portraits of the public as exerting little effort (Lau 2020), being directionally motivated (Lodge & Taber 2013), and holding weak prior attitudes on most issues (Kinder & Kalmoe 2017). Yet, as the above examples demonstrate, there exists substantial variance in effort, motivation, and attitude strength. Scholars need to more actively theorize about how these variables influence persuasion.

TREATMENTS

Topic

The classical framework considers what is said (message content) and how it is delivered (medium) (Lasswell 1948). But it ignores something perhaps even more central: the topic. There exist at least four nonexclusive political topical areas. First are persons or groups such as candidates, elected officials, media figures, parties, and racial/ethnic groups. Second are public policy issues. Third are institutions—i.e., norms/rules or organizations—such as the government, science, and the military. Fourth are products; the rise of political consumerism or private politics has politicized businesses, as demonstrated when activists try to sway consumers to boycott a business due to poor environmental practices (Abito et al. 2019).

People process distinct topics differently. For instance, attitudes about individuals are more enduring and less vulnerable to persuasion than attitudes about policies (Druckman & Lupia 2000). In this vein, McGraw & Dolan (2007) show that when a message personifies the state (e.g., focusing on its leader), people form stronger attitudes than when the message characterizes the state in terms of institutions (e.g., the parliament). Hence, topical framing affects attitude strength.

There also exists substantial variation within so-called topics. Consider the literature on the persuasive impact of party cues. Studies suggest that when a party endorses a policy, partisans move their opinions by 3–43% on the policy opinion scale (Bullock 2011). Variation in the policy issues studied partially drives these inconsistent results: There is no sampling from a population of policy issues (Druckman & Leeper 2012a, Slothuus & Bisgaard 2020). Tappin (2020) studies the impact of party cues across 34 distinct policy questions and finds that the impact ranges from 15% (on whether Congress should audit the Federal Reserve) to 1% (on whether police should be required to wear body cameras). The difference between topics may not explain all the variation, but it clearly plays a role. Relatedly, variation across topics depends on the strength of prior opinions (Bartels 1993), self-interest (Slothuus & Bisgaard 2021), and, as I discuss below, timing—that is, the extent to which people have already been exposed to arguments on the topic (Druckman & Leeper 2012b).

Message Content

Scholarship on the content of persuasive messages is expansive and exasperating. One prominent concept is argument quality. As mentioned, when people are able to put forth effort, they scrutinize the argument, and it persuades them if they consider it high quality (Chaiken 1980, Petty & Cacioppo 1986). Identifying what constitutes high quality entails an empirical exercise of asking individuals whether they perceive the argument as strong and cogent rather than weak and specious (Eagly & Chaiken 1993, p. 311). While this approach helps to document when content receives attention or which message wins out in competition (Chong & Druckman 2007a),

ability), motivation (cf. Lodge & Taber 2013, Tappin et al. 2021), and attitude strength (Howe & Krosnick 2017).

it provides scant theoretical insight. In fact, it seems to be an inadequate tautology. It is a tautology because it involves identifying persuasive messages as persuasive, and it is inadequate because "asking respondents about perceived or expected persuasiveness [is] no more informative about relative actual persuasiveness than flipping a coin" (O'Keefe 2018, p. 133).

Where does that leave the study of message content? I suggest three steps as a way forward. First, tie the study of persuasive messages to the aforementioned model of attitude structure that includes evaluative dimensions, evaluations on those dimensions, and weights applied to each dimension. Different messaging strategies target each of those elements. For instance, framing (or the analogous processes of priming and agenda setting) captures altering the dimensions under consideration or the relevant weights, as in the above example of assessing a housing development on economic and/or environmental grounds. Social scientists have long recognized altering the frame or scope of conflict as a crucial part of politics (Schattschneider 1960). Alternatively, messages can focus on evaluations such as how the housing development will affect the environment.

Second, consider the audience's motivations in assessing a message. Recall the Bayes et al. (2020) study showing that climate change arguments succeed when they align with the audience's motivation—for example, value framing (e.g., protect the sanctity of the environment) works when receivers seek value affirmation, while a science fact message is persuasive for accuracy-motivated receivers. This dynamic explains the appeal of targeted messaging crafted to match the recipient's characteristics (Hillygus & Shields 2008). For example, Matz et al. (2017) show that messages that comport with the audience's level of extraversion or openness to experience enjoy more success in affecting product purchasing behaviors than mismatched messages (but see Eckles et al. 2018). Targeting in politics, though, may not be an ideal strategy. Hersh & Schaffner (2013) show that targeting specific groups (e.g., born-again Christians, union members, Latinx respondents) with specialized messages tends not to persuade the group and backfires among the broader public (also see Ostfeld 2019). Instead of focusing on social groups, more success could come from connecting messages to the audience's goals (e.g., knowing whether they care most about their values, what others are doing, or particular policies).

Third, alter the audience's motivation (Mullinix 2016). An example of such a messaging strategy is narrative persuasion, a message format that describes events in chronological order with information about characters and their actions. Gooch (2018) uses two experiments to show that a personalized narrative from a partisan elite (Joe Biden) can increase support for the discussed issue (Social Security) among in-partisans and increase the elite's favorability among all partisans. Kalla & Broockman (2020) present evidence from three field experiments on the impact of the "nonjudgmental" exchanging of narratives where the speaker offers portrayals of unauthorized immigrants or transgender people (also see Broockman & Kalla 2016, Kalla & Broockman 2021). They find that, relative to a control placebo (and in one case relative to arguments alone), the inclusion of the narrative durably reduces exclusionary attitudes toward these groups. Kubin et al. (2021) similarly show that relaying personal experiences, particularly those that are relevant to the issue at hand and that involve harm/suffering, generates respect across group lines and perceptions of rationality more effectively than relaying facts.

Personal narratives "transport" the receiver into the story, so that the receiver becomes focused on the world it depicts (Green & Brock 2000). Hamby et al. (2017) suggest that transportation works via retrospective reflection, the recall of self or other relevant memories to validate and extend the story. It consequently can shift the audience away from directional motivations to a focus on connecting with the narrative (Carpenter 2019, p. 15). This is not the same as an accuracy motivation but, in essence, it shifts motivations by reducing the need to be protective and allows for persuasion on ego-threatening topics.

Medium

Much has changed since Lasswell (1948) mentioned the "channel" as one of the key persuasive variables. The political communication environment evolved from newspapers and radio to television to the internet to social media. Researchers have leveraged social media data in remarkably innovative ways to study political communication patterns (Persily & Tucker 2020). Here I make two points that have received less attention.

First, the medium by which one receives a message can alter frames, processing goals, and/or effort. For example, in his experiment using the famous first Nixon–Kennedy debate, Druckman (2003) shows that, compared to those who listen to the debate, those who watch it on television rely more on personality assessments in evaluating the candidates (e.g., perceived integrity) and less on issue position assessments. This difference alters overall evaluations (in Kennedy's favor). Here, the medium acts as a framing mechanism that shifts the criteria of assessment. Althaus & Tewksbury (2002, pp. 182–83) show that reading *The New York Times* online instead of in print facilitates directional goals because it "draw[s] readers immediately to those stories most likely to fit their information preferences." Print readers view international stories on the front-page section and then see them as more salient, while directionally motivated online readers skip over such stories by following links. In this case, the medium prompts distinct goals.

In another such example, Druckman et al. (2018) compare communication via media segments to communication via in-person conversations (which I construe as variations in media, although one could see them as variations in context). They show that exposure to an out-partisan media segment (e.g., Democrats watch a Fox News segment supporting drilling for oil) appears to stimulate directional partisan motivated reasoning such that the audience counterargues the story and moves in the opposite direction (e.g., they become more opposed to drilling). In contrast, when individuals watch partisan media and talk with a group that includes out-partisans about the topic (e.g., Democrats talk to Republicans about drilling for oil), they seem to move away from directional partisan motivated reasoning and become relatively persuaded (e.g., they become less opposed to drilling). The give-and-take of the in-person format stimulates more reflecting thinking than the media format.

With regard to motivation and social media, the results are surprising. Many researchers conclude that misinformation on social media shapes beliefs due to directional motivations where partisans believe anything that supports their group (Flynn et al. 2017, p. 128). Pennycook et al. (2021) show that this is not always the case and, instead, the persuasiveness of misinformation on social media reflects receivers' lack of effort in processing social media (cf. Osmundsen et al. 2021). When people put in more effort to assess social media information, they are less likely to believe false messages and to share them. The implication is that simple effort prompts can make a difference: Pennycook et al. (2020) show that asking people to rate the accuracy of a single headline subsequently increases the likelihood of sharing true rather than false posts.

My second point is about the interaction between medium and other variables. For example, considerable debate concerns how persuasive argumentation from out-group sources works on social media (Guess et al. 2021). Bail et al. (2018) find that exposing Republicans to liberal messages via Twitter leads them to move in a more conservative direction (a backlash effect). Democrats exposed to conservative Twitter messages move in a liberal direction, but not statistically significantly so. In contrast, Levy (2021) finds no effects on political opinions among partisans exposed to counter-attitudinal messages via Facebook.[2] Even though both Bail et al. (2018) and Levy (2021)

[2]These contrasting findings reflect a larger set of conflicting results about potential backlash effects (e.g., Porter & Wood 2019, Ma et al. 2019).

focus on the impact of social media out-party exposure, the differences could stem from variation in other dimensions that affect persuasion. These include treatment medium (Twitter versus Facebook), sources (retweets from more than 4,000 political accounts versus news outlets), receiver motivation (being paid to follow a Twitter bot/account versus being nudged to subscribe to an outlet that could reveal new perspectives), and settings (receiving 24 messages each day versus choosing whether to comply and view the outlets). Of those variations, the most important may have been the relative onslaught of oppositional message in the experiment by Bail et al. (2018), triggering negative reactions (Bail 2021). This differs from the careful engagement likely stimulated in the Levy (2021) study. This comparison illustrates why one may find conflicting results. When studying messages in a particular medium, it is crucial to consider differences across other variables. The comparison also reveals the need to consider multiple variables, as one could mistakenly, for example, conclude that the distinct results stemmed from different social media.

OUTCOMES

Attitudes

The modal target of persuasion is the receiver's attitude, which has been my implicit focus thus far. Here I make a tangential point. The increasing availability of behavior data due to the internet and social media, equipping researchers with "big data," has led some to minimize the importance of studying attitudes (for discussion, see Matz & Netzer 2017, Miller 2017). This is foolhardy for two reasons. For one, a tenet of representative democracy is the responsiveness of elected officials to the preferences of the populace (Dahl 1971). Thus, political preferences—regardless of actions based on those preferences—matter. Their importance does not depend on Gallup & Rae's (1940) idyllic vision of *The Pulse of Democracy*, where polls reveal genuine thoughts to the nation's leaders. Regardless of one's normative stance on what makes for the best democracy, politicians attend to opinion surveys and so, practically, they are important (Druckman & Jacobs 2015).[3] Second, as I discuss in the next section, scholars have taken low correlations between attitudes and behaviors as evidence that attitude measures may be insufficient. Yet, in the age of social media data, one must also consider whether the behaviors studied are the right behaviors to study. Put another way, attitude surveys are constrained by sampling issues and nonresponse (Miller 2017), but researchers using behavioral data often ignore the sample and use whatever social media expressions are available. These may be meaningful but are far from representing the population of possible behaviors. In short, if attitudes and behaviors do not match, it could be because the wrong behavior is being studied and not because attitudes do not matter (see Groves 2011, p. 870).

Behaviors

Early studies presumed that attitudes straightforwardly explain behaviors (e.g., a voter likes a candidate and therefore votes for or donates to the candidate). But "we should not expect that a change in general attitudes. . . will have much of an impact on any particular behavior" (Fishbein & Ajzen 2010, p. 278). To see the implications for persuasion, consider Levine & Kline's (2017) experiment on climate change. They provided recipients with a generic message about taking action to address climate change, a public health message about taking climate change action, or a

[3] Further, the public themselves look at attitudes of others as pieces of information on which they act (e.g., Moy & Rinke 2012).

food risk message about taking climate change action (e.g., to prevent food shortages). They find that—in line with the idea that loss frames persuade—the health and food risk messages cause people to support clean energy policies and believe climate change should be a policy priority. Yet in an analogous experiment, these types of loss frames depressed climate-relevant behaviors such as joining a climate advocacy group. The logic is that, relative to a gains frame, the loss frame leads people to support preventing the loss (their attitude), but it also makes salient their own resource constraints, making them less likely to act (also see Levine & Kline 2019).

This work makes clear that one must be careful in identifying the target outcome. There are at least two possible routes for exploring behavioral outcomes (or judgmental choices). One is to downplay or evade a focus on the attitude–behavior connection if one's goal is to understand behaviors. For example, Groenendyk (2019) shows that the linchpin of stimulating voting turnout and intentions is not resolving attitudinal ambivalence but rather activating positive "gut feelings." Altering behaviors may depend less on attitudes than on motivations and emotions (also see Groenendyk 2016).

Another route is to identify the conditions under which attitudes shape behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen 2010, p. 278). For example, Druckman & Bolsen (2011) exposed people to arguments about the use of carbon nanotubes (CNTs), an alternative energy source to coal, oil, or natural gas. They randomized study participants to exposure to pro arguments (e.g., lower energy costs) or con arguments (e.g., health risks). They also randomly varied whether the arguments included facts, operationalized as a reference to a scientific study (e.g., showing that mice injected with CNTs react as if they were injected with asbestos or showing that CNTs double the efficiency of solar cells). They find that regardless of the facts, the frames move attitudes in the predicted direction (e.g., a pro frame leads to more support for the use of CNTs). However, the frames only influence behavioral intentions (e.g., likelihood of personally using CNTs) when accompanied by the supporting facts. The accompanying facts increase the certainty with which individuals hold their attitudes, and that certainty leads people to act on their attitudes.

This study reveals the importance of attitude strength as a driver of behavior (Howe & Krosnick 2017). More generally, behavior or the intention to engage in a behavior (O'Keefe 2021) depends on attitudes/attitude strength, injunctive norms (i.e., if the behavior is desired by important others), descriptive norms (i.e., if other people perform the behavior), perceived behavioral control (i.e., perception of the ease or difficulty of the behavior, including resource constraints), and emotions (Fishbein & Ajzen 2010).[4] Persuaders who hope to influence behaviors need to consider which of these components matter to the receiver(s) in a given situation, which components seem more moveable, and the current intention of the receiver(s).

Emotion

Emotions—instinctive states emanating from one's situation or mood—are not an explicit part of the attitudinal construct presented above. Yet, emotions inform the considerations that drive attitudes or behaviors and sometimes override conscious considerations driving behaviors (see Marcus 2002, pp. 10–11). Either path makes emotions an important target of persuasion (Albertson et al. 2020).

For example, Clifford & Jerit (2018) provided study participants with messages about an infectious disease and varied the absence or presence of text prompting disgust (e.g., symptoms include

[4]These factors come from the reasoned action approach. Habit is another predictor, as is clear from research on habitual voting (e.g., Malhotra et al. 2011).

bloody diarrhea, boils) and/or anxiety (e.g., high likelihood of spread). Anxiety messages prompted individuals to request more information about the disease while disgust messages lowered such requests. Brady et al. (2017), who exposed participants to messages about gun control, same-sex marriage, and climate change, find that messages including moral-emotional words (e.g., hate) lead individuals to pass them along in social media (i.e., moral contagion). Other work demonstrates the role of negative emotions such as anger in stimulating political action (Valentino et al. 2011) and how individuals who regulate negative emotions reduce their likelihood of political action (e.g., protesting, donating, volunteering online posting) (Ford et al. 2019).[5] This latter finding suggests that those interested in stimulating action may want to reframe upsetting political events to accentuate personally relevant negative emotions (that can vitiate regulation), although this can also lead to deleterious behaviors such as violence and moral condemnation.

Identity

People often base political decisions on their partisan or social identities (Achen & Bartels 2016). Indeed, the implications for one's identity group are often a crucial consideration when one forms an attitude. It is thus not surprising that speakers often seek to activate or pander to particular identities.[6]

For instance, Levendusky (2018) shows that priming a common national identity can lead opposing partisans to move away from animus and hold more positive feelings toward one another. Klar (2013), looking at issue attitudes, finds that when Democratic parents receive a message that makes their partisan identity salient, they become more supportive of social service spending regardless of the national deficit (which falls to future generations), less supportive of antiterrorism spending, and more supportive of releasing sex offenders early to start rehabilitation. In contrast, when the message instead accentuates their parental identity, their policy opinions move in the opposite directions. Klar further shows that the key to activating an identity is threat (i.e., current policies pose a threat to one's partisanship or parental status) (also see Wojcieszak & Garrett 2018).

SETTINGS

Competition

Classical persuasion experiments involve a single speaker sending a message to receivers; there is scant attention to context. Yet, many contexts involve multiple speakers trying to persuade the audience. To see why this matters, consider a typical framing effect, such as when people hear that a hate group rally should be thought of as a public safety concern and not be allowed (Nelson et al. 1997). Invariably, the involved group or another group will argue that the decision to allow the rally constitutes a free speech issue. When two arguments clash, they could cancel out (Sniderman & Theriault 2004). Chong & Druckman (2007a), however, argue that competing rhetoric prompts effort, leading people to opt for the argument they perceive as stronger. The authors show that if the public safety argument comes from a credible source and the free speech argument comes from a noncredible source, then the public safety perspective sways individuals (although see the above discussion on argument strength in the Message Content subsection of the section titled

[5] Positive emotions also can stimulate action; Brader (2006) shows how campaign advertisements that prompt enthusiasm stimulate campaign participation.

[6] Speakers also often target values, such as in the moral framing examples above (see Howat 2019 on the relationship between identity and values).

Treatments). Yet, in general, studies of competitive persuasion remain limited in the social sciences (Della Vigna & Gentzkow 2010, p. 665).

The number of receivers also matters. When someone hears an argument, the presence of others can stimulate normative pressures. Levitan & Verhulst (2016) show that having others nearby shapes how people form their attitudes on issues such as abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, and immigration. Receivers look to see how others react and follow suit (also see Sinclair 2012). Alternatively, if listeners observe a persuasive argument targeting someone else, they may learn about its applicability to themselves. Lupia & McCubbins (1998, p. 61) provide an example where a Democratic observer hears a Republican speaker endorse a policy to his/her Republican constituents. The Democratic observer then takes the opposite stance (what the authors call an observer effect). This type of dynamic partially explains the aforementioned backlash of targeted messages among those not targeted (Hersh & Schaffner 2013).

Space

Many political and social interactions occur in a specific space, and so what happens in one context may not affect attitudes and behaviors in another. This aligns with the prior discussion of outcome variables but concerns the application of a particular outcome in distinct contexts. Mousa's (2020) study of intergroup contact shows that attitudes can change due to interpersonal exchanges, even those not involving explicit argumentation. Mousa assigned Christian amateur soccer teams in northern Iraq to randomly receive three additional Christian players or three additional (displaced) Muslim players. Christian players on teams that added Muslims expressed more tolerant attitudes toward training with Muslims or playing on a mixed team in the future. However, they did not become more tolerant of interactions with Muslims not on the teams, in contexts (or spaces) such as attending neighborhood social events or patronizing Muslim businesses.

Wiest et al. (2015) find a related dynamic in a study of climate change messaging. Frames focusing on local (state) conditions alter perceptions of the severity of climate change and support for subnational policies. However, the frames do not carry over to influence support for policy efforts at the national or global levels. These types of findings connect to construal theory, which holds that people construe psychologically proximal targets in more concrete terms (Liberman & Trope 1998). The bottom line is that attitudinal and/or behavioral change in one setting does not generalize to other spatial contexts.

Time

Timing matters. In their review of attitude change, Albarracin & Shavitt (2018) discuss time in terms of a receiver's development, lifespan, and generation. Here, I focus on timing as an aspect of the setting. Political arguments occur over time; thus, understanding the outcome of persuasion requires recognizing what came before. For example, in a study conducted among engaged individuals (Druckman & Leeper 2012b), arguments concerning a public-funded casino—both pro arguments focusing on economic benefits and con arguments focusing on social costs (e.g., addiction)—failed. They failed because these individuals previously had been exposed to the economic argument and had formed strong opinions in favor of the casino. Hearing the economic argument again did not matter. They had already formed strong opinions and rejected the con argument. Such pretreatment effects make clear that one often must attend to communication over time to grasp its effects (Gaines et al. 2007, Slothuus 2016).

Druckman et al. (2012) show how early arguments can set opinions in place, leading individuals to seek out confirmatory information and making them more resistant to later arguments. For instance, those exposed to an initial argument for universal health care to minimize inequality

subsequently chose to read articles with that framing, and then when exposed later to opposing arguments concerning economic costs, they rejected them. In other circumstances, more recent arguments may win out, particularly among individuals who are averse to elaboration (Chong & Druckman 2010).

The flip side of "what happened before" is "what happens after": how long a given persuasive effect lasts. Although the question has been considered since Hovland & Weiss's (1951) sleeper effect hypothesis (e.g., people initially discount a message due to a noncredible source but later adjust their attitudes in the direction of the message), it is far from settled (Albarracin et al. 2017). Related to duration is the amount of elapsed time between exposure to the persuasive message and measurement of outcome—immediate or delayed. Not all studies of persuasion need to account for prior and subsequent dynamics, but they need to situate themselves in time and recognize that timing can alter what persuades.

Process

Different settings involve distinct decision-making processes. For instance, situations with personal threats alter how individuals receive persuasive messages. Druckman et al. (2021) show that those who felt more threatened by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (e.g., more cases in their surroundings) focused on substantive information instead of following messages from their parties.

Political processes often involve environments rife with conflict and individualism (Groenendyk & Krupnikov 2021). Yet, another depiction of politics posits a public endeavor of deliberation for a common good (also see Karpowitz & Mendelberg 2014). In this latter situation, individuals move away from directional goals and engage in open-minded (not synonymous with accurate) assessments. Using the issue of gun control, Groenendyk & Krupnikov (2021) demonstrate that settings privileging open-mindedness (e.g., linking it to life success) lead individuals to evaluate arguments counter to their standing beliefs in an open-minded fashion. Individuals also arrive at moderate opinions in response to a mix of arguments. In political settings, by comparison, individuals think of conflict and engage in directional processing. This is particularly the case in the presence of extreme partisan differences (Druckman et al. 2013). An intriguing question, given these results, concerns the impact of various social media and entertainment contexts on processing (Kim 2019): When do they prompt directional as opposed to open-minded reasoning in response to arguments?

Culture

In recent years, persuasion scholars have come to recognize that culture shapes how arguments are made and processed (Albarracin & Shavitt 2018). For instance, Song et al. (2020) conducted a survey to assess what individuals viewed as an environmental issue. They find that minorities and low-income respondents perceive several human-oriented issues as environmental. For instance, relative to White people, Black and Hispanic individuals are significantly more likely to identify poverty, unemployment, diabetes, and racism as environmental issues. Those with lower household income are significantly more likely to identify unequal access to education and racism as environmental issues. Presumably, social experiences become embedded in a cultural understanding of what constitutes an environmental issue. This, in turn, matters for persuasion, since it shapes the nature of conversations and surely affects what constitutes a persuasive argument on these issues.

Stark et al. (2020) show that priming evenhandedness alters attitudes. Reminding labor activists of the possibility of labor campaign contributions leads them to be more supportive of

business contributions (i.e., they offer more evenhanded evaluations). Yet, this effect is not nearly as strong in countries that have collectivist cultures (e.g., Asian countries) because evenhandedness considerations are chronically accessible. Here, culture generates what could be thought of as a pretreatment effect.

Soroka et al. (2019) study the impact of negative news content in 17 countries across 6 continents. They find evidence of higher attentiveness and arousal during exposure to negative stories. They also report individual-level variations in reactions; however, these differences do not connect to country-level contextual factors. In this case, there is less evidence of a cultural impact, which itself is intriguing given that prior research had been concentrated in Western countries. Clearly, understanding persuasion requires attending the intersection of multiple variables.

REVISITING CONTRADICTORY CLAIMS

To see the usefulness of the GP Framework (**Table 1**), consider the contradictory statements from the bulleted list near the beginning of this review. Broockman & Butler (2017) conclude that politicians can shape opinions with ease while Stanley et al. (2020) hold that individuals do not move from their initial opinions regardless of the reasons presented. The studies differ in terms of actors (sources) and settings (timing). The former presented statements from legislators and measured change from initial opinions after a substantial amount of time (at least a week). The latter provided arguments without sources and assessed opinions very close in time to the initial reporting of opinions.

Flores (2019) states that ballot initiative campaigns are persuasive in his study of television advertisement effects on opinions about the legality of same-sex marriage. Nickerson & Rogers (2020) state that campaigns have little to no effect. However, these studies differ in treatment and outcome: Nickerson and Rogers's treatment focuses on candidate elections (as opposed to initiative campaigns), and their outcome of interest is voting behavior (as opposed to an issue attitude). Kalla & Broockman (2018) also find scant campaign effects in general election campaigns. Yet, they acknowledge that persuasion can occur in unusual circumstances depending on the timing (e.g., earlier in the campaign), voters (e.g., with weaker prior opinions), targets (e.g., atypical candidates), and messages (e.g., exploiting notable candidate blunders). These variables map onto the GP Framework's settings, actors, and treatments. Kalla & Broockman's (2018) reasonable conclusions are based on the set of extant studies and their assessment of "typical" general elections campaigns. The challenge, though, is that no one has identified the population of campaigns and how they vary across the GP Framework's dimensions. If scholars were to situate their studies within the framework and simultaneously consider variation across variables in the population of interest (e.g., general election campaigns), it would engender more confidence about what is and is not typical.

Tesler & Zaller (2017) find that persuasion effects are short-lived, on the basis of evidence from election studies that focus on candidate television advertisements altering voting behavior (Gerber et al. 2011, Hill et al. 2013). In contrast, Markovich et al. (2020) suggest that persuasion effects endure, but they study a distinct outcome (opinions), treatment (the topic of marijuana legalization and the medium of online news), and actor (partisan networks).

The contradictory claims thus stem from work that differs on multiple dimensions—with all four dimensions of the GP Framework being relevant. In fact, in each contradictory pair, the works differ along at least two of the dimensions. Understanding why studies with the same ostensible focus arrive at contradictory conclusions requires attention to multiple possible differences. The purpose of the GP Framework is to offer scholars a way to proceed when they study persuasion, identifying which variables may matter and how their work connects to other research. The goal

is to structure the literature in a way that better ensures collective progress. Authors can apply it by being explicit about which elements they are studying and which they are not (e.g., in a table), thereby enabling others to situate the work.

FINAL THOUGHTS: NORMATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

There is much to say about normative implications, and theorists have considered how to treat persuasion from a host of angles (Garsten 2006, Disch 2011). There exists a long-standing tension between idyllic conceptions of the citizen—as engaged and holding consistent preferences—and the existence of persuasion by political elites. That elites can persuade means that the very individuals who are supposed to respond to the authentic opinions of the citizenry have an incentive to engage in disinformation and manipulation. This tension contributes to confusion about salubrious persuasion (learning) versus detrimental manipulation (Druckman 2014). Adding to the complexity is that engaged citizens are more likely to have directional motivations that make them averse to open-minded deliberation (Druckman 2012). If one continues down this line of reasoning, an infinite regress of trade-offs emerges. Normative criteria for a good citizenry and the role of persuasion in promoting or hindering good citizenship are inherently subjective, often arbitrary, and empirically challenging (e.g., how to intuit speakers' motivations).

An alternative would be to focus on processes—such as articulating an ideal of accuracy-motivated citizens with access to competitive information. The problem here is that accuracy may be a lot to ask for, and even if not, accuracy motivation need not lead to accurate conclusions (Kunda 2001, p. 238). Moreover, specifying the availability of competitive information may be doable at the extremes but ultimately can become arbitrary; it is not clear what the full range of information includes, particularly given institutional constraints on representation.

Many scholars sidestep normative debates for fear that imposing their own values onto citizens could be elitist (Lupia 2006). Alas, knowingly or not, this is what much scholarship has done. Narratives lead to less exclusionary attitudes even though they can be far from fact-based (Van Bavel et al. 2021), moral framing generates support for climate change policy despite including no scientific information, and identity priming can depolarize without any mention of the need for compromise in politics. In all of these cases, scholars have no ethical issue in studying particular persuasive approaches that could alter opinions because they lead to, respectively, more tolerant, evidence-consistent, and politically functional outcomes. These each invariably constitute valued democratic collective goods to which governments contribute, and thus, scholars need not back away from endorsing them and exploring persuasion as a means to these ends.

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