

# Baumgartner, POLI 203 Fall 2014

Public opinion

Reading: Peffley and Hurwitz

October 8, 2014

# Persuasion v. Resistance

- Fact: I went to Michigan and you can't make me root for Ohio State or even make me think it's a good university
  - Duke? Don't even think about it.
- Resistance: Your lack of openness to certain ideas, facts, new bits of information.

# Persuasion and the death penalty

- One reason the moral argument is so “sticky”
  - To be persuaded to change your opinion on the death penalty, based on morality, would typically involve accepting an idea that your religious beliefs are wrong.
- Innocence, cost, other “logistics” arguments allow one to be persuaded without calling into question those basic elements of self-identification.

# Motivated Reasoning

- Some things you accept easily, other things you subject to great scrutiny
- This is human nature
- It makes very good sense to behave this way
  - Examples: don't pay attention, reevaluate anything when for example a cat purrs when you pet it. But when the unexpected happens, you need to look further.
  - Sun rises in the east, ok no big deal. Sun rises elsewhere, ok you'd need to look into that!
  - This is very appropriate behavior, human nature, and allows you to allocate your attention where it needs to be: on the “surprises” in life.

# However, in politics it can be terrible

- Your predisposition (call it a prejudice, call it a pre-existing attitude, call it what you will) determines:
  - How you accept, or if you accept, new information as credible.
  - It's not just that conservatives watch Fox so are exposed to things they already believe, and liberals watch MSNBC
  - It's actually worse than that: even when presented with the information, people respond differently

# Memory

- It's easier to remember something that "makes sense" – e.g., that conforms to your previous beliefs
- It's harder to remember something that doesn't make sense.
- So your brain is full of "confirming" facts and it filters out those facts that disconfirm your previous beliefs

# Attitudes and Information

- Often, people are hostile to learning
- They know that more information may confuse things, make their attitudes and behaviors harder to justify, and this causes anxiety or stress, so people often resist
- This will happen to you when you try to explain more about the facts you have learned about the death penalty to others after this class!

# Death penalty opinions

- Ellsworth and Gross (1994):
  - People feel strongly about the death penalty
  - They know little about it
  - They feel no need to know more...
- Thurgood Marshall: The more you know about it, the less you support the death penalty.
- So, to maintain support, it is good to limit information.



# Racial differences in understanding Crime

- Causes of crime:
  - Dispositional factors (violent tendencies, no sense of right and wrong, criminals are just disposed that way)
  - Structural factors (poverty, biased policing, etc.)
  - Obviously, there can be a mix. Individuals might weight the two factors differently...
- These relate to race: why are Blacks over-represented in prison?
  - Dispositional factors?
  - Structural factors?
- Blacks and Whites might differ in the weights we each give to these explanations...

# These racial differences in attitudes may lead to different responses to information

- Blacks: structural factors stronger, so relatively welcoming or open to structural explanations
- Whites: dispositional factors stronger, so relatively hostile to information suggesting that this may not be so, or that structural factors matter...
  - “You can prove anything with statistics...”
  - Find a way to down-play the unwelcome evidence.

# Shift the weight you give

- Faced with evidence about structural factors, you might say:
  - Yes, I knew that, it confirms my expectations, and it furthermore demands reform
  - Data are flawed
  - Even if the data are not flawed, there is STILL a dispositional aspect to it, and we can't ignore that! In fact, I'm going to insist that we focus more on that.

# The survey evidence

- “Statistics show that African Americans are more often arrested and sent to prison than are whites. The people we talk to have different ideas about why this occurs. I’m going to read you several reasons, two at a time, and ask you to choose which is the *more important* reasons why, in your view, blacks are more often arrested and sent to prison than whites.
  - First, the police and justice system are biased against blacks, OR blacks are just more likely to commit more crimes?
  - Next, the police and justice system are biased against blacks, OR many younger blacks don’t respect authority?”

# This generates a 0-4 scale

- 0 = give the structural answer twice
- 4 = give the dispositional answer twice
  
- Blacks, Mean = 1.5, Mode = 0
- Whites, Mean = 2.5, Mode = 4
  
- So we get some real variation there...

# Table 1

- Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder? **W 65, B 50**
- Some people say that the death penalty is unfair because most of the people who are executed are African Americans. Do you... **W 77, B 38** (W= +12, B = -12 compared to baseline)
- Some people say that the death penalty is unfair because too many innocence people are being executed. Do you... **W 64, B 34** (W = -1, B = -16)

# Figure 1

- As Whites move from the Structural to the Dispositional explanation of crime, their support for the death penalty increases very strongly. At the far end of the dispositional scale, almost no Whites are strongly opposed to the death penalty...

# Backlash effects

- Whites reject the “racial bias” argument so strongly that they increase support for the death penalty..
  - Motivated reasoning: they think of why this is, and focus on disposition, and become highly punitive.
  - Other possible explanation they do not propose: self interest: it won't apply to me, so it is easy to support... (DP won't typically apply to any of us...)



# Easy arguments, and hard ones

- It is very hard for most Americans to accept the idea that the criminal justice system is unfair to Blacks.
- This just shakes too many beliefs. People resist it, therefore. They attach the disparities that are observed to dispositions, not structures.
- Both matter, of course. But you can choose which one you focus on.

# Innocence is easy. Race is hard.

- Lots of arguments are hard. That is, they will meet with greater resistance. In fact, they can even backfire:
  - Morality
  - Deterrence
  - Race
- Some arguments are easier. People are not as investing in protecting against them:
  - Innocence
  - Cost
  - Botched executions