
The Effect of Political Party

on Processing and Attitudes

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Our study investigated how superficial and systematic processing influences people's memory and attitudes. In our experiment, all subjects read 2 sets of excerpts from hypothetical political campaign advertisements with or without political party labels as the independent variable. We measured the level of processing and the subjects' attitudes towards each candidate and their arguments. Previous research suggests that political party labels influence people's attitudes about political issues and trigger the use of superficial processing, we expected a person who identified with one party to express favorable attitude evaluations of a candidate of the same party and less favorable attitude evaluations of a candidate in another party. If subjects did not identify with either the Republican or Democratic Party, we predicted that they would rate the candidates and their excerpts neutrally. We further hypothesized that subjects in the labeled groups, subjects who read excerpts either labeled Democratic or Republican, would process information superficially (earning low memory test scores), while people in the no-label group would process information systematically (earning high memory test scores). Our results are inconclusive about the effect labels have on processing, but suggest that attitude evaluation is impacted by the strength of group affiliation. Implications of our findings are discussed and compared to previous research.

In light of the upcoming Presidential election in America, candidates' campaigning efforts have revived voters' own personal political party ties. When voters reflect on their own values and identities, ideally, they would impartially evaluate information about candidates rather than merely supporting their preferred party's designated candidate. Careful choices matter now more than ever because polarization of American politics is at its highest since 1879 (Howard & Poole, 2015). When voters receive messages from members of a political party that they do not identify with, it may be easy for them to nonchalantly disregard those individuals as just another outgroup member. In other words, people may use political party labels of the group as a whole to shape perceptions about the individuals within the group. Given the grave state of polarization in American politics, not thoroughly considering who is best fit for leading the country could have serious consequences. This paper explores exactly how powerful these political party labels are and the way they influence processing and attitudes.

Superficiality versus depth is a core concept of social psychology. This processing principle explains the way people normally do not dedicate much cognitive effort to processing information. However, if the informa-

tion is particularly important to them, conflicts with their expectations, or threatens goals they view as significant, people may be motivated to exert more effort in processing that information (Smith, Mackie, & Claypool, 2016).

Evidence of processing levels includes results from an experiment in which subjects read persuasive messages from either likeable or unlikeable communicators under conditions of high or low involvement (Chaiken, 1980). The dependent variable in this experiment was the degree to which subjects changed their opinions. The results indicated that subjects in the high involvement condition expressed significant changes in their opinions based on arguments (systematic processing), whereas the subjects in the low involvement condition displayed significant changes in their opinions based on likability of the communicator (superficial processing). Considering that people process information at different levels in general, we wondered how they process messages from political candidates in a situation as polarized as America's political environment.

People continue to process superficially even in the context of politics. In an experiment manipulating access to party labels and levels of consistency of information available to subjects, subjects heard video pre-

sentations from two believable (but fabricated) political candidates and then answered evaluative questions after the presentation (Rahn, 1993). The questions touched upon the subjects' perceptions of the candidates' policy positions as well as the subjects' perceptions of the candidate overall. A key finding from this experiment was that when subjects had access to the candidates' political party labels, they defaulted to superficial processing. This finding is representative of the reaction that occurs when people must make judgments about people in a stereotyped group. Therefore, the presence of political party labels does in fact prompt people to process information superficially. Given that people process superficially when stereotypes are available, we pondered how people's personal connections with certain groups may impact people's opinions of political candidates.

Previous studies supported the idea that personal group affiliation does influence opinions of members of that group and those of an out-group. For instance, when liberal and conservative students learned about a policy either supported by their own political party or an out-group, students whose own party supported the policy, expressed favorable attitudes towards it. However, when an out-group supported the policy, students did not have favorable attitudes (Cohen, 2003). This finding adds support to the theory that people anticipate agreeing with others whose values align with their own.

The researchers of another study gathered similar findings by manipulating the similarity in the way subjects judge other people and measuring the subjects' judgmental confidence (Goethals & Nelson, 1973). They found that when similar people agree, their agreement is more influential when a value, like political ideology, is at issue versus a preference is at issue, like favorite foods. Additional experiments tested the way judgmental subjectivity/objectivity affects subjects' preferences to consult with partners similar to or different than themselves (Gorenflo & Crano, 1989). In their first experiment, subjects pretending to be college admissions officers received sufficient information (allowing them to make an objective decision) or incomplete information (allowing them to make a subjective judgment) about a student. They found that subjects making objective decisions preferred to make comparisons to partners different than themselves, whereas subjects making subjective judgments preferred to make comparisons with those similar to themselves. Their second experiment placed subjects in a pretend murder trial jury. Findings of the first study were replicated, implying that shared interests could affect the way

people are motivated to compare their preferences.

Offering more support for the idea of in-groups influencing group members, several studies involving injunctive and descriptive norms found that stronger group identification correlated with more positive emotions towards conforming group members (Christensen, Rothgerber, & Matz, 2004). For the reference group condition, the experimenter told subjects if they were following the norms or not in relation to their classmates. For the control condition, the experimenter did not mention anything about the student body. The dependent variable was the degree of positive emotions. The results suggested that greater identification with the group of classmates led to higher positive emotion regarding group conformity.

A study in which participants who identified as Democrat or Republican read identical candidate brochures labeled with their preferred party or with an ideologically similar third party reinforced the theory that party labels influence attitudes (Munro, Zirpoli, & Taulbee, 2013). The dependent variable was the subjects' favorability rating of each candidate and policy. According to the researchers' results, participants rated the candidates and policies more favorably when the label on the brochures matched participants' preferred political party. This finding further solidifies the idea that group identification positively influences attitude evaluations.

In light of the research that suggests that people process information superficially or systematically and that those principles apply in a political context in terms of labels and group affiliation, we were curious about how political party affiliations affect how deeply people process candidates' messages. We specifically wanted to answer how political party labels attached to ideologically neutral campaign excerpts will impact subjects' attitudes towards those excerpts and those candidates. Overall, our research looked at the way political party labels attached to politically neutral campaign excerpts influenced people's memory and attitudes. The aforementioned findings gave us reason to believe that when people read excerpts with ideologically neutral content from political candidates with labels attached, they will process those excerpts more superficially, as evidenced by a memory test and express more extreme attitudes. Meanwhile, we expected that people reading excerpts without any labels will process the content of the excerpts systematically, resulting in higher memory test scores and less extreme attitude evaluations. Furthermore, we predicted that people of the same political party would receive favorable evaluations, and people whose political party identifications

clash with those of the candidate would receive less favorable evaluations.

We tested this by having all subjects read two excerpts from hypothetical political campaign advertisements with or without political party labels as the independent variable. The dependent variable was the level memory test scores and the subjects' attitudes towards each candidate and the content of their excerpts. We measured subjects' level of processing using a multiple-choice question memory test. Lower memory test scores represented superficial processing whereas high memory test scores indicated systematic processing. The last two questions on the memory test asked subjects to recall the political party label affiliated with each candidate. This measure served as our manipulation check. We also asked participants to rate their own party affiliation in order to discern the extent to which superficial processing is related to in-group bias. They rated their own political party identification on a 7 point scale ranging from strongly identify as Republican (1) to neutral (4) to strongly identify as Democrat (7). We operationalized the subjects' attitudes towards each candidate using multiple-question attitude evaluations regarding both the excerpts and the candidates. Subjects answered each question on a 7 point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The higher the average attitude evaluation score, the higher the liking for the excerpts and the candidates.

Method

Participants

Sixty-seven Grinnell College students (42 female, 24 male, 1 other) participated in our experiment in exchange for Introduction to Psychology course credit or a 1 in 20 chance of winning a \$25 gift card to the Grinnell College bookstore.

Materials and Procedure

After providing informed consent, we passed out a randomly assigned packet including demographic questions, excerpts, attitude evaluations, and a memory test. First, we instructed participants to answer demographic questions and rate their party affiliation on a scale. Next, participants read two labeled (Republican or Democrat) or non-labeled excerpts. After reading the excerpts, we gave the participants limited time to answer both the attitude evaluation and memory test. After completing these measures, we collected the packets and debriefed the participants.

Cover story

To prevent demand characteristics in our study, we designed a cover story. We told the participants that the purpose of our study was to test the power of political messaging. Specifically, we told subjects that we were investigating the impacts of campaign materials on levels of persuasion. They believed that one experimental group would receive the excerpts of political candidates printed on a plain piece of paper and that the other group would receive them on a professional pamphlet. All subjects were told that they were in the paper condition.

Demographic Questions

The participants were instructed to rate themselves on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating "strongly identify as Republican" and 7 indicating "strongly identify as Democrat." Excerpts. The two excerpts were from two fictional candidates, Candidate Orange and Candidate Yellow. The order of the excerpts was counterbalanced across participants. The excerpts were identical across the groups and the only difference was whether there was no label, a Democratic label, or a Republican label next to the candidate's name. The contents of the excerpts were written so as to be ideologically neutral. For example, one excerpt went as follows: "Throughout my career I've fought to defend American core values. That means investing in our infrastructure, our industries, and, most importantly, our citizens."

Attitude Test

We designed an attitude test to measure participants' attitudes toward candidates and candidates' excerpts. Participants' attitudes toward the candidates were measured by their numerical values of their answers (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) to questions such as, "I do NOT see myself wanting to spend time with Candidate Orange." Participants' attitudes toward the excerpts were measured using questions such as, "Candidate Orange's message is strong." There were eight questions in total, with four questions about Candidate Orange and four about Candidate Yellow. Participants were given two minutes to answer the questions and were able to refer back to the excerpts during this time.

Memory Test

We designed a memory test to assess whether participants were processing the information superficially or systematically. Participants were given two minutes to complete the memory test and were told not to refer back to previous sections of the materials. There were eight multiple

choice questions in total. Six of the questions asked about the content of the excerpts, such as: “What does Candidate Orange want to invest in?” The last two questions asked participants to recall the party label that appeared next to the candidates’ names. These questions served as our manipulation check.

Results

Manipulation Check

Of the 65 participants who answered the manipulation check questions, 52 answered them correctly resulting in a $t(6) = 72.33, p < .001$. Additionally, we had 56 of 67 participants identified as Democrats, 8 identified as Neutral, and 3 as Republicans. One participant refused to rate herself.

Memory Test

We suspect there was a ceiling effect, the circumstance when measurements of the dependent variable result in many very high scores on the dependent variable masking a potential effect of the independent variable, in our memory test because most participants only used about half of the time allotted for this section. Our suspicion was confirmed using a one-way between subjects ANOVA test. The ANOVA test measured the sum of the first six memory test scores and found $F(2, 64) = .510, p < .02$. The correlation between party preference and the memory score in the “Democratic” condition $r(55) = .494, p = .019$.

Attitude Test

The four questions about Candidate Orange were added up as a general attitude score towards Candidate Orange, as were the four questions about Candidate Yellow. The questions phrased in the negative, using “NOT”, were reverse scored. A one-way between subjects ANOVA yielded differences in attitude scores between groups for Candidate Orange ($p = .024$) as well as between groups for the combined score (comprised of both hypothetical candidates’ attitude scores) ($p = .004$). The difference between conditions for Candidate Yellow presented weak evidence for rejecting the null hypothesis ($p = .078$). We will focus on the differences in overall attitude scores between groups, as the results were similar for both candidates. The No Label group showed a favorable mean attitude towards both candidates ($M = 4.74$). The Democrat group also showed a slightly favorable mean attitude ($M = 4.43$). However, the Republican group showed a slightly unfavorable mean attitude

towards both candidates ($M = 3.90$). The ANOVA test measured the overall mean attitude scores and found a significant difference between groups, $F(2, 64) = 5.947, p < .004$. After conducting multiple comparisons using Post Hoc Tests, we found that the difference between the “Republican” group and the “No Label” was .832 (mean difference), $p = .001$, and the difference between the “Republican” group and “Democrat” group was .527 (mean difference), $p = .041$. The difference between the “No Label” condition and “Democrat” group was not significant. Figure 1 displays these differences in attitudes between groups.

Finally, because an overwhelming majority of our participants identified as Democrats, we were curious whether there was a correlation between the party preference and their overall attitude. However, the correlation was not significant.

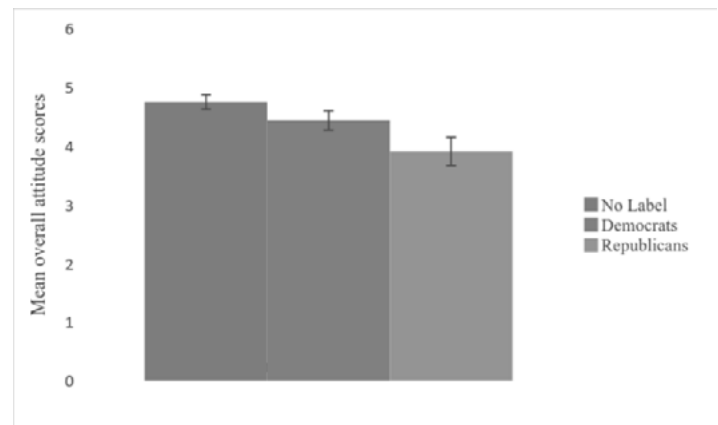


Figure 1. Mean overall attitude scores representing the participants’ attitude towards Candidates in different conditions. A significant difference exists between the Republican and No label conditions, as well as between the Republican and Democrat conditions. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars attached to each column.

Discussion

Our hypothesis that a subject will respond with favorable attitude evaluations to stimuli with a party label that matched that of the subject and negative evaluations when the stimuli’s label was of the opposite party was partially confirmed by our findings. Our prediction that subjects in the labeled groups would process the content of the excerpts more superficially while those in the “No Label” group would process the content systematically remains largely unexamined due to limitations in our memory test, although one finding tentatively suggests that, in fact, the opposite is true. Our findings suggest that political attitudes formed about stimuli are negative when the party identification of the stimuli is incongruent with that of the observer (and that no positive atti-

tudes result from matching identifications) and that the depth of a person's processing of political stimuli can be predicted by the degree to which they identify with their preferred party.

Before we delve into an exploration of the underlying psychological processes that help explain our findings, it is necessary to enumerate the limitations and weaknesses of this study in order to better frame our understanding of the results. First, due to our extremely low number of self-identified Republican subjects, our analysis is limited to self-identified Democrats. However, in all cases that we draw conclusions about how Democrat subjects' behave, we assume that this behavior would be similar (although in some cases in the opposite direction) as Republican subjects. Second, our memory test scores exhibited ceiling effects that inhibited our analysis of subjects' depth of processing. The memory tests were designed to assess the salience of the stimuli as mediated by the various label conditions. With no significant differences between conditions and most scores near perfect, analyses of the differences between conditions was impossible.

There are several potential explanations for the ceiling effects in our memory test. First, it is possible that the questions on the memory test were too easy and even a cursory reading would enable a subject to get a perfect score. This is an obvious problem because it does not allow us to distinguish between superficial and systematic levels of processing. Second, another possibility is that we administered the memory test too soon after subjects had viewed the stimuli, and thus failed to accurately test what was actually made salient to them. Thirdly, subjects may have seen through the attitude assessment page to the page labeled, in bold, "Memory Test." This would have the effect of inducing all participants to process systematically in anticipation of the memory test. Lastly, while impossible to confirm, it is conceivable that all subjects did, in fact, process the stimuli systematically.

One effect our memory test data did yield was a correlation of $r = .494$ between party preference (the 7-point scale from Republican to Democrat) and memory score when the stimuli was labeled "Democrat." This indicates that as a subject's self-identification becomes more extreme (in this case, in the "Democrat" condition, because almost all of our subjects rated themselves above "4" on the self-identification scale), that subject's memory of stimuli improved, as long as that stimulus was also labeled Democrat. No such correlation was found when the stimulus was labeled Republican. Several conclusions

can be drawn from this observation; we will touch on them shortly.

Our major findings, however, came from the attitude evaluation. Our findings suggest that when people are exposed to political stimuli with a party label attached that clashes with their own political affiliation, they will respond with negative attitude evaluations of that stimuli. However, this phenomenon appears to occur only in the event that party labels clash. When self-identified Democrats evaluate stimuli labeled Democrat, for example, they will evaluate it no more positively than they would neutral political stimuli. These findings seem to corroborate those of Cohen (2003), which demonstrated that party labels function as group signifiers that can sway subjects' attitudes without impacting their depth of processing. Indeed, since we saw only significant differences between groups on the attitude scores and none on the memory test, our findings may be explained by Cohen's assertion that group influence is the mediating force behind attitudinal differences. It is important to reiterate that the limitations of our memory test prevent us from determining whether or not party labels impacted subjects' depth of processing. A major difference between our findings and those of Cohen is that, whereas his research found that subjects' attitude evaluations were affected by label condition both when that condition was in-line with a subject's own party affiliation as well as when it was not, our research demonstrated that effect only when party labels clashed. In other words, in Cohen's study, a subject who self-identified as a Democrat would respond with favorable attitudes toward stimuli labeled Democrat and negatively toward stimuli labeled Republican. In our study, that same subject would exhibit only negative responses toward the Republican stimuli and their response to Democrat stimuli would be no different than No Label stimuli.

Another finding that is contrary to our initial hypothesis but was somewhat borne out in our data, comes from Petersen, Skov, Serritzlew, & Ramsøy (2013). This research found that subjects who were exposed to information with party labels actually processed that information more systematically than did subjects who viewed information without party labels. The correlation we found in our study between Democrat self-identification and memory score within the Democrat condition indicate that, to some degree, processing was affected by label condition, but only when a subject's self-identification matched that of the condition. While the results of our memory test prevent us from determining what level of

processing this correlation represents, our findings do suggest the existence of various degrees of processing that can be predicted by (and corresponds to) a subject's extremity of political identification. However, Petersen et al.'s findings, in contrast to ours, demonstrated that systematic processing is present both when subjects consider stimuli whose label matches their own political leanings, as well as stimuli whose label doesn't match. Where Petersen's research simply made a distinction between superficial and systematic processing, our study indicates a spectrum of processing that only occurs when the labels of stimuli and the self-ascribed labels of subjects match.

The findings of Petersen et al (2013) do not necessarily preclude those of Cohen. While Cohen suggested that group influence on political attitudes does not necessarily correspond with a dual-process theory of information processing, when considered alongside Petersen et al., the two studies suggest that when processing levels are affected by political labels, group influence can either be the mechanism that determines processing levels or it can operate as a parallel phenomenon that affects only attitude evaluations. Our research takes a slightly different view to these findings somewhat. In the case of group influence on attitude evaluations, our study finds that group influence affects attitudes evaluations of political stimuli only negatively. In other words, people's political group identity only serves as a basis for derogating the

out-group and does not induce positive feelings about the in-group. The tepid attitudinal response of self-identified Democrats toward "Democrat" labeled stimuli could, however, be due to subjects seeking to distance themselves from what they saw as vapid campaign rhetoric. In the domain of processing depth, our study deviates slightly from the findings of Petersen et al. to suggest that processing depth is affected only when people's political self-identification and that of the stimuli are congruent, and that the degree to which a person identifies with their party preference predicts the degree of depth with which they process political stimuli.

The implications of our findings for the world outside the laboratory are numerous. Mainly, however, they serve to reaffirm the power of group influence even on something as private and personal as political attitude formation. Even when people are processing information systematically, their attitude is ultimately influenced by their notions of their group membership. This group influence can also impact the degree to which people process and receive information. Future research should be able to conclusively determine the impact political labels have on processing and how group influence plays a role in that impact. Further study should also include more politically diverse samples as well as contain broader swathes of the socioeconomic spectrum.

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