Overcoming Biases and Bridging Gaps: *The Democratic Dilemma*'s Perspective of Hope

Yanna Krupnikov, *Stony Brook University*

INTRODUCTION

Lupia and McCubbins's *The Democratic Dilemma* begins with a proposition that may have seemed unusual at the time of the book's initial publication—and likely remains so today. "Reasoned choice," the book suggests, "does not require full information" (1998, 2). This proposition is striking. Lupia and McCubbins acknowledged that people may not have full information (and, in some cases, actually may know very little about politics). Yet, they suggested that what people do not know may not always make them unable to carry out the types of choices necessary to sustain a representative democracy. Neither, they noted, are people's political choices destined to be manipulated by deceitful messages aimed to lead the uninformed down a bad political path. People *can* fail—they can make poor choices and they can fall victim to manipulation—but this failure is not *unconditional*.

The idea of conditionality is key to Lupia and McCubbins's argument. For every condition under which people's lack of information or susceptibility to deceitful persuaders leads them to make choices that are not well reasoned, there is a condition under which they can overcome their lack of information and distinguish between persuaders who are being truthful and those who are lying. The specification of these conditions is a tremendous theoretical foundation for the study of voter decision making. Even more broadly, however, at its core, *The Democratic Dilemma* presents something that often is absent from contemporary research in political psychology: hopefulness. Yes, people can be manipulated and, yes, they can make terrible political choices, but a voter's failure is not an inevitability.

This article considers the divergence—and the potential for reconciliation—between *The Democratic Dilemma* and contemporary research on voter psychology and behavior. I begin by distinguishing between the perspective of voters offered in *The Democratic Dilemma* and the perspective suggested by motivated reasoning theories—an approach that during the past decade often has dominated research on voter decision making. Building on these distinctions, I discuss even more recent scholarship on voters' failures: affective polarization. Finally, I bring these points together by exploring how we can continue to acknowledge people's political limitations without casting aside the hopeful conditionality of *The Democratic Dilemma*.

MOTIVATED REASONING

On a broad level, the goals of *The Democratic Dilemma* and of motivated reasoning theories appear strikingly similar. *The Democratic Dilemma* begins with the guiding premise that citizens have limitations; theories of motivated reasoning also posit similar premises. Where the two approaches begin to diverge is in the intersection of political communication and citizen limitations. To consider the consequences of this divergence, I begin with the premises of motivated reasoning before returning to *The Democratic Dilemma*.

At the baseline, motivated reasoning is a collection of mechanisms all leading to the same place: people's goals affect the way they consider and interpret new information (Kunda 1990). In this framework, people are motivated to reach certain conclusions from the start and are either more dismissive or welcoming of new information based on these goals.

The motivated reasoning perspective has a clear intersection with politics. People are motivated to retain their political positions (especially when these positions are a pivotal part of their political worldview) and, in turn, are likely to dismiss any information that is incongruent to these positions (Lodge and Taber 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006). Often underlying this perspective is a focus on affective responses. People's rejection of incongruent information is automatic and subconscious: they have rejected the information before even realizing they have done so (Taber and Lodge 2016). Furthermore, Taber and Lodge (2006) argued, not only do people discredit and ignore incongruent information; they also dig into their preexisting worldviews. Paradoxically, this work suggests, exposure to the opposing viewpoints (or to speakers who hold opposing viewpoints) leads people to become even more extreme in and certain of their own position.

I do not see it as controversial to note that the perspective of motivated reasoning has taken a foothold in the political psychology perspective on voters. To date, Taber and Lodge's (2006) canonical piece has been cited more than 2,000 times.[1] Building on this idea, scholars have carefully tracked individual unwillingness to accept new information over various political contexts (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Braman and Nelson 2007; Kahan 2012; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Redlawsk 2002; and many more) and from various sources (Cohen 2003; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; and many more).

Motivated reasoning is not inconsistent with the theoretic premises proposed by Lupia and McCubbins in *The Democratic Dilemma*. Both suggest that when encountering a speaker who is offering new information, people are likely to consider both the content and the source. Indeed, in both theoretic approaches, people's perceptions of a speaker affect the extent to which a person will find that speaker's informational offering persuasive (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 55). In a premise we could find in scholarship on motivated reasoning, *The Democratic Dilemma* directly addresses the idea

Certainly, *The Democratic Dilemma* specifies many conditions under which political communication can fail. However, if we accept motivated reasoning as the dominant perspective of individual political decision making, there is almost no way in which political communication can ever succeed.

THE EXACERBATING ROLE OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

If motivated reasoning paints a glum view of voter behavior, then recent research on affective polarization only further

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that people's *a priori* expectations of the speaker's motivations affect the way they process that speaker's message.

Where the perspectives appear to diverge is in the potential for automaticity in people's responses to new information and in the consequences of these responses. Motivated reasoning opens the possibility of an almost subconscious immediacy to people's rejection of incongruent information, suggesting that whether people accept or dismiss new information may be largely out of their own control (Taber and Lodge 2016). *The Democratic Dilemma* posits that a number of cognitive limitations affect the way people pay attention to new information; however, in the book's perspective, people have more control over their behavior. Although people may not always overcome their biases, under certain conditions, they are capable of making reasoned judgments about the incoming information.

These perspectives diverge even further in the implications of people's dismissal of some new information. *The Democratic Dilemma* does not necessarily view a citizen's potential reliance on *a priori* expectations of the speaker's interests as entirely negative. Indeed, Lupia and McCubbins suggested that evaluating a speaker's message in the context of one's shared interests with the speaker can be a reasonable response to new information. When a receiver dismisses new information from a speaker with an entirely opposing viewpoint, motivated reasoning views this outcome as a failure on the part of the receiver. However, in the context of *The Democratic Dilemma*, dismissing information that comes from a speaker whose interests diverge from those of a receiver may signal the best course of action.

It is not my intention to suggest that one perspective is more accurate than the other in describing the way that people interact with politics. In a context in which there are numerous speakers vying for attention at any given point in time, both perspectives likely describe some people some of the time. Rather, what I suggest is that interpreting motivated reasoning—especially motivated reasoning as an automatic response to new information—as the likely true state of the world can lead to the perspective that political communication is futile.

underscores the futility of communication. Not only are voters likely to succumb to bias—because they cannot help it (Taber and Lodge 2016)—but also exacerbating this (already overwhelming) bias are increasing levels of dislike for the opposing side (Iyengar et al. 2019). Whereas people always had an incentive to dismiss speakers and ideas that they found unpleasant, deepening dislike for the other side only strengthens these incentives and deepens the futility of political communication.[2]

The idea of affectively polarized voters is not inconsistent with *The Democratic Dilemma*. Lupia and McCubbins directly addressed the possibility that people will use the party as a heuristic about the speaker's usefulness. The critical component, however, again is conditionality. Whereas I do not disagree that there are groups of people who are polarized and dislike the opposing party (though, these people may be in the minority [Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018]) treating polarization as the most likely state of the world can encourage research that maps the hatred between two groups rather than explores conditions under which political communication can be more effective. Unlike *The Democratic Dilemma*—which suggests that the success of political communication is conditional—at the intersection of motivated reasoning and political polarization, all paths lead to failure.

A MORE HOPEFUL DIRECTIVE?

People have limitations. As Lupia and McCubbins noted in *The Democratic Dilemma*, they have a limited capacity for paying attention. They like to have been right about everything all along and are uncomfortable with dissonance (Kunda 1990). We have long been concerned that people know too little about politics (Converse 1964) and that, in turn, the "popular control of government is illusory" (Iyengar 1987, 816). Recent research has only magnified this sense of concern: "[w]e find bias, bias everywhere," wrote Taber and Lodge (2016, 82). Over time, much scholarship has spoken to people's capacity for failure.

In this context of futility and failure, it is my view that the perspective offered in *The Democratic Dilemma* has become even more important. Beginning by exploring people's limitations,

the book specifies a series of conditions and paths that lead to different outcomes. Some of these paths lead people to dismiss speakers whom they should trust and to listen to speakers whom they should reject. Some paths lead unscrupulous speakers to deliberately misrepresent information and lead people astray. However, there are other reasonable paths

Perhaps the strongest testament to the importance of the type of conditionality—and the importance of the speaker—underscored in *The Democratic Dilemma*, however, is research on the role of social contexts in politics. Once we take Lupia and McCubbins's approach and consider people as functions of their broader environments, many psycho-

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that can lead to positive outcomes in which voters—despite their limitations—competently carry out the duties of a representative democracy. This conditionality, the possibility that things could go right, is important.

Although it is critical to understand the conditions under which people willfully dismiss helpful new information or express a profound dislike for the opposing side, taking a cue from *The Democratic Dilemma* suggests that analyzing political psychology and political behavior also means identifying conditions under which people *can* be more capable and competent. Moreover, it also means acknowledging that dismissing incongruent information from certain sources is not always a failure on the part of a citizen.

When scholarship shifts away from assumptions of futility, we see greater evidence of the type of hopeful conditionality explored in *The Democratic Dilemma*. As Druckman (2012) argued, for example, people's engagement in motivated reasoning is conditional and not universal: scholars can predict the types of individuals most likely to rely on these types of biases. Millers, Saunders, and Farhart (2016), for example, found that the people most likely to believe in conspiracy theories are those who have the lowest trust in government. Meanwhile, analyzing misinformation in health-care policy, Berinsky (2017) focused directly on identifying informational conditions under which people are more or less likely to cling to political rumors. Even more recently, research suggests that exposure to incongruent information may *not* lead to backfire effects (Guess and Coppock 2018; Wood and Porter 2018). In summary, bias exists, but its presence is more in line with the conditionality of *The Democratic Dilemma*.

Although many people *do* prefer their own party (sometimes strongly so), there is research to suggest that—as theorized in *The Democratic Dilemma*—they will not unconditionally rely on a speaker's partisanship (Mullinix 2016). As Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014) demonstrated, under certain conditions, speakers can overcome both party preferences and motivated reasoning tendencies. Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) showed that different informational conditions produce different levels of political polarization.

logical responses become contextual rather than constant. Depending on who is around them, people can have different partisan preferences (Klar 2014; Klar and Krupnikov 2016), be more or less trusting of others (Ahn, Huckfeldt, and Ryan 2014), make better (or worse) political choices (Pietryka 2016), and may even take on different political values (Connors 2019). Analyzing people within social contexts, Carlson (2019) found that they behave in ways that Lupia and McCubbins suggested in *The Democratic Dilemma*: they distinguish between more and less suitable messengers. Although this type of work focuses on social influence, the approach to individual behavior echoes the foundational arguments of *The Democratic Dilemma*. People, Lupia and McCubbins noted, do not make decisions in a vacuum. Rather, their abilities to make reasoned choices depend on context: institutional structures (a focus of *The Democratic Dilemma*), ever-present social cues, and broader social networks.

Twenty years after publication of *The Democratic Dilemma*, the book still presents a powerful research directive to scholars who aim to understand how individual psychology produces attitudinal and behavioral outcomes as well as how political communication fits within the process. Understandably, it is important to consider the absolutes and constants of individual psychology. Yet, doing so exclusively—in my perspective—can lead us as scholars to apply a lens of futility to voter behavior. *The Democratic Dilemma* suggests that we have more to offer than predictions of failure: we have the capacity to specify the conditions for a better democracy.

NOTES

1. According to Google Scholar statistics; retrieved April 28, 2019.
2. Whereas I consider affective polarization, a more ideological view of polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) could make it easier for citizens to engage in some of the processes underlying *The Democratic Dilemma*.

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