

# Can Information Persuade Rather Than Polarize? A Review of Alex Coppock's *Persuasion in Parallel*

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## Abstract

In Matthew Levendusky's review of Alex Coppock's *Persuasion in Parallel*, he praises, overall, the book's clear focus, rich data, and striking results, arguing that it makes an important contribution to the literature. He takes issue, however, with Coppock's treatment of theories of motivated reasoning, and he explores ways in which the literature might profitably move forward to better understand how citizens process political information.

**Keywords:** persuasion; information; motivated reasoning

In an age of polarization, does information have any effect at all on people's attitudes? Can people be persuaded when shown new information, or do they, instead, reject arguments that are inconsistent with their prior beliefs? Alex Coppock's excellent new book, *Persuasion in Parallel: How Information Changes Minds about Politics*, takes up this important question and shows that people update their beliefs in response to new information. Rather than rejecting counter-attitudinal information, people are persuaded by it—perhaps only a little bit, but they are persuaded nonetheless. This is a strikingly consistent pattern that occurs with issue after issue, with little evidence of heterogeneity throughout the public. The book's results demonstrate, as the title of the concluding chapter notes, that “persuasion is possible.”

In the book, Coppock examines the effects of persuasive information (i.e., arguments) and not the effects of other related factors, most notably group cues, such as partisan cues.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the discussion in Chapter 3 of the book's scope conditions is remarkably clear and helps readers know exactly what is, and is not, included in the theory. Coppock's basic claim is that the effects of persuasive information on attitudes are “small, positive, and durable for everyone.”<sup>2</sup> Small here means that effects are modest, as most information “only adds a handful of considerations

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<sup>1</sup> On the effects of such group cues, see Thomas Leeper and Rune Slothuus, “Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Public Opinion Formation,” *Political Psychology: Advances in Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (2014): 129–56; John Bullock, “Elite Influence on Public Opinion in an Informed Electorate,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (2011): 496–515.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Coppock, *Persuasion in Parallel: How Information Changes Minds about Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 51, Table 3.2.



phenomenon: that of Lord, Ross, and Lepper<sup>7</sup> in Chapter 2, and the study by Taber and Lodge<sup>8</sup> in Chapter 7. His argument (and replication of the Lord, Ross, and Lepper experimental design) will convince readers that the extant evidence supporting this argument has been overstated. But more persuasive are the empirical results. The book's results are extremely consistent on this point, and combined with other findings in the literature,<sup>9</sup> the case is clear: information itself does not generate attitudinal polarization, contrary to what one might expect from theories of motivated reasoning. Rather than generating polarization, counter-attitudinal information generates persuasion—often only a little bit, but persuasion nonetheless. In turn, this helps us make sense of the modest effect sizes of campaign communications and advertisements<sup>10</sup> and framing,<sup>11</sup> which also produce modest, though real, effects. Indeed, this book provides, in many ways, the micro-foundational argument for Page and Shapiro's<sup>12</sup> classic work about public opinion changes over time.

I greatly enjoyed the clean focus on a set of forced-exposure designs (where all participants receive the same messages). But seeing these results makes me wonder what happens when, as is often the case in the real world, there is more choice over which messages people receive.<sup>13</sup> Once people can select receive messages or not, or at least pay less attention to them, we might see more variable effects of information. For example, as Druckman, Fein, and Leeper<sup>14</sup> show, information search helps reinforce earlier messages, so building on these findings with more complex designs will undoubtedly help us better understand these persuasive dynamics both theoretically and empirically.

The finding that persuasion is possible also has important implications for the polarized state of the nation. To be clear, there is no quick fix for polarization: it is a hard, endemic problem that will likely plague our politics for the foreseeable future. But Coppock's findings underscore those of Kalla and Broockman,<sup>15</sup> as well as some of my own,<sup>16</sup> on the importance of dialogue and listening.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098–109.

<sup>8</sup> Taber and Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs."

<sup>9</sup> Most notably, see Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, "The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence," *Political Behavior* 41, no. 1 (2019): 135–63.

<sup>10</sup> See, among others, Richard Johnston, Michael Hagan, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundation of Party Politics* (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Alexander Coppock, Seth Hill, and Lynn Vavreck, "The Small Effects of Political Advertising Are Small Regardless of Context, Message, Sender, or Receiver: Evidence from 59 Real-time Randomized Experiments," *Science Advances* 6, no. 36 (2020): eabc4046; Josh Kalla and David Broockman, "The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (2018): 148–66.

<sup>11</sup> Eran Amsalem and Alon Zoizner, "Real, but Limited: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of Framing Effects in the Political Domain," *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1 (2022): 221–37.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> See, most notably, Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> James Druckman, Jordan Fein, and Thomas Leeper, "A Source of Public Opinion Stability," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 430–54.

<sup>15</sup> Josh Kalla and David Broockman, "Which Narrative Strategies Durably Reduce Prejudice? Evidence from Field and Survey Experiments Supporting the Efficacy of Perspective-Getting," *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 1 (2023): 185–204.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Levendusky, *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Help Bridge the Partisan Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).







This also underscores another important point about heterogeneous effects. Coppock correctly notes that, in most cases, there is effectively no evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects across age, gender, partisanship, and so forth. But a motivation-based approach also helps us hypothesize about which groups should have heterogeneous effects because they differ on the basis of those motivations. The findings of Bayes et al. offer some initial evidence of this; those authors show that the match between the motive and message is key, so the heterogeneity stems from differences in motivations.<sup>37</sup> So rather than searching for heterogeneous effects by a set of standard demographic variables (a likely fruitless enterprise), a better approach is to let the motives be our guide to thinking about how effects differ throughout the population. The answer may still be that effects are homogeneous in many cases (at least in part because we typically lack the power to detect heterogeneous effects), but this gives us a principled set of variables to search for in terms of looking for between-person differences. But more broadly, this general line of argument underscores the normative issues at stake.

The goal of understanding citizens' information processing is not simply to understand it for its own sake but rather to understand how to design persuasive messages about critical issues, such as climate change and election denialism. This discussion of motivation-driven communicative strategies also highlights the broader study of persuasion itself, which requires a focus on not just the message itself but on who sends it, in what context, and so forth.<sup>38</sup> This also draws our attention to the critical task of unpacking argument quality and how it might differ across contexts.<sup>39</sup> In short, a motivational approach helps us tackle not just one issue but rather a broader class of problems.

One could perhaps argue that a Bayesian perspective could accommodate all of the above through the use of, say, different priors or likelihoods. That may well be true, and efforts to differentiate these theories may, in the end, not be terribly fruitful (though see Thaler<sup>40</sup> for an approach to identifying scenarios where they are incompatible with one another). But there is, to me, another reason why we might not want to throw out motivational approaches just yet. To see why, we need to consider how individuals typically receive persuasive information.

## The Importance of Political Information Processing

The experiments that are the focus of Coppock's analysis focus on the purest version of information processing: simply providing people information with little attention to source, context, and so on. This is, of course, a completely reasonable decision and makes for a clean and important test of his argument. But in the real world, political information does not arrive in a vacuum; instead, it largely comes from political elites, delivered through journalists and the mass media. It is elites—in particular, partisan political elites—who provide the vast majority of messages

<sup>37</sup> Bayes et al., "When and How Different Motives Can Drive Motivated Political Reasoning."

<sup>38</sup> Druckman, "A Framework for the Study of Persuasion."

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Kevin Arceneaux, "Cognitive Biases and the Strength of Political Arguments," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 2 (2012): 271–85; Kevin Arceneaux and Stephen Nicholson, "Anchoring Political Preferences: The Psychological Foundations of Status Quo Bias and the Boundaries of Elite Manipulation," *Political Behavior* 45 (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09847-6>; Jack Blumenau and Benjamin Lauderdale, "The Variable Persuasiveness of Political Rhetoric," *American Journal of Political Science* 67 (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12703>.

<sup>40</sup> Thaler, "The Fake News Effect."







but those more committed to President Trump, who see this as a more core part of their identity, will resist efforts to correct this incorrect belief. Indeed, for many Republicans, believing this is a core part of their identity: to be a Republican is to believe that Trump won the 2020 election<sup>58</sup>; hence, rejecting counter-messages is identity protecting. This, to me, ultimately highlights the value of an approach rooted in motivations: it helps us think about when and why we might observe these effects, and among whom. Before we conclude motivated reasoning is not valuable, we need to see that it fails not just in one particular case but more broadly.

Perhaps ultimately, much of this comes down to a matter of taste. All theories have limits and are highly imperfect abstractions of our underlying decision-making. Theoretical models are useful for helping us think through how to study important questions, but the questions are ultimately the key thing. No doubt, in the years to come, motivational theories will be supplanted by some other theoretical paradigm that helps us better answer the substantive questions of interest. We should keep our focus there, to better understand how citizens think through and process political messages. *Persuasion in Parallel* has certainly given us plenty of fodder to do just that.

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<sup>58</sup> Chris Cillizza, "How Believing the Big Lie Has Become Central to Being a Republican," CNN, 13 September 2022. Available online at: <https://cnn.it/42Nqmck>.