



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior**

## **Routes to Persuasion, Central and Peripheral**

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior

Chapter Title: "Routes to Persuasion, Central and Peripheral"

Pub. Date: 2017

Access Date: June 6, 2017

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781483391168

Online ISBN: 9781483391144

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n330>

Print pages: 718-720

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With an estimated 7 billion dollars spent on the 2012 U.S. presidential election, understanding how people respond to and are affected by persuasive messages is an important facet of understanding political behavior. Imagine two potential voters' experiences watching a campaign advertisement for an unfamiliar candidate: one voter who is not very interested in or knowledgeable about politics (Larry), and one who is very interested in and knowledgeable about politics (Helen). As explained shortly, much research now suggests that these two individuals will follow different routes to influence. For example, Larry will likely notice that the candidate is a Democrat like him and that he likes the song playing in the background of the ad. Because these easy-to-process aspects of the commercial appeal to him, he will become more favorable toward the candidate with relatively little thought (peripheral route to persuasion). Helen, on the other hand, also notices that the candidate is a Democrat whereas she is a Republican and she is not wild about the song featured. Nonetheless, she thinks carefully about the position statements the candidate makes in the ad and finds them to be both novel and compelling. She also becomes more favorable toward the candidate but by a more thoughtful process (central route to persuasion) than Larry, and with very different consequences.

### **The Elaboration Likelihood Model**

Richard Petty and John Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion is a theory of how attitudes are formed and how they change. It can help us understand how and why Larry and Helen were influenced by the campaign commercial and with what consequences. The ELM was developed in an attempt to better understand decades of seemingly inconsistent findings in the persuasion literature. Prior to the ELM, it had proven difficult to predict whether any given persuasion variable (e.g., adding distraction to the message, having an attractive or expert source give the message) would enhance or suppress persuasion. That is, sometimes these variables would increase persuasion in the message recipients and at other times these same variables would have no effect or even reduce persuasion. Also, from the existing research, it was difficult to predict whether any persuasion (attitude change) that occurred would actually be consequential—would any new attitudes adopted last over time and predict behavior? Previous persuasion theories largely tried to tie successful influence to how well the information in a message was learned and whether people yielded to that information. The ELM, however, grew out of cognitive response theory, which stated that the most important consideration in whether a persuasive message will succeed was not necessarily whether people learned and remembered the information provided, but how they thought about it—how much or little did they think about the information, and if thinking, whether the reactions were favorable or unfavorable.

### **Two Routes to Persuasion**

An overarching theme in psychology over the past few decades has been that people do not always operate at their full processing capacity. That is, people sometimes think carefully about things, but they can't possibly think carefully about every piece of information or message that they encounter. Instead, people often rely on heuristics, or decision-making shortcuts. These varying levels of thought, or elaboration, have consequences for how information is received and its persuasive impact.

The ELM is an early example of what became an explosion of dual-process and dual-system theories of decision making and judgment. However, rather than proposing that people think

either in one way or the other, it proposes a continuum of thinking (elaboration) with a different persuasion process (or “route”) occurring at each end of the continuum and a combination of the respective processes under each route at moderate levels of thinking. In the ELM, persuasion based on relatively high degrees of thinking is called the *central route* to persuasion, whereas persuasion that occurs with relatively little thinking is called the *peripheral route* to persuasion. These different routes mean that different people can respond to the same information quite differently or the same people can respond differently to the same information under different circumstances. Importantly, whether persuasion results from relatively high or low amounts of thinking will result in very different consequences.

### Central Route

When motivated and able to do so, people tend to carefully analyze information presented to them, scrutinizing the perceived *central merits of the arguments* in light of preexisting knowledge. Importantly, this increased thinking does not automatically lead to increased persuasion. An argument (or piece of evidence) is only persuasive if it prompts favorable thoughts in the receiver. An argument can be detrimental to the persuasion attempt if it is judged to be inaccurate or elicits mostly negative reactions such as counterarguments.

Helen, from the opening example, was impressed by the arguments, so the advertisement had a positive effect on her evaluation of the candidate. Had she been unimpressed, however, she would have produced negative thoughts about the candidate, resulting in resistance to the appeal. Under the central route, the degree of attitude change depends on the *valence* of the thoughts produced in response to the message (favorable or unfavorable), the *amount* of them, and how *confident* people are in their thoughts. The more favorable thoughts produced that are held with confidence, the more persuasion. Because the central route relies on the *perceived* rather than the actual quality of an argument’s central merits, its persuasiveness can vary from person to person. Furthermore, it means that high thinking does not necessarily equate to objectivity or rationality in processing—the careful processing may be objective, or it may be biased (e.g., by one’s prior opinion). That is, people who hold strong attitudes against a candidate may focus on finding flaws in the message and downplay positive aspects of the candidate.

### Peripheral Route

Because people cannot devote their full attention to each and every message to which they are exposed, they often rely instead on simple heuristics or *peripheral cues*, including the expertise or attractiveness of the speaker or their own current mood (e.g., “I enjoyed myself at that rally, so I must really like that candidate.”). There are a number of relatively simple cues available in the political context that can trigger favorable evaluations in the absence of much thinking. The most obvious example is political party. Other strong cues include the likability, similarity, and trust heuristics, which involve voting for somebody because they appear likable, similar to oneself, or trustworthy despite not knowing much about the candidate’s policies. Indeed, the mere perceived trustworthiness of a candidate’s face has been shown to predict election outcomes. Although simple cues such as likability and trust often produce change when people are not thinking much via the peripheral route, as will be discussed shortly, these same simple cues can also influence attitudes via the central route.

Recall that Larry did not care much about politics so did not pay close attention to the campaign ad. Thus, he was operating under the peripheral route and was influenced by

simple cues in the absence of much message scrutiny. Larry's attitude change was based on a simple association of positivity with the candidate, whereas Helen's change, under high elaboration, was based on a more complex processing of information about the candidate.

### Determinants of Elaboration

Whether a message is processed more via the central or peripheral route is determined by the *degree of elaboration* it receives. Factors such as interest and knowledge about politics can determine the route to persuasion by affecting how much people are motivated or able to think about political messages. In addition to knowledge, ability to process a message can be affected by factors such as time pressures, distractions, and the "channel" of communication (self-paced channels like printed materials are easier to process than audio or video, the pace of which is predetermined in production). In addition to political interest, motivational factors affecting amount of elaboration include things like how personally relevant the recipient considers the topic, whether there is any external expectation of an evaluation (i.e., accountability), as well as certain individual difference traits. Three traits that are especially relevant and that have received extensive attention are the *need for cognition* (how much someone enjoys thinking and problem solving), the *need to evaluate* (how much someone enjoys judging things and taking strong positions on topics), and the *need for closure* (how much someone values having a quick answer).

### Consequences of Elaboration

As factors in the situation increase the likelihood of thinking by enhancing one's motivation or ability, simple cues become less important determinants of attitudes whereas substantive issue positions and arguments become more important. Because political information (and one's own responses to it) is more carefully considered under increased elaboration, this information is more likely to become well integrated into the receiver's preexisting mental framework regarding the object of evaluation. Thus, attitudes formed or changed via the central route are likely to be stronger and more consequential than the same attitudes formed or changed via the peripheral route. Specifically, this means central route attitudes will be more *accessible* (come to mind easily); held with higher *confidence* (seen as more valid); be more *persistent* over time; more *resistant* to future persuasion attempts; and perhaps most importantly, be more *predictive* of subsequent behavior. Thus, although the two routes to persuasion can lead to what look like the same attitude, they can have very different—and important—consequences. Next, we see how the same variable can lead to persuasion by either the central or the peripheral route.

### Multiple Roles

So far, we have noted two ELM claims: (1) There are two basic routes to persuasion, which operate at the endpoints of an elaboration continuum and differ in the amount of issue-relevant thought they require to result in attitude change; and (2) although both routes may result in superficially similar outcomes, the central route to persuasion, with its more elaborative processing, results in stronger and more consequential attitudes than the more associative peripheral route.

A third important claim of the ELM is that the *same* information can be processed via either route. For example, if elaboration is high, as we argued it would be for Helen, her feelings of happiness could be carefully processed as a possible argument. Helen may decide that the

candidate's ability to make her happy, despite coming from across the aisle, is an indication that the candidate will be a balanced leader. As another example, likability, similarity, and trust are not constrained to triggering the heuristics previously mentioned but can also be processed as arguments. A person might reason that because a candidate seems similar, it may be more likely that the candidate shares his or her cultural worldviews and moral underpinnings, providing a strong argument to vote for the candidate. Although these inferences are not necessarily true, it's the simple fact that the voter is actively thinking about and responding to the inferred merits of the information that transitions it from a peripheral cue or heuristic to being an argument.

In contrast, if elaboration were low, the feeling of happiness that served as an argument in contexts of high elaboration can serve as a peripheral cue. For example, Larry did not consider whether his positive mood during the advertisement was evidence that the candidate would make a good leader; he simply noticed that the candidate was of the same party, which was a good thing for him, and the music made him happy, which became associated with the candidate.

Although only serving as arguments when thinking is high or cues when thinking is low were discussed here, the ELM postulates that variables can serve in three other roles as well. That is, when thinking is high, variables can also bias the thinking that takes place (e.g., people have more positive thoughts when happy than when sad) or affect the confidence in one's thoughts (i.e., people are more confident in their thoughts when happy than when sad, leading them to rely on them more). Finally, if thinking is unconstrained, a variable can influence the amount of thinking that takes place (e.g., sadness can increase thinking over happiness if a bad mood leads to the assumption that there is a problem to be solved).

## Conclusion

With its central and peripheral routes to persuasion, the ELM provides a useful framework for understanding and predicting the effects of persuasive communications on attitudes and behaviors. When one is motivated and able to think about information, the central route to persuasion predominates, leading to careful consideration of the arguments' central merits and greater strength in the resulting attitudes. When either motivation or ability are lacking, the peripheral route prevails, with its effort-saving heuristics and peripheral cues operating. Because these processes require less thought, their effects are more fleeting than the central route's lasting impacts.

**See also** [Art in Political Campaigns](#); [Charisma](#); [Emotions and Voting](#); [Irrationality](#); [Sleeper Effect](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n330>

10.4135/9781483391144.n330

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