Two Routes to Persuasion

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In the course of our daily lives, we make tons of decisions ranging from the relatively trivial to the more consequential. What should I wear to work? What soap should I buy? For whom should I vote in the Presidential election? The work that my colleagues and I have done over the past several decades has tried to address how people go about evaluating their options and deciding what to do. Our goal has been to build a general model of attitude formation and change that can be applied to virtually any situation in which a person must make a decision or decide on a course of action. As social psychologists, our focus has largely been on how people’s own views are influenced by the information provided to them by other people, but we have also studied self-influence.

Although I was very interested in persuasion as a teen – mostly because of the practical benefits of the rare win in arguments with my father – I first became interested in social influence as an academic topic as an undergraduate Political Science major at the University of Virginia. I was intrigued by Richard Neustadt’s dictum that the power of the president was merely the power to persuade. Yet, little evidence was available to indicate how voters made their decisions and what factors determined whether citizens were drawn to one side over another. As luck would have it, a social psychologist was offering a small advanced seminar on political psychology that I was allowed to join despite not being a psych major. The course proved so fascinating and relevant to my interests that I vowed to forgo my original law school plans and become a social psychologist instead.

When I arrived in Columbus to enter the social psychology PhD program at Ohio State University, I wasn’t entirely sure what to expect. However, as luck would have it once again, I began a friendship and ultimately long-term scientific collaboration with another student entering the program at the same time, John Cacioppo. Ohio State was the perfect place for us to do our individual and collaborative work because of the stellar resources and atmosphere. My initial academic advisor was Robert Cialdini, visiting OSU at the time, and his influence was monumental, as was that of Tim Brock, Tony Greenwald, Tom Ostrom, and
Bibb Latané. John and I read the existing literature on persuasion, but also engaged in various field trips to see persuasion in action, from negotiating with used car dealers to making a strange visit to the Church of Scientology.

Reading the literature in social psychology on persuasion at the time (mid-1970s) was quite depressing. The prevailing textbooks stated that although the study of attitudes once reigned supreme, the topic was no longer at the forefront. The primary reason was that so much research had yielded contradictory findings that it seemed impossible to make sense of it all. Even for the seemingly simplest persuasion variables, such as the credibility of the source, some studies obtained the obvious effect—that high credibility led to more persuasion than low—but other studies revealed the opposite, and some failed to find any effect. This replication crisis was so severe that some scholars suggested that research on this topic be abandoned until more clarity could be obtained. Adding to this depressing state of affairs were additional findings indicating that sometimes the changed attitudes endured over time and predicted behavior, but, at other times, attitude changes were short-lived and seemingly inconsequential.

Against this backdrop, and following many long night conversations and debates, John and I concluded that a new approach was needed if the study of attitudes was to be restored to prominence and provide any useful guidance in important domains of application. Our key insight was that despite the long-standing tradition of assuming that learning messages and careful deliberation were the keys to persuasion, attitudes could also be changed if thinking was low, but the processes and consequences would be different. In what became our Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion, we proposed that in some contexts people were motivated and able to engage in careful thought about a message, and, in such situations, persuasion would be determined primarily by the cogency of the information available. In other contexts, however, people would be relatively unmotivated or unable to engage in message scrutiny. In such situations, people could be influenced by simple cues in the situation (e.g., source credibility, their mood, mere number of arguments) that could help them form a reasonable opinion with relatively little cognitive effort. Furthermore, we proposed that low-thought attitude change would not be as enduring and predictive of behavior as that produced by high thought.

How did this framework help to bring coherence to the field? Most importantly, it explained why contradictory results for any given persuasion variable would be expected. Prior results were not really contradictory at all, if the underlying processes involved were understood,
because different processes could lead to different outcomes. The ELM held that thoughtful (central) and non-thoughtful (peripheral) routes to persuasion anchored the ends of an elaboration continuum. Some variables pushed people toward the high-thinking end (e.g., high personal relevance, accountability), and other variables pushed them toward the low end (e.g., distraction, low knowledge). We also identified a way to assess individual differences in the likelihood of thinking in our need for cognition scale. The ELM was also a theory about theories, in that it specified that some prior persuasion theories postulated high-thought mechanisms (e.g., cognitive dissonance) that were more likely to operate at the high-thinking end of the continuum, whereas other theories proposed low-thought mechanisms (e.g., classical conditioning) that were more likely to operate at the low-thinking end of the continuum. Thus, it was not that some prior theories were right and some wrong, or that there was only one direction of effect for any given variable, but, rather, that different outcomes and processes operated at different points along the elaboration continuum.

For example, consider the question of whether providing three or six arguments is better for persuasion. According to the ELM, the answer depends on how much thinking the person is doing and whether the arguments are strong or weak. If people are not doing much thinking (e.g., low relevance topic), presenting six arguments is better than three regardless of quality because people will just reason that if there are more, it must be better. However, if thinking is high, then six arguments will be better than three only if the arguments are strong. If they are weak, six will be worse than three because with more weak arguments, people will become increasingly convinced that there is little merit to the proposal. This example shows how the effect of a given variable can reverse its impact by invoking a different process depending on the extent of thinking. Many other variables behave similarly.

The ELM has now been around for over three decades, and it has prospered because it has brought some coherence to what had been a confusing state of affairs, by proposing that judgments can be formed in different ways with different consequences. The ELM was an early example of what became an explosion of subsequent dual-process and system theories of judgment. It also became influential because the basic principles of the theory could be used to understand and influence all sorts of judgments, from the election of politicians to jury outcomes to one's personal health and consumer choices. Now that the ELM has gained acceptance and several meta-analyses have confirmed the predictions of the theory, the time is ripe to use the theory in additional applied
settings and to flesh out when the variables identified by the ELM will have their largest effects.

That is, although the ELM is good at identifying the direction of expected effects for different variables in different situations, an important step in using the ELM in applied contexts is to understand how to implement the variables of the theory. For example, what serves as a credible source in one context may not do so in another, so pretesting of variables is advised. In using the ELM, the magnitude of effects that should be expected will depend on how variables are operationalized. For example, take the prediction that as the personal relevance of a message increases, the quality of the arguments will have a larger impact on attitudes, such that enhancing personal relevance will increase persuasion if the arguments are strong, but decrease persuasion if the arguments are weak. How large an effect should this be? The answer is that the size of the effect will be influenced by how argument quality and personal relevance are instantiated in any given setting as well as the presence of all other variables in the situation that could also affect the extent of thinking. In general, to observe a larger effect for personal relevance on thinking, it is better if other variables that influence thinking are set at a moderate level so relevance has the most room to operate. For example, if studying the impact of personal relevance on a group of individuals who are highly accountable for a decision (versus low in accountability), thinking will already be high, so increasing personal relevance will not be able to increase it much further.

Of course, the variables that are most under the influencer’s control and the possibilities for their implementation will vary from situation to situation. Nonetheless, the ELM provides useful guidance as to which variables are potentially important and makes clear predictions about the direction of effects these variables should have, in what contexts they are most likely to operate, and whether the resulting changes will tend to be consequential or not.

REFERENCES
