Elaboration Likelihood Model

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Abstract

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a framework for when and why variables in the persuasion process change people's attitudes. Its core premise is that message recipients vary in their propensity to think carefully ("elaborate") about the merits of the arguments presented. When an audience is unmotivated and/or unable to elaborate on a message, they can be persuaded by simple cues—the *peripheral* route. However, when an audience elaborates more on the message, persuasion occurs via more thoughtful processes—the *central* route. Rather than positing different types of persuasion variables, the ELM holds that any variable can influence attitudes under low or high elaboration conditions, but the mechanism underlying that influence can take at least five forms. This entry summarizes the ELM's key premises and predictions in the context of political communication, including an analysis of party cues' persuasive impact from the perspective of this dual-process model.

Keywords: persuasion, attitude change, dual-process models, party cues, argumentation, need for cognition

Politicians, campaign managers, and activists strive to influence citizens' views through persuasive communication, but their success hinges on myriad situational and individual variables. The *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (ELM) of persuasion offers a framework for understanding when and how different aspects of persuasive messages will change an audience's attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).[1] The key insight of the ELM is that the persuasive impact of any variable depends on how much an audience *elaborates* on a message. "Elaboration" is how much a person thinks about and scrutinizes a message's arguments. The cognitive processes that drive attitude change when people elaborate a lot on a message differ from those operating when they elaborate less. In this entry, we summarize the *peripheral* and *central* processes that underlie persuasion as postulated by the ELM, connecting them to political communication.

Determinants of Elaboration

There is too much information in the world for people to be able to deeply process it all. We must be selective in how we spend cognitive energy. Elaboration generally depends on a person's *motivation* and *ability* to carefully consider the arguments in a message. For motivation, people expend more cognitive energy processing a message when they feel compelled to do so. A common way researchers have manipulated people's motivation to process a message is by tweaking its personal relevance (Johnson & Eagly, 1989). For example, if a proposed policy would directly affect how much a person pays in taxes, they will be quite invested in understanding the arguments for this policy. By contrast, a policy that would affect tax policy in another country is less personally relevant and would likely spark less elaboration. Some people, however, are quite prone to elaborate on all sorts of messages simply because they enjoy

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[1] Around the same time, the "Heuristic-Systematic Model" also emerged, which makes many of the same predictions as the ELM but specifies the model somewhat differently (see Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012).

effortful thinking. These are people who are high in the individual difference, "need for cognition" (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982).

However, regardless of how motivated a person is to elaborate on a message, they still need to have the *ability* to elaborate. They need to have the cognitive resources to devote to critically evaluating the message. For example, people are not as able to elaborate when they are simultaneously completing another task that requires high cognitive effort (Petty et al., 1976). Conversely, people are more capable of critically evaluating a message when they know more about the issues under consideration (Wood et al., 1995).

Persuasion does not occur in a vacuum, however. People are subject to multiple, sometimes competing motivating forces and constraints on their cognitive abilities. Therefore, any single factor cannot always simply predict how much someone will elaborate on a message. For example, even individuals who are low in a need for cognition can still be motivated and able to process a particular message (see Luttrell et al., 2017).

The Peripheral and Central Routes

People are often unwilling or unable to carefully elaborate on information relevant to political policies and candidates. In such cases, when they do update their political attitudes to align with a piece of communication, it is likely to be via the *peripheral route*. That is, the influential elements of a message are "peripheral cues": superficial characteristics that are not specifically relevant to the topic at hand. These cues act as efficient signals that the recipient should adopt the message's position. They can work by evoking a general positive or negative evaluation that people associate with the message. For example, charismatic politicians may be persuasive by connecting their overall likeability with their message, not necessarily by communicating a cogent point (Wood & Kallgren, 1988). Peripheral cues can also operate via

simple cognitive reasoning rules or "heuristics." For example, if a communicator rattles off many arguments to support their position, an audience may be persuaded even by weak arguments merely because the sheer number of arguments suggests that the communicator's position is well-founded (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Nevertheless, there are still plenty of times when people are invested enough in a particular issue and can deeply consider new information on the topic (i.e., they are likely to elaborate). In these cases, attitudes depend more critically on the strength of the issue-relevant arguments, and peripheral cues are less likely to have much influence on their own. This is the *central route* to persuasion and stems from cognitive response theory (Greenwald, 1968), which holds that attitudes do not naturally follow from learning new information. Rather, as people elaborate on a message, they generate their own thoughts and reflections on the arguments. If their thoughts are favorable towards the message, their attitude shifts in accordance with it. This generally happens when the arguments are substantively cogent and logical. However, messages comprised of weak arguments spark thoughts that oppose the message; therefore, people resist changing their minds despite having learned the arguments.

One of the ELM's central tenets holds that attitudes established via the central (vs. peripheral) route will be stronger. "Strong" attitudes are those that resist changing over time or in the face of subsequent messages, and they tend to guide people's judgments and behavior (Luttrell & Sawicki, 2020). For instance, even though a campaign could change attitudes to the same degree via either peripheral or central processes, communicators may prefer to persuade via the central route to engender more lasting and consequential support.

Multiple Roles for Persuasion Variables

Although the ELM posits two "routes" to persuasion, there are not two distinct types of persuasion variables. The two routes provide a simple framework for the different ways in which any variable can drive attitude change at relatively low versus high elaboration. Critically, the lack of two distinct types of variables means that the same variable can affect attitudes even at different levels of elaboration but via different processes. To illustrate this point in the context of political communication, we consider the influence of *party cues* from an ELM perspective. Scholars have long surmised that the public's openness to policies and candidates is due at least partly to the political parties endorsing them. A message should be more persuasive when it explicitly states that the policy or candidate is endorsed by the political party with which the recipient identifies (see Bullock, 2020). A thorough review of this literature is beyond the scope of this entry, but this phenomenon in political communication offers a useful vehicle for outlining the five roles a variable can play in persuasion.

First, when elaboration is not heavily constrained by other factors, party cues can affect attitudes by motivating an audience to pay more or less attention to the message. Just as people are motivated to elaborate more on messages that are relevant to themselves, they also tend to elaborate more on messages coming from prototypical ingroup members (Mackie et al., 1990). Also, just as people elaborate more when a communicator advocates for a surprising position, citizens may also elaborate more when a political party endorses an ideologically misaligned position (Petersen et al., 2013).

Second, if an audience is not motivated or able to think carefully about a message, party endorsements offer a simple peripheral cue to persuasion. The heuristic is simply to adopt whatever position is endorsed by one's party, either because that party seems especially credible or because adopting that position facilitates social affiliation goals. Indeed, party cues have been

particularly influential when the audience is expected to care relatively little about an issue (Ciuk & Yost, 2016) or generally lacks knowledge and interest in politics (Kam, 2005).

The final three roles highlight several distinct processes that can occur via the central route when the audience is already motivated and able to think about the message. Party cues can also be especially influential under high elaboration conditions. For instance, in-party (vs. out-party) endorsements matter more to people who are higher in need for cognition (Bakker & Lelkes, 2018) and political sophistication (Boyte, 2021). There are several reasons why party cues would be compelling via the central route.

One of these central route roles is biasing people's thoughts in response to the message. When the substance of a message is neither clearly strong nor weak, some aspect of the persuasion environment can bias people's thoughts in favor of the message or against it. A common account of party cue effects holds that people are motivated to find merit in arguments advanced by their party but to find fault in arguments from the other side (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). Consistent with the ELM, this motivated reasoning account has been supported by evidence that assesses cognitive responses to a political message (Jennings, 2019).

Variables can also be influential via the central route by acting as substantive arguments themselves. When an aspect of a communication is relevant to the message's conclusion, it can be critically evaluated as an argument. If it evokes positive cognitive responses, it functions as a strong argument, but if it evokes negative cognitive responses, it functions as a weak argument. In theory, this means that people might be quite willing to support policies endorsed by their party if that endorsement constitutes relevant evidence (e.g., it may argue that the policy is worth supporting because it will be enacted and enforced). Some recent evidence shows that party

endorsements may not necessarily bias people's interpretation of substantive policy details but instead act as independent information that citizens take into account (Tappin et al., 2023).

Finally, a refinement of the ELM includes an additional high-elaboration role for persuasion variables: metacognitive validation (Briñol & Petty, 2009). The elaborative thoughts evoked by a message should only guide people's attitudes to the extent that they perceive those thoughts as valid. Therefore, variables can also shape the persuasion process by signaling the validity of a recipient's cognitive responses once they have already been generated. In principle, this means that if someone learns about a new policy and has favorable thoughts in response, they will be especially convinced if they then learn that their party supports the policy because this information will validate their own favorable reaction. By contrast, they are likely to doubt their initially positive response if they then discover that the policy is endorsed by the out-party. Indeed, people are more confident in their thoughts about a political issue and use those thoughts more when settling on an attitude if they are primed with their own political ideology after thinking about the issue (Blankenship et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In sum, the ELM offers a thorough accounting of psychological processes that can facilitate effective persuasion. It provides a clear explanatory framework for when and why political communication succeeds and fails. Communicators may try in vain to settle on the single best message to advocate for a candidate or policy, but what is persuasive to one person or another can depend on their willingness and capacity to engage deeply with the content. A successful campaign will instead consider this diversity within a public and the corresponding variety of psychological mechanisms that drive attitude change.

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