

CITIZENS  
AND  
POLITICS

PERSPECTIVES FROM  
POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

EDITED BY

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# I

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## *The Role of Affect in Symbolic Politics*

DAVID O. SEARS

Humans often are intensely emotionally involved in remote and abstract political events with only modest direct personal costs and benefits. These involvements have energized many of history's most devastating social, political, and religious conflicts. Why such intense emotions are evoked by situations with so little that is tangible and personal at stake has long been a central puzzle for social scientists. This chapter proposes one psychological approach to the problem.

Political symbols often evoke and mobilize human emotions. Virtually every American war has been fought around such rallying symbols. The Boston Tea Party symbolized the colonials' rebellion against British authority. The Confederacy's attack on Fort Sumter and "Remember the *Maine!*" were the great rallying cries for the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, respectively. The sinking of the *Lusitania* served the same purpose as America entered World War I and the "sneak attack on Pearl Harbor" for World War II. A less successful effort to create the same kind of rallying symbol was the Tonkin Bay incident in 1965, which succeeded in momentarily mobilizing support for the Vietnam War in Congress but not in the general public. Nonetheless, the Vietnam War had its share of wonderfully symbolic phrases, such as the American officer's statement that "we had to destroy it [a Vietnamese town] to save it," symbolizing for many the pointlessness of that conflict.

People can serve as powerful symbols. Jesus, hanging on the cross, is perhaps the most widely known. Revolutionary symbols are familiar to all of us: George Washington, Simon Bolivar, Garibaldi, Lenin, Castro, or Martin Luther King, Jr. People can also symbolize social evils. Marie Antoinette's supposed "let them eat cake" comment, or Nero's fiddling while Rome burned, are examples. Adolf Hitler symbolized the Nazi horror. Richard Nixon, perhaps cursed forever by the Herblock cartoon character crawling out of a sewer, symbolized deceptiveness and sleaze for many in the Watergate affair. Willie Horton, during the 1988 presi-

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dential campaign, came to symbolize a whole complex of problems in modern society: the supposed mixture of sexuality and violence in black males and the excessive permissiveness of the liberal Democratic crime policy. The supposed villainy of Saddam Hussein stimulated widespread support for a remote war with little apparent connection to American interests.

Symbols are particularly useful for distinguishing the bad guys from the good guys. There is the spendthrift Congress ("tax and spend, tax and spend"), the Communists, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), Wall Street, drug kingpins, welfare queens, and Somalian warlords. Or we have "good Americans," "honest working-class people," "the taxpayers," "senior citizens," or even "the people." We have "flower children," "brothers" and "homeboys" in urban ghettos, "war veterans," and "resistance fighters" (some more credible than others, perhaps, such as the distinction between France in 1943 and Nicaragua in 1983). "Woodstock" symbolized a Rousseauian ideal of peace and brotherhood.

When presented to us, these political symbols rivet our attention and evoke strong emotion. These emotions are dominated by a simple good-bad, like-dislike evaluative dimension. But beyond that, they may also take a wide variety of more specific forms. "Hatred" is not too extreme a word for the emotions behind hate-based crimes (Berk, 1989) and the more extreme forms of xenophobia, such as in the killing in Bosnia. Religious disputes in Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus evoke hatreds as well. Some mixture of shame and rage may lie behind the most violent of these events (see Retzinger, 1991; Scheff, 1992). "Anger" is the more appropriate label for emotions associated with the antigovernment affect of the tax revolt in the 1970s and 1980s (as in "I'm mad as hell, and I won't take it anymore"; Jarvis, 1978; see also Sears and Citrin, 1985). The Ross Perot campaign of 1992 seems also to have exploited this strain in popular feeling (Craig, 1993), as did such earlier nativist and racist leaders as Gerald L. K. Smith, Father Gerald Coughlin, Joseph McCarthy, and George Wallace (Lipset and Raab, 1979). Fear seems to motivate repression of minorities such as blacks. Disgust has perhaps also accompanied racial prejudice in the United States and other ethnocentrisms such as European anti-Gypsy, anti-Semitic, and anti-guest-worker or anti-immigrant attitudes. The many instances of genocide increasingly recorded by social scientists are presumably founded on such emotions (see Kuper, 1981; Staub, 1989).

Our language for positive emotions in mass politics may be more impoverished, but many supporters of Franklin D. Roosevelt, or of John F. Kennedy or of Fidel Castro in the early 1960s, no less than the supporters for such charismatic leaders as Hitler or Lenin, surely

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experienced powerfully passionate affections. One should not fail to mention the grandiose “moments of madness” when “all seemed possible,” such as in the 1848 European rebellions or the student revolts of the late 1960s or the Cultural Revolution.

This chapter offers a theory of individual psychology, described as a theory of symbolic politics, to explain these powerful mass political emotions. Usually, I will argue, these emotions center on some enduring evaluative predisposition toward relevant political symbols. To understand such emotions properly may require going well beyond such simple predispositions into the treacherous ground of more complex emotions, as these examples suggest. But I would argue that a simpler theory is an indispensable starting point and one that is sufficient for many purposes.

#### A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF SYMBOLIC POLITICS

Let us begin with a “simple theory of symbolic politics,” as first proposed.<sup>1</sup> It holds that people acquire stable affective responses to particular symbols through a process of classical conditioning, most crucially relatively early in life. The term “political symbol” refers to any affectively charged element in a political attitude object; it is not intended as a singular or special class of those elements.

These learned dispositions may or may not persist throughout adult life, but the strongest, called “symbolic predispositions,” do. The most important of these in American politics include party identification, political ideology, and racial prejudice. Later in life, people respond to the daily flow of political attitude objects consistently with these standing predispositions.

Any given attitude object is composed of one or more symbolic elements, and each element conveys some meaning to the individual. Whether the symbolic meaning of an object is fully apparent in its manifest content, or is dependent on some cognitive structure it elicits in the individual, is not prejudged by the use of the term “symbolic meaning”; all that is intended is that the symbol convey some meaning to the individual. Attitudes toward the object as a whole reflect some combination of the affects previously conditioned to the specific symbols included in it. For example, attitudes toward “forced busing to integrate whites and blacks” would depend on affects toward such symbols as “force,” “busing,” “integration,” “whites,” and “blacks.”

1 The most complete earlier descriptions of the psychology of “a simple theory of symbolic politics” have appeared in Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen (1980), Sears (1983), and Sears, Huddy, and Schaffer (1986).



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The adult individual has numerous predispositions (that is, learned affective responses that have been conditioned to specific symbols). When these symbols become salient later on, they should evoke consistent evaluations through a process of “transfer of affect” or cognitive consistency (see Lorge and Curtiss, 1936; Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955).<sup>2</sup> This assumes that people simply transfer affects from one symbol to another when they are linked to one another. As a result, the symbolic politics process is characterized by rather unthinking, reflexive, affective responses to remote attitude objects, rather than by calculations of probable costs and benefits (whether personal or not).

There are five key propositions in the theory that bear on the role of affect in symbolic politics:

1. Attitudinal predispositions that have a major impact on the adult’s evaluation of political attitude objects can be identified. The strongest of these are described as “symbolic predispositions.”
2. Symbolic predispositions are strong attitudes normally acquired through classical conditioning in early life (though not necessarily in the preadult years). Their strength is dependent on a variety of factors, most prominently the frequency and consistency of exposure to pairings of the political symbol with the evaluation in question.
3. These symbolic predispositions remain relatively stable throughout adult life.
4. The symbolic meaning of an attitude object evokes particular symbolic predispositions and thereby influences evaluations of it.
5. The process by which symbols evoke predispositions (“symbolic processing”) is automatic and affective. Among other things, cost–benefit calculations play a relatively modest role.

### *Symbolic Predispositions*

The core of the symbolic politics process is that standing learned predispositions are evoked by political symbols in the current informational environment. Most of the relevant research has concerned the origins, nature, and effects of these symbolic predispositions. These represent one

- 2 The “transfer of affect” theory is best described in terms of affective consistency rather than cognitive consistency, but congruity theory does not fundamentally differ from it (or indeed from the other cognitive consistency theories) in this respect; all deal primarily with reconciling inconsistent affects rather than with the cognitive processes that bind them together. For exceptions, see Abelson (1959, 1968).

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end of a continuum of attitudes varying in affective strength, at the other of which presumably are “nonattitudes,” which are highly unstable, unrelated to other attitudes, and unlikely to influence other preferences (Converse, 1970).<sup>3</sup> They can be identified using three criteria: of all the individual’s attitudes, they are the most stable over time (stability), yield the most consistent responses over similar attitude objects (constraint), and have the most influence on attitudes toward other objects (power; see Sears, 1969). Racial prejudice is a good example: it is quite stable over time (Converse and Markus, 1979; Sears, 1983), relatively consistent over racially relevant areas such as schools, jobs, and housing (Sears, 1988), and powerful in determining preferences toward racial policies and black candidates (Sears and Kosterman, 1991).

Much research has documented the influence of such predispositions on other political attitudes. Simple examples can be drawn from two of the most passionate and divisive political disputes in recent American history. One is the role of racial prejudices in producing antibusing (for school integration) attitudes. Their dominant role has been repeatedly documented, both in national (Sears, Hensler, and Speer, 1979) and local (McConahay, 1982; Sears and Allen, 1984) studies. Similarly, religiosity and other forms of moral conservatism are strong determinants of antiabortion attitudes (Blauwkamp, Fastnow, and Kellstedt, 1992; Luker, 1984; Sears and Huddy, 1990). In neither case do any other measured variables even approach the explanatory power of such predispositions.

This pattern holds across a wide variety of other studies on other issues. A typical study (Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen, 1980) used a national survey of adults, with attitudes toward major policy issues (unemployment, national health insurance, busing, and law and order) as dependent variables. The predictors were the major symbolic predispositions (party identification, ideology, and racial attitudes) and indicators of self-interest. The symbolic predispositions had strong effects, while self-interest had virtually none.

Similarly, policy and candidate preferences have often been shown to be influenced by standing party identification (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960), social values (Feldman, 1988), racial attitudes (Sears, 1988), and antagonisms toward such groups as the Communists, Nazis, and the KKK (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1982). Whites’ racial attitudes influence opposition to affirmative action and black candidates (Jessor, 1988; Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sears, Citrin, and

3 Fazio’s recent work on the automatic activation of attitudes asserts a very similar underlying continuum in the strength of object–evaluation associations, though he refers to it as an “attitude–nonattitude continuum” (1993, p. 758).

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Kosterman, 1987; Sears and Kosterman, 1991); political ideology, opposition to communism, and support for the military influenced support for the Vietnam War (Lau, Brown, and Sears, 1978); party identification, ideology, and racial attitudes influenced support for the California tax revolt (Sears and Citrin, 1985); and basic values activated by symbols of injustice, inequity, or immorality produced mass protests (Sears and Citrin, 1985; Sears and McConahay, 1973).

The second proposition is that such symbolic predispositions are acquired relatively early in life. Extensive research on political socialization has investigated children's and adolescents' early affective responses to such symbols as the flag, the president, stigmatized racial groups, and the political parties (e.g., Easton and Dennis, 1969; Hyman, 1959; Katz, 1976). This early learning presumably yields such predispositions as party identification, racial prejudices, ethnic identities, basic values, nationalism, and attachment to various symbols of the nation and regime.

The third proposition is that these early acquired predispositions persist through life. Early researchers on political socialization believed that childhood and early adolescent experiences were formative (Easton and Dennis, 1969; Hyman, 1959), whereas Mannheim (1952) pinpointed late adolescence as a critical period for the acquisition of lasting attitudes. "Revisionist" theorists (e.g., Franklin, 1984), in contrast, hold that short-term forces continue to influence symbolic predispositions (such as party identification) through adulthood.

Such disputes have led to the formulation of several alternative models of attitude change (and susceptibility to change) across the life span (Alwin, 1991; Sears, 1975, 1983) and to empirical tests among them. Extensive research has indicated support for both the "persistence" and the "impressionable years" viewpoints (see Sears, 1989, for a review; also see Alwin and Krosnick, 1988; Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb, 1991; Green and Palmquist, 1990; Sears, 1983). Especially interesting recent work has been done on the conditions for long-term attitude stability (Niemi and Jennings, 1991; Sears, Zucker, and Funk, 1992), and especially on socialization experiences later in the life span (Sigel, 1989).<sup>4</sup>

4 There is an active debate between "traditional" and "revisionist" views of persistence, with the latter asserting considerably more influence during adulthood of short-term forces on long-standing predispositions than does the former. The revisionists' strongest claims center on attitude changes in young adulthood, however; the burden of evidence suggests stability rather than change in later adulthood (see Alwin, Cohen, and Newcomb, 1991; Green and Palmquist, 1990, 1992; Sears and Funk, 1990).

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*Symbolic Meaning*

Our fourth proposition suggests that symbolic meaning influences evaluations of the attitude object. And changes in symbolic meaning should do so as well. The symbols contained in the object can vary cross-sectionally among individuals at one time point or longitudinally within individuals over time. The effects of changes in symbolic meaning have been investigated in a number of contexts.

Only recently has attention begun to be devoted to the role of the evoking political symbols. At the simplest level, naturalistic wording variations sometimes show dramatic effects on evaluations of public policy (though they do not always do so). Support for intervention in the Korean War was considerably greater when it was described as intended “to stop the Communist invasion of South Korea” than when it was simply described as “the war in Korea” (Mueller, 1973). Most people strongly oppose spending for “welfare” but support “helping the poor,” “public assistance programs to the elderly and the disabled,” and programs “for low-income families with dependent children,” which together comprise a major portion of welfare spending (see Sears and Citrin, 1985; Smith, 1987). Whites overwhelmingly oppose “busing” but support “racial integration of the schools” (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985; Sears, Hensler, and Speer, 1979). In each case the differences may be due to a variety of factors, but it seems likely that the presence of affectively loaded symbols such as “Communists,” “welfare,” or “blacks” or other minority cultures is a critical factor.

A second point concerns the level of abstraction of political symbols. The conventional wisdom in political science and social psychology has been that abstract attitude objects are processed differently than concrete ones. Converse (1964) argued that relatively few voters possess abstract ideological conceptualizations that would permit the deduction of specific policy attitudes. On the other hand, deductive hierarchical structures play a more prominent role in contemporary social psychology, as “top-down” or “theory-driven” processing helps “cognitive misers” to minimize psychologically costly information-processing efforts (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987).

The simple symbolic politics view is quite different from either view of abstract attitude objects. It assumes that processing of political symbols depends on the evaluations associated with them, not on the symbols’ level of abstraction. Several findings indicate that political symbols presented at different levels of abstraction but referring to the same underlying reality do draw different responses, but because of the differences in their manifest contents (and, presumably, the evaluations associated with

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them), not because of differences in abstraction. For example, most Americans prefer, in the abstract, “less government” to “more government.” On the other hand, a large majority also consistently prefer that government services in specific areas (such as the schools, police, public health, etc.) be at least maintained at current levels, not cut. But there is no evidence that these two sets of attitude objects are processed very differently, despite the difference in levels of abstraction: in one extensive study, both were explained by the same predispositions (party identification, ideology, and racial attitudes), and both had similar effects upon support for tax cuts (Sears and Citrin, 1985). A simple symbolic politics theory would explain the less favorable evaluation of the more abstract object as principally due to the different manifest symbolic content presented at each level of abstraction (and the different conditioned associations to those different symbols), not to the difference in level of abstraction per se (also see Sears et al., 1986).

A third case in point concerns social groups as attitude objects. Much social science theory holds that they are not treated like other political symbols; rather, they have special psychological meaning. For example, the conventional wisdom in social psychology has been that one’s group identity is psychologically central to the individual, with self-esteem partially dependent upon perceiving one’s own group as superior to other groups (Tajfel, 1982). Similarly, a “sense of group position” is thought likely to generate racial prejudice when the dominant group feels threatened by other groups (Blumer, 1958). And groups are thought to be the most “central” of political attitude objects, so that political parties are perceived in terms of which groups they favor or oppose, with voters adopting “ideologies by proxy” from the beliefs of their own groups, providing the psychological foundation for ego-involved attitudes (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Sherif and Cantril, 1947). Similarly, group interest is said to be a powerful determinant of one’s political preferences (Bobo, 1983; Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986).

The symbolic politics view, in contrast, is that a group represents an attitude object like any other and therefore evokes affective responses in the same manner. Groups may behave like other political symbols, mainly evoking symbolic predispositions (as in patriotism or nationalism or class solidarity), and so may be best described in terms of symbolic politics (see Conover, 1988; Jessor, 1988; Sears, 1988). For example, people’s willingness to extend civil liberties to a group depends on their evaluations of the group (Stouffer, 1955; Sullivan et al., 1982).

But more than that, support for policies or candidacies associated with a particular group should be influenced quite specifically by

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evaluations of that group and not of other groups. So whites' attitudes toward racial policies and black candidates are influenced by their evaluations of blacks but not of whites (Sears and Kosterman, 1991), and non-Hispanics' attitudes toward bilingual education are influenced by evaluations of Hispanics (but not of other minorities or whites; Sears and Huddy, 1990). Similarly, racial equality values influence support for racial policies, and gender equality values influence support for gender policies, but neither set of values influences issues affecting the other group (Sears, Huddy, and Schaffer, 1986).

*Symbolic Processing*

The theory of symbolic politics also describes a distinctive mode of information processing, which might be called "symbolic processing." Most notably, it proceeds in terms of strong affective responses to political symbols. When we hear the word "democracy" we have a strong and immediate positive affect; when we hear the word "Nazi" we have a strong and immediate negative response. Affect is central to this process, then, since political symbols are assumed to evoke strong emotions in the individual.

A contemporary illustration of affectively driven symbolic processing is "hot button" political advertising. Political campaigns devote much of their attention to trying to discover what issues or symbols evoke an emotional response, that is, what hits voters' hot buttons. The assumption is, as one specialist put it, that "voting is a matter of the heart, what you *feel* about someone, rather than a matter of the mind. . . . [The mind] takes what the heart feels, and interprets it" (Diamond and Bates, 1984, p. 316). Certainly the hot button formula of many modern political ads, such as Lyndon Johnson's Daisy spot, George Bush's "revolving-door justice" spot, or Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" ads, aim to evoke gut-level, affective responses (Kosterman, 1991).

Two recent experiments provide examples. Perdue, Dovidio, Gurtman, and Tyler (1990) demonstrated that pairing nonsense syllables with in-group designators such as "we" or "ours" led to more favorable evaluations of the nonsense syllables than did pairing them with such out-group designators as "they" or "theirs," even when the latter were presented only briefly and subliminally prior to the nonsense syllables. In another experiment, Americans responded more negatively to foreign than to American leaders when shown television clips without audio tracks. Interestingly enough, this negative response to foreign leaders disappeared when the audio information was supplied, suggesting that the negative affect was an immediate, primary, and noncognitive

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response to the leaders' foreignness (see Warnecke, Masters, and Kempster, 1992).<sup>5</sup>

A second aspect of symbolic processing is that evaluation of the attitude object is cumulative and rapidly becomes detached from its informational origins. This is described by the notion of "on-line processing" (as opposed to "memory-based processing"; see Hastie and Park, 1986). The individual makes an evaluative judgment as relevant information is encountered and then essentially keeps only a running tally, simply retrieving and updating that summary evaluation with later information but forgetting the actual pieces of evidence that contributed to it. Indeed, there is much evidence from experimental studies of impressions and attitudes that affective change is generally only weakly correlated with memory for the information that originally induced the change (see Anderson and Hubert, 1963; Fiske and Taylor, 1991). In experiments on political information processing, similarly, Lodge and his colleagues (1993) find that candidate evaluations are responsive to campaign messages, and indeed, the cumulative evaluation continues to reflect those message effects for some time. But the contents of the specific messages are themselves quickly forgotten.

Third, symbolic processing involves a relatively swift, reflexive, automatic triggering of an appropriate predisposition by a political symbol, guided by pressures toward affective consistency (Lorge and Curtiss, 1936; Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). In general, these consistency pressures are assumed to operate quickly and nondeliberatively. Consistent with this view, much of our research has shown that rational calculations of self-interest are weak forces in mass politics (Sears and Funk, 1991).

Fourth, affect often dominates cognition. Which of them plays the more important role in mass politics is an old debate, originally framed by James Madison in the *Federalist Papers* as pitting passion against reason (see Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, and Barnum, 1989). Many have attempted to contrast the empirical impact of the two, going back at least to the work of Rosenberg (1960) and Carlson (1956) in the early days of consistency theory.

In more recent work, the dominance of simple evaluative predispositions can perhaps be seen in the ineffectiveness of (content-rich)

5 While the difference between positive and negative affect is crucial to a symbolic politics theory, it does not concern itself with qualitatively different *kinds* of affect in each category. For example, fear is not differentiated from anger, or hope from pity, contrary to some current theories of emotion (see Marcus, 1990; Roseman, Abelson, and Ewing, 1986; Weiner, 1974). It may be that such distinctions will be valuable in the future.

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short-term forces in altering (highly affective) long-term partisan commitments (Green and Palmquist, 1990, 1992). Granberg and Brown (1989) report several conceptually similar findings in a study of candidate evaluations and the vote. Candidate evaluations were more closely related to the vote than were cognitions about the candidates; the stability of evaluations of parties and candidates, and the association of evaluations with the vote, were only minimally affected by the number of relevant cognitions held by the individual; and the evaluative ambivalence of the individual's cognitions, not their number, was the critical influence on all these indicators of partisan strength. Finally, Rahn and her colleagues (1994) find that the "reasons" voters give for their votes tend to be rationalizations of their evaluative preferences rather than derivations of their votes from their "reasons." Early deciders and the highly politically involved are especially likely to muster extensive cognitive rationalization for their prior preferences.

#### ATTITUDE ACCESSIBILITY AND AUTOMATIC ACTIVATION

This symbolic politics theory has emerged from cross-sectional surveys of the general population. However, the phenomena it focuses on, and the underlying theory, are quite similar to those developed in contemporary laboratory social psychology.

It has long been recognized that evaluation is central to such core phenomena of social psychology as social perception, interpersonal attraction, attitudes, and prejudice. Early experiments on impression formation showed that the warm-cold dimension is an especially central dimension of person perception (Asch, 1946; Kelley, 1950). Later, Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) demonstrated that evaluation is the central dimension of meaning in a wide variety of areas of life; its importance is in no way limited to person perception.

More recently, Zajonc (1980, 1984) also believes that evaluation is a universal component of all perception and meaning. But he goes on to propose that affect is a separate system altogether from cognition and, in his "affective primacy" hypothesis, that affect is primary, basic, inescapable, irrevocable, difficult to verbalize, capable of being elicited with minimal stimulus input, often dependent on cognition, and quite separate from content or knowledge (see also Murphy and Zajonc, 1993). That is, affective reactions are primary; they do not depend on prior cognitive appraisals and, indeed, may become completely separated from the content on which they were originally based (though perhaps later cognitively justified). In this sense, affect does not depend upon



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deliberate, rational, or conscious thought and may not even depend on unconscious mental activity.<sup>6</sup>

The clearest applications of such affect-driven theories to experimental studies of attitudes use the concepts of “attitude accessibility” (Fazio, 1986) and “automatic attitude activation” (Bargh, Chaiken, Gollwitzer, and Pratto, 1992). Both lines of work extend basic memory models to the case of attitudes (also see the recent synthesis by Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). This approach begins with the assumption that long-term memory is an “associative network,” a system of nodes connected by associational links (Anderson, 1983). For example, “the Democrats support racial quotas” is stored as two nodes (the Democrats, racial quotas) and the link associating them (supports). Recall begins at one node, and activation spreads along the links between nodes (Collins and Loftus, 1975). These links are strengthened each time they are activated.

To apply the model to attitudes requires thinking of “an attitude [as] essentially an association between a given object and a given evaluation” stored in long-term memory (Fazio, 1986, p. 214). The nodes of the network could be any kind of attitude object. When the attitude object is encountered, the attitude is activated and enters consciousness (i.e., is accessed). The process of activation is said to be an automatic, spontaneous one; it does not require reflection or attention (Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, and Kardes, 1986). The key point for the present discussion is that evaluation is central to the process.

### *Automatic Processing*

This approach views attitudes as spontaneously and automatically activated in the presence of the attitude object. Swift evaluative responses are the hallmark of the accessing of attitudes: people quickly classify objects as either good or bad. This automatic processing can occur without conscious goals, control, attention, or awareness, and so it places minimal demands on processing capacity (Bargh, 1988, 1989). One example is the experimental evidence produced by Murphy and Zajonc (1993) that only affective primes work with extremely brief

6 There are objections to the Zajonc view. Lazarus (1984) has argued that prior cognitive appraisal, especially of the personal significance of the stimulus, is necessary before the affective response occurs. Similarly, Weiner (1986) contends that cognitive attributions precede emotions; for example, making an internal attribution for a positive outcome produces pride, whereas making an external, controllable attribution for a negative event produces anger.

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(probably subawareness) exposure durations; only with longer exposure durations do cognitive primes influence judgment. In other words, affective responses immediately and almost reflexively influence judgment, even when there is minimal or no cognitive participation.

There are several versions of this automatic processing process, and they have a good deal in common, so they will be cited briefly here. One version distinguishes *automatic* from *controlled* processing (Shiffrin and Schneider, 1977). Automatic processing involves the spontaneous activation of a well-learned set of associations that have been developed through repeated activation in memory. An example offered by Devine (1989) is of conventional American racial stereotypes. They are learned early in life, before children develop the cognitive ability to evaluate them critically. Devine argues that they represent a frequently activated, well-learned set of associations that are automatically activated in the presence of a group member (or symbolic equivalent of the target group) for virtually all Americans. In contrast, “controlled processing” is voluntary and requires conscious effort and active control by the individual. An example is the “theory of reasoned action” (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), which contends that behavior follows from behavioral intentions, which in turn are derived from attitudes toward the action and normative expectations, in a quite conscious and deliberate way.

A second distinction, discussed earlier, is between *on-line* and *memory-based* processing (Hastie and Park, 1986). In on-line processing, the individual keeps a running tally of evaluation of the attitude object. Each new piece of information is simply absorbed as an incremental updating of that running tally, but the information itself is not necessarily stored. When the attitude is primed, the current stored summary evaluation is retrieved, not the raw information on which it was based. As a result, evaluation is independent of memory of the details. In contrast, in memory-based processing, attitudes are dependent on the retrieval of specific pieces of information from memory, and are predictable from the mix of pro and con information retrieved from memory (McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh, 1990). Experiments by Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh (1989) found that on-line processing dominated in “impression-driven” conditions, in which individuals were presented with various pieces of information about a political candidate and then were asked whether they liked or disliked the candidate. Memory-based processing appeared only in a “memory-driven” condition, in which they instructed the person simply to try to understand the information.

A third distinction is between *category-based* and *piecemeal* processing (Fiske and Pavelchak, 1986). In category-based processing, perceivers categorize other individuals immediately upon encountering them, rapidly and at a perceptual level rather than as a consequence of

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deliberate and conscious thought. The category carries an “affective tag” that transfers immediately to the evaluation of the target individual. Fiske and Neuberg (1990) argue that category-based processes typically have priority over more attribute-oriented, individuating processes, or “piecemeal processing,” in which the stimulus person is processed in terms of his or her own individual attributes, with each individual piece of information being reviewed and integrated into the overall impression. A similar distinction has been developed by Brewer (1988), between “category-based” and “person-based” processing, in her “dual-process model of impression formation.”

Several recently developed psychological concepts parallel what we have described as symbolic processing, then: the automatic activation of attitudes, automatic processing, on-line processing, and category-based processing. All are highly affective rather than contentful or cognitive; spontaneous rather than deliberate; cognitively effortless, making minimal demands on cognitive processes; automatic rather than intentional or voluntary; and oriented around symbolic representations.

A fourth distinction does not parallel these quite as neatly: between “peripheral” or “heuristic” processing, on the one hand, and “central” or “systematic” processing, on the other (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The former describes attitude change resulting from cues other than the merits of the arguments, such as source expertise or attractiveness. The latter emphasizes deliberate and thoughtful processing of persuasive arguments, evaluating each for its validity. Peripheral/heuristic processing does parallel a piece of the symbolic or automatic processing picture in that the individual responds without thoughtful review of the details of the arguments. But it misses an equally central element: the swift and reflexive affective response based on strong object-evaluation associations (Kosterman, 1991). Central/systematic processing would seem to correspond more closely to controlled processing in that attitude change is dependent on piecemeal review of the individual arguments.

### *Priming*

Priming is a key concept in attitude activation: “the mere presentation of an attitude object toward which the individual possesses a strong evaluative association would automatically activate the evaluation” (Fazio, 1989, p. 157). For example, presenting positively evaluated words, even if only momentarily or subliminally, can speed the response to other positively valenced stimuli (with symmetrical effects of priming negative affects; Devine, 1989; Fazio et al., 1986; Perdue et al., 1990).

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Activating an accessible construct through priming should increase its impact over other attitudes, judgments, and behavior. For example, priming a particular trait construct gives it more weight in impression formation. Bargh, Lombardi, and Higgins (1988) presented subjects with a group of four words that contained the critical priming trait (e.g., “she, *outgoing*, is, was”), then an ambiguous description of a person’s behavior (e.g., “he monopolized the telephone where he lived”), and then asked for one word best describing this type of person. The primed adjective was more likely to be given.

Priming political attitudes has been shown experimentally to enhance their impact on candidate evaluations. Sherman and colleagues (1990) activated the categories of either foreign affairs (by presenting words such as “diplomat”) or the economy (e.g., “fiscal”). Then they described a political candidate who was experienced in one area but inexperienced in the other. Evaluations of the candidate were most influenced by his level of experience in the area that had previously been primed. Similarly, “agenda-setting effects” show that emphasizing a particular issue in television news broadcasts increases that issue’s weight in viewers’ evaluations of presidential performance (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). This can be thought of as another kind of priming effect: watching network coverage of a particular issue primes the individual’s attitudes toward that issue, making them more accessible and more influential.

*Chronic Accessibility*

Some attitudes are more accessible than others on a long-term basis: “like any construct based on associative learning, the strength of the attitude can vary . . . this associative strength may determine the accessibility of the attitude from memory” (Fazio, 1986, p. 214). Spontaneous activation, without prompting from situational cues or even extensive exposure to the attitude object itself, should by this theory occur most readily with highly accessible attitudes, that is, those with especially strong associative links between attitude object and evaluation. Even if not directly primed, they will dominate other attitudes. Less strong attitudes must be more explicitly primed to have an effect, either through exposure to the attitude object or prompting from situational cues (Higgins and King, 1981).

This dimension of chronic accessibility, reflecting the strength of object–evaluation association, is analogous to a number of other concepts that bear on underlying attitude strength, such as “ego involvement” (Sherif and Cantril, 1947), “attitude centrality” (Converse, 1964), “attitude importance” (Krosnick, 1988), “conviction” about one’s attitude (Abelson, 1988), or “public commitment” to an attitude (Hovland, Campbell, and Brock, 1957). In the language of symbolic politics, sym-

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bolic predispositions anchor one end of this dimension and nonattitudes the other (Sears, 1983).<sup>7</sup>

The link between accessibility and attitude strength lies in the notion that attitudes are evaluations stored (along with relevant information) in long-term memory and varying in associative strength. Accessibility in memory does provide one potential explanation for the effects of attitude strength on resistance to change or influence over other attitudes. For example, Krosnick (1989) has suggested that the effects of attitude importance are due to accessibility; more important attitudes are more accessible, and therefore more easily evoked and more likely to influence other attitudes. Similarly, Fazio and his colleagues argue that more accessible attitudes produce higher attitude-behavior consistency, such as between preelection candidate preference and actual vote (e.g., Fazio et al., 1986; Fazio and Williams, 1986).

There is some controversy about whether or not strong (more accessible) attitudes are indeed more readily activated than weak ones in laboratory studies. Fazio's (1993) view is that strong attitudes are activated much more readily than weak attitudes, while Bargh's view (see Bargh, Chaiken, Gøvender, and Pratto, 1992; Chaiken and Bargh, 1993) is that all attitudes are automatically activated. In this dialogue there is some consensus that strong attitudes are more readily activated but debate over whether idiosyncratic or consensual determinants of attitude strength are more important.

It should be noted, though, that laboratory studies are generally working at the tepid end of the affective continuum. For truly strong object-evaluation associations (as the Fazio theory requires), one might want to look at attitude objects with extremely long histories. "Collective memories," or "public memories" (see Brown, Shevill, and Rips, 1986; Schuman and Scott, 1989), such as those of World War II or of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, might offer better representatives of the strong-predisposition camp. Memories of group oppression are likely to be especially significant, such as the cultural conflicts surrounding collective memories of the American West (Novotny, 1992).

7 Not everyone would agree that all these concepts can be reduced to a single dimension of attitude strength. Raden (1985) and Krosnick and Schuman (1988) raise such questions, and others (Johnson and Eagly, 1989) distinguish three different versions of ego involvement, of which "valuerelevant" (i.e., "position involvement") most parallels attitude strength. It should also be noted that the psychological mainsprings of these various concepts vary somewhat. Sherif and Cantril (1947) and Converse (1964) suspect that the strongest ego involvements were anchored in some sense of group identity, while Abelson (1968) describes "conviction" as deriving from emotional commitment, ego preoccupation, and cognitive elaboration.

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APPLICATIONS TO MASS POLITICS

In short, the core idea of a symbolic politics theory, as it has been developed in survey research on political behavior, is that strongly held affective predispositions are triggered automatically by attitude objects with relevant symbolic meaning. Quite independently, recent experimental work on attitudes has treated them in parallel fashion, as elements in an associative network that vary in the strength of the object-evaluation association (i.e., in attitude strength). Those with the strongest associations are most accessible in memory and are evoked most automatically when primed with relevant stimuli. The notion of symbolic processing of political symbols relevant to symbolic predispositions would seem to have much in common with the notions of automatic processing of objects that activate chronically accessible attitudes, on-line processing, and category-based processing. All of them would seem to contrast with the concepts of controlled processing, memory-based processing, attribute-based processing, or central processing. But these latter literatures have been developed on the basis of experimental laboratory research.

Most social psychologists seem to feel that automatic processing dominates in ordinary life: "It appears that most daily behaviors are not sufficiently consequential to induce people to undertake a controlled analysis" (Fazio, 1986, p. 238); "category-based processes seem to be the default option . . . under ordinary conditions, people simply do not pay enough attention to individuate each other" (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990, p. 21); "person-based encoding is the exception rather than the rule in . . . complex information settings" (Brewer, 1988, p. 3); and "on-line processing is . . . psychologically realistic in placing minimal information-processing demands on voters" (Lodge et al., 1989, p. 416) and is more common than memory-based processing (also see Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Hastie and Park, 1986).

This might imply that symbolic processing would dominate mass politics as well. But this does not necessarily follow because the conditions of mass politics are special ones (like those of any specialized realm of human life). So which of these modes of processing best fits the natural conditions of mass politics? To answer this question, we need to review the conditions under which automatic as opposed to more controlled processing takes place. And then we need to ask how common they are in mass politics.

For one thing, *time pressure* and *limited attention*, and indeed limited cognitive resources in general, promote category-based processing (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990). These, of course, are perennially at the heart of the problem with public participation in politics. It is clear that ordinary

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people usually do not have a great deal of political information (Kinder and Sears, 1985; Sears, 1969). Nor do they pay close attention to the political media; even though television is ubiquitous in our society, it usually receives diffused and distracted attention from the public, and that is particularly true of political messages (Kinder and Sears, 1985; Sears and Kosterman, 1991). The incentives for public attentiveness are minimal, and there are many other demands on people's time, so politics is plainly one area of life in which decision-making shortcuts are likely to be found. Indeed, the cognitive miser may be just as rational as Downs's (1957) rational nonvoter. So the generally poor information and weak attention of the mass public should favor symbolic processing.

Category-based processing requires the presence of *appropriate categories*, strongly established categories, and consistency of the target with the category (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990). To be sure, nonattitudes abound in politics. But both politicians and journalists try to frame issues and candidates in terms that can be readily linked to widespread, consensually understood predispositions. That is, the information environment in mass politics is heavily biased toward widely understood and shared categories. When that process is successful, the public is likely to be very effective in making its will(s) known; if it is unsuccessful, the public will flounder and its voice is likely to be dimly heard.

Symbolic processing should be most common under conditions of *strong object-evaluation associations*. True, the mass public's attitudes toward the detailed issues of public life are frequently not very consistent or stable (Converse, 1964, 1970; Zaller and Feldman, 1992). On the other hand, they do have quite strong and stable attitudes toward the continuing political symbols of the era, and those are the attitudes that are evoked most often (Converse and Markus, 1979; Sears, 1983).

On-line processing is enhanced by an *impression set*, in which the individual's goal is to develop an impression of another person, whereas memory-based processing is enhanced by the goal of remembering the informational details (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). And in fact, an impression set is the ordinary person's orientation toward politics. The main practical decisions voters must make are choices between candidates, which require impressions of those rivals. This is the focal point of much mass political conversation as well: "what do you think of X?"

A considerable body of experimental work argues that central processing, and consequent close attention to the merits of the arguments, are stimulated by *personal involvement* in the outcomes of the issues (Johnson and Eagly, 1989; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). In the political behavior literature this variable has been described as "self-interest" or

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the personal impact of political issues (Sears and Funk, 1991). Similarly, outcome interdependence with another person motivates closer attention to the details of that person's nature, especially short-term, task-oriented outcome dependence on the target (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990). However, such situations are relatively rare in politics. For the most part, the political choices faced by ordinary citizens do not have a major impact on their personal lives (Green, 1988; Sears and Funk, 1991).

Moreover, there is a good deal of evidence that people do not induce political preferences from the details of their own personal experiences. Rather, people appear to be slow to draw societal-level implications from *personal*-level information and vice versa; the two seem to be cognitively compartmentalized. Extensive reviews of the literature on the political effects of self-interest have been published elsewhere and need not be reiterated here. The best evidence is that self-interest has relatively little impact on political attitudes (Sears and Funk, 1991). On the few occasions that self-interest does have large effects on public opinion, they tend to be cognitively quite narrow.

For all these reasons, then, I would argue that strongly affective symbolic processing (or, in social psychological language, automatic processing) is most likely under the conditions that hold most commonly in mass politics. Of course, there are exceptions; sometimes people do have the advantages of extended campaigns and a great deal of information, sometimes they do not have handy categories to apply, sometimes they do not need to arrive at a fast impression, and sometimes personal considerations are quite salient.

Yet it is not self-evident that even these seemingly infertile conditions foreclose symbolic processing. The California tax revolt met most of these conditions: a campaign that lasted for years, not months, with extensive media coverage, no particularly central personalized leaders, and important and well-publicized personal implications. Yet it proved to be vintage symbolic politics, mixed with some other elements, to be sure (Sears and Citrin, 1985). In my view, it is difficult for mass politics to escape the conditions that most encourage symbolic processing.

#### SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Let me close with two observations about the implications of this work for how we think about democratic governance. As Page and Shapiro (1992) have wisely noted in their book, a variety of perspectives on the general public is possible. There is one of a fairly sensible and rational public, doing as well as can be expected given the limited and biased information it is given. The image conveyed by the symbolic politics approach is rather different: emotional and reflexive responses to



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political symbols, relatively heedless of instrumentalities or realities. To be sure, this view is of the public in the aggregate, and it concedes that it is not a good representation of the individual.

The symbolic politics model is most obviously geared to the political conditions under which manipulation of the public is most likely to occur. By the reasoning laid out here, such efforts should be least fruitful on stimuli that have a clear, unambiguous, and consensual meaning. It has been difficult, for example, to change the meaning of busing because it is so widely viewed as a racial issue. On the other hand, manipulation should be easier on issues or candidates that lack consensual or manifest symbolism. When a new candidate, such as Michael Dukakis or Bill Clinton, comes onto the political scene, he is something of a black box, whose profile can be molded to elicit either positive or negative underlying predispositions – though presumably within some constraints based on reality.

Controlling the public agenda is required in order to control the symbolic meaning of an attitude object. Such control is politically consequential both in influencing overall public support for the object and in influencing which predisposition it evokes. By manipulating the meaning of an issue like crime, for example, as the Republican campaign did with the Willie Horton commercials in 1988, one can manipulate the role of a powerful and damaging predisposition such as racism. Similarly, regimes often manipulate national symbols to evoke loyalty and patriotism, as frequently has been done in recent times to mobilize secessionist sentiments in formerly Communist nations.<sup>8</sup>

The normative impact of the symbolic politics process on democratic governance depends to a great extent upon what symbols are salient in the public arena. If the symbols evoke the uglier set of our predispositions – prejudice, ethnocentrism, nationalism, hostility toward the weak and disadvantaged – that is what we are likely to get. If the symbols appeal to our better sides – to our communitarian spirit, our selflessness, our idealism – that is what we are likely to get. Political elites are to a considerable extent prisoners of their times; events dictate, to some extent, what is placed upon the public agenda. But let us not forget that no theory of good or bad times will explain variation in our own leaders' appeals to the better or to the worse sides of human nature. In our own

8 This ignores the possibility that in some natural situations the direction of causality will be reversed: the predisposition itself may influence which symbolic meaning the attitude object takes on, rather than vice versa. For example, a particular set of political protests can “mean” an ugly resurgence of nationalism or an inspiring liberation from an imperial oppressor, depending on one's predisposition. We are not here addressing this particular sequence.