Political Psychology, Overview

Patrizia Catellani

Catholic University of Milan, Milan, Italy

1. Scope of Political Psychology
2. Political Knowledge and Political Attitudes
3. Political Identity and Conflict
4. Political Communication
5. Political Participation
   Further Reading

GLOSSARY

accessibility The ease with which information in long-term memory can be retrieved.

bias A systematic distortion in the processing of information.

entitativity The extent to which a social category is perceived as having real existence.

heuristic A simplified procedure or rule of thumb for making a decision or solving a problem without systematic processing of information.

ideology-based voting Voting choice based on ideology or values.

issue-based voting Voting choice based on parties' position on given political issues.

matching effect The different impact of persuasive messages as a function of authoritarianism and other characteristics of the target.

media agenda setting Decision process regarding the relative space and time to be devoted to different news by the media.

performance-based voting Voting choice based on evaluation of past performance of a party or a political leader.

political identity The part of the self-concept that derives from belonging to a political group.

salience Prominence, distinctiveness; any aspect of a stimulus that causes it to stand out and attract attention.

third person effect A tendency to overestimate media influence on others and underestimate media influence on oneself.

trait-based voting Voting choice based on personal characteristics of a political candidate that may have either a positive or a negative connotation.

voter's paradox A definition of voting as an apparently contradictory action, since costs implied by the act of voting are higher than the benefits the single citizen may expect from that act.

Political psychology investigates representations and actions of political actors, be they citizens, politicians, or members of groups characterized by collective and public goals. This overview begins with a definition of the area of interest of political psychology and of the main stages that have characterized the development of the discipline. We will then examine how citizens know and evaluate political reality, with a special focus on political candidates. Attention will also be devoted to the differences between experts and novices in the political domain, and superordinate principles (such as values and ideologies) around which political attitudes may be organized. In the third section of the article, political identity will be dealt with. Different groups one may identify with in the political context will be highlighted, with a particular stress on regional, national, and supranational identities, and on the roles they play in international conflicts. Media and various

forms of political communication, such as political interviews or discourses, influence most of our interpretations of political reality. These issues will be analyzed in the fourth section, with special emphasis on motivations and goals that underlie political messages, as well as their persuasive effects. Finally, we will consider psychological factors involved in voting behavior and in other forms of political participation.

1. SCOPE OF POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

1.1. Area of Interest

Let us consider millions of people in different countries all over the world gathering on the same day in main squares and streets of their towns and demonstrating in favor of peace, shouting slogans against terrorism and war. Let us consider other millions of people watching the event on television. If we zoom in on any of the demonstrators, politicians, bystanders, or the people simply watching this political event, we may investigate how they represent people struggling or not struggling for peace, what expectancies they have regarding possible success of peace movements, what plans they have regarding their future engagement in peace movements, and so on. We may also move beyond the specific event and investigate their political views, their political identities, or their voting intentions. All these issues fall within the area of interest of political psychology, which studies the representations and actions of all the people involved in political reality, from simple citizens to political leaders.

Most research in political psychology originates from the extension of "basic" psychological research to the political context, an extension that implies consideration of two main categories of context-specific factors: (1) rules and constraints that are present in the political context, and (2) motivations and goals of individuals and groups who act in the political context. For example, research on how citizens form an impression of political candidates takes into account the fact that in the political context, unlike other contexts, knowledge of a target person is often not direct, but is filtered by media. It also considers that motivations underlying the citizen's perception of a political candidate may be different from those underlying perception of a target person in other contexts, and these differences may have an influence on perception accuracy or

on traits perceived as most relevant. The influence of the citizen's ideological orientation on candidate perception is also taken into account—a variable that may not be as relevant in other contexts (see Section 2). These are examples of how research in political psychology may identify a series of factors that moderate or mediate effects already observed by basic psychological research, in some cases also highlighting previously neglected effects.

1.2. Historical Development

A short reference to the historical development of political psychology may offer an idea of the main issues dealt with by the discipline so far, as well as an idea of the psychological theories that have been most frequently assumed as frames of reference. Four main stages may be identified.

1. *1940s to 1950s: Politicians' personality.* Studies of political psychology initially focused on the personality of political leaders, assuming psychoanalysis as their main frame of reference. Biographies of famous leaders (e.g., Alexander the Great, Hitler) were carefully reconstructed through historical and archival data, with a special stress on the educational environment that characterized the leaders' development. Features of the adult personality, for example, a strong tendency to dominate over others or to be aggressive toward external enemies, were traced back to a series of psychological processes originating in childhood. Other studies, not focusing on political elites but on the wider category of political activists, adopted Maslow's motivational model as a frame of reference. According to this model, people would perceive the need for engaging in political activity only when other, more basic needs have already been satisfied (e.g., health or social needs). As a consequence, politically active people would be characterized by high self-esteem and strong personal efficacy, that is, they would be deeply convinced of being able to engage successfully in political action.

2. *1960s to 1970s: Public opinion and voting behavior.* In this period, research focus changed dramatically from political elites to normal citizens and from personality to behavior. Surveys aimed at tapping political attitudes and voting intentions were being carried out on a regular basis, before or after national political elections. In 1960, Campbell et al. published a volume, *The American Voter*, in which they suggested that political attitudes would develop quite early, influenced by the individual's family environment and, by adult age,

would become rather stable and resistant to change. Party choice would therefore be the consequence of a largely irrational process, defined as party identification, instead of being based on a thorough consideration of information regarding candidates, parties, and political issues. Although this approach evokes the image of an irrational voter, a very different, substantially opposite approach to voting behavior also developed in the same years, this one supporting the image of a rational voter. In *The Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), Downs made reference to rational choice theory (RCT), according to which individuals, in this case voters, may effectively use all the information they have at their disposal so as to choose, from a series of possible alternatives, the one characterized by the maximum subjective expected utility. Decision-making would consist in an accurate evaluation of the pros and cons of each alternative in order to choose the one that is perceived as the potentially most useful for the individual, where utility is intended as functional to the personal, mainly economic, interest of the individual.

3. *1980s: Political cognition.* As compared to the previous stage of research in political psychology, in this stage attention shifted from political attitudes and behaviors per se to the cognitive processes that underlie and influence attitudes and behaviors. The 1980s were characterized by the extension of the "social cognition" approach to the political domain. Political psychology borrowed from social cognition a well-articulated corpus of theory and data regarding what happens in the different stages of human information processing, from initial coding of new information, to its organization in the individual's mind, to its retrieval from memory. The citizen was seen as actively selecting and processing political information, attributing meaning to it through comparison with information already stored in memory, thus arriving at a personal interpretation of political reality. Information processing is constrained by the limits of human memory, mainly the capacity for dealing with only a limited amount of information at the same time. Because of these limits, citizens often do not thoroughly examine all the information they are exposed to. To save mental energy, they recur to simplified and rather superficial reasoning strategies, so-called heuristics. These strategies are functional to the everyday goal of making decisions and planning behaviors in a reasonably short time, but, being based on partial and approximate processing of available information, they may also lead to systematically distorted evaluations (biases). Thus, the political

cognition perspective offers an alternative to the above-mentioned opposition between the irrational and rational voter by suggesting that voters are characterized by a limited rationality.

4. *1990s to today: Social psychology of politics.* Although the synthesis of research developments that are still unfolding should be made with some caution, two main tendencies in contemporary political psychology may be singled out. The first one involves an enhanced attention to context-related factors (citizens' motivations and goals, power relationships, normative and political constraints, etc.) and how these factors may influence both quality and quantity of political information processing. For example, cognitive theories of decision-making may be applied to voting decisions, taking into account the fact that context-related factors, such as the voting system of a given country or the dimensions and numbers of the opposing parties, may condition the way in which citizens make their decisions. The second tendency identifiable in contemporary political psychology is a gradual abandoning of a substantially individualistic perspective and the assumption of a more marked social perspective. Considering that one of the functions of politics is to regulate the relationships between individuals and groups, especially resources and power distribution, it is difficult to conceive of a psychology of politics that is completely detached from the social dimension. Social identity, social influence, intergroup relations: these are some of the factors that have been widely investigated by social psychology and are now also being taken into account by political psychology.

2. POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES

In this section, we consider how political reality is perceived, felt, and reflected upon by the individual. As we have seen, studies of political psychology in the 1960s focused on public opinion: the substance of people's political attitudes and how their attitudes on various political questions are interrelated. While these questions remain relevant, and indeed central to political psychology, in the following years there was greater recognition of the interdependence of attitudes and cognition, namely, how being in favor of or against a political candidate or issue is related to what we know (or believe we know) about them.

As compared to the past, contemporary society has developed an amazing number of ways through which information, including political information, can be transmitted and disseminated (TV, radio, Internet, mobile phones, etc.), and the potentiality of these media is still far from having been entirely explored. This means that, in principle, everybody has access to an incredibly large amount of information. However, such an access is filtered and regulated by a number of selection processes. Whereas some of these processes are independent from the individual, others depend (at least partly) on them.

1. *Media agenda setting.* This information selection process is operated by the media, that is, by those who decide the relative space and time to be devoted to each piece of information, as well as the language and images that convey information. These choices inevitably reflect a given way of reconstructing and interpreting reality, and are not under the control of the individual who receives information via the media.

2. *Non-voluntary media exposure.* This second source of selection is linked to the individual's life but at the same time is largely not dependent on the individual. Being born in a given place, living in a given family environment, attending a given school, these are all factors that inevitably influence the kind of media, and therefore the political information, to which the individual is exposed.

3. *Voluntary media exposure.* Although influenced by the individual's social and family sphere, media exposure is also voluntary, because individuals, once they have reached a certain developmental stage, start to choose the kind of media to which they want to be exposed.

4. *Selective attention.* Being exposed to a given piece of information does not necessarily mean paying attention to it. Social cognition studies have clearly shown that people engage in a process of selective attention, more or less consciously, that leads them to process only the information that, for various reasons, they perceive as salient or relevant in the given context.

In this section, we shall examine the latter type of selection process. We shall see what information is more likely to catch the individual's attention, with a special focus on information regarding political candidates. We will then consider how a well-established attitude regarding a political candidate or issue may influence or bias the processing of new information. Differences between experts and novices in political information processing will also be highlighted. Finally, we shall consider various theoretical proposals regarding organizing principles (ideologies, values, etc.) of political knowledge and attitudes.

2.1. Candidate Perception and Evaluation

Citizens process information regarding political events, issues, programs, parties, candidates, or leaders. These various categories of information are obviously related to each other. However, the relative salience of each category may vary according to the goal pursued in processing that information and other context-related factors. In particular, when elections are upcoming, information regarding political candidates is especially likely to become salient. Actually, perception and evaluation of political candidates has been the most investigated area of political information processing so far, borrowing from the consistent body of results gathered by social cognition research regarding how people form descriptive and evaluative judgments about target persons.

2.1.1. Traits

When we form a judgment about a political candidate, we are likely to devote our attention to three main information categories: (1) the candidate's party, (2) the candidate's position on political issues, and (3) the candidate's traits, that is, personal characteristics that may have either a positive or a negative connotation. An analysis of the answers to an open question in a pre-electoral survey carried out on a regular basis in the United States (National Election Study) has shown that when people are asked to speak about candidates, they focus on their personal characteristics more than on their party or their position on political issues. This tendency is not significantly influenced by the individual's education level, suggesting that the stress on personal traits is not necessarily due to a lack of political competence, but may instead be due to the prevailing need for the individual to choose the right person to represent his or her own political needs and positions. Although some variation in the relative stress on personal traits has been found according to the political system and context in which individuals find themselves, recent years have witnessed an increasing personalization of politics, which is likely to make perception of the candidates' traits more and more important in citizens' political choices.

There is substantial consensus on what traits an individual focuses on when evaluating a political

candidate. These traits may be divided into five main categories: (1) competence (intelligence, ability in dealing with political issues); (2) integrity (being honest or, on the contrary, being prone to corruption); (3) reliability (being consistent, being able to keep one's word); (4) charisma (having capacity for leadership); and (5) image (being good-looking, attractive, photogenic). While the importance of the first two categories is generally more heavily stressed than the others, the relative weight attributed to each category may vary according to the context in which candidate evaluation takes place. For example, the salience of traits related to the candidate's integrity may be enhanced in a context characterized by a series of scandals involving corrupt politicians. These events usually get wide media coverage and may induce citizens to construct their evaluation of candidates around the dimension of integrity versus corruption. In these cases, a "figure-ground phenomenon" is likely to happen, in that the honesty of a given politician becomes especially salient because it is perceived as peculiar in a context of diffused corruption.

2.1.2. Emotions

The evaluation of candidates is influenced not only by their traits but also by the emotions (happiness, anger, etc.) they trigger. We may in fact wonder whether our judgment of a given candidate is based more on the traits we attribute to him or her (cognitive component of the attitude) or on the emotions we associate with him or her (affective component of the attitude). Research suggests that emotions, especially positive ones, are very good predictors of candidates' evaluation and voting intention. However, the relative weight of traits and emotions can vary according to the context. It has been suggested that emotions might become especially relevant in a changing context, when new candidates or new parties emerge in the political scene. The relative weight of positive versus negative emotions is also likely to depend on the context. Consistent with the figure-ground phenomenon described previously, higher relevance of positive emotions might be due to the fact that citizens are especially inclined to notice something positive when the context is mainly negative.

2.1.3. Influence of Ideological Orientation

So far, we have focused on traits and emotions that are generally perceived as relevant when evaluating a political candidate. However, some differences in perceived relevance of traits and emotions have also been highlighted. In particular, citizens with opposite ideological orientations have been shown to differ in the positive traits they perceive as most relevant in political candidates. In a study by Caprara *et al.*, left-wing citizens asked to rate personality traits of candidates of different parties stressed the dimension of sincerity/reliability (sincere, loyal, reliable, accountable, authentic, etc.) in candidates of their own political side and the absence of the same traits in candidates of the opposite side. Right-wing citizens performing the same task have instead focused on the dimension of energy/innovativeness (dynamic, resourceful, resolute, energetic, creative, etc.), rating these traits as high in candidates of their own side and as low in candidates of the opposite side.

Interestingly, when evaluating their own personality, citizens tend to rate themselves as high in the same traits they perceive as typical of their favorite candidates. Can we therefore infer that citizens tend to choose candidates that are similar to them? Not necessarily. It may well be that an assimilation effect is taking place here, according to which we are inclined to perceive people we like as more similar to ourselves than they actually are.

2.2. Assimilation and Contrast Effects

As social cognition research has widely demonstrated, once a positive (or negative) attitude toward a given target has developed, processing of new information regarding that target may be biased, in the sense that we look for a confirmation of our own attitudes. This may happen in various ways, through discarding inconsistent information, devoting selective attention to consistent information, or reinterpreting neutral information in a way that is consistent with our attitudes. Attitude-consistent processing of new information is especially likely when the relevant attitude is strong and when information presents itself as somehow contradictory or ambiguous. Both conditions may be often found in the political domain. People typically develop strong attitudes in favor of or against political candidates, parties, or issues. At the same time, these attitude objects are not always stable over time, but may instead change, sometimes rather substantially. Let us consider a politician who argues about the opportunity for a country to restrict or enlarge its immigration policy. The politician's position on such an issue is not necessarily the same in different places and at

different times. With regard to place, the politician may present his or her stand on the issue with different tones and nuances according to the audience. Politicians know very well how to tailor their message, using all the possibilities offered by the richness of language and rhetorical strategies (see Section 4). Regarding time, politicians may change their position on a given issue due to several reasons, such as shifts in political alliances or changes in the national or international political situation. The more mutable and ambiguous a political position on an issue, the more strongly the citizen may be inclined to select, interpret, or even distort information in a way that is consistent with his or her consolidated attitude.

If we have a positive attitude toward a candidate, we are especially inclined to perceive the candidate's position on relevant political issues as being very similar to our own (assimilation effect). For example, we may ask people to rate their position on a restricted immigration policy on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (fully against) to 7 (fully in favor). Then we may ask them to use the same scale to rate the supposed position of political candidates on the same issue. Research results show the presence of a high and positive correlation between one's position and the one attributed to the preferred candidate: if one's position is rated with a 5, the candidate's position will also be rated with a 5, whereas if one's position is more extreme (i.e., rating 7), the same extreme rating will be attributed to the candidate. An opposite tendency to differentiate our position on a given issue from that of a candidate we do not like has also been observed (contrast effect). The contrast effect is weaker, however, than the corresponding assimilation effect. This asymmetry has been attributed to a positivity effect, according to which people prefer to focus their attention more on what they like than on what they dislike.

2.3. Expertise

So far, we have focused on how people know and evaluate political candidates and issues irrespective of the degree of competence these people have in the political domain. However, political information processing appears to vary according to people's level of expertise. Political expertise has been defined as the synthesis of different dimensions, such as political interest, political knowledge, and media use. Experts and novices in the political domain seem to process information very differently, and these differences affect all stages of information processing.

1. *Coding.* Experts understand new political information more quickly than novices do, and are quicker in expressing evaluations on political issues and candidates. Such evaluations are also more stable over time. These differences are due to the fact that frequent reasoning about politics makes a number of political concepts immediately accessible to the experts' minds and therefore easy to employ in the interpretation and evaluation of new information.

2. *Organization.* Experts' political attitudes are more consistent than those of novices, and experts experience a larger number of thoughts related to a political candidate or issue. This difference has been attributed to how concepts and their positive or negative connotations are organized in people's minds. Experts' conceptual networks are not only characterized by a larger number of concepts, but also by a larger number of links between concepts. Moreover, a hierarchical structure is often well developed in experts' mind, so that a series of concepts is organized around a limited number of more abstract concepts. This means that the activation of one concept easily leads to the activation of other related concepts at the same or a higher level of abstraction. Such an interrelated network increases the experts' consistency. Different political issues, such as unemployment subsidies, norms toward immigration, and the welfare state, may be linked to each other in the experts' mental network, and all of them may in turn be linked to a more abstract concept such as solidarity. If the experts' attitude toward applying the solidarity principle in politics is positive, related attitudes will also be positive. This may not be the case for novices, who may be more prone to express inconsistent attitudes. At the same time, novices are likely to be less sensitive to inconsistency in politicians' attitude.

3. *Retrieval.* Better organization of political information in experts' minds facilitates the process of retrieving information; this explains why the experts' recall of political information is better than that of novices.

2.4. Ideological Orientation and Values

As we have seen, specific political concepts and attitudes may be cogently linked to more abstract, unifying principles. But what are these principles? In his article in this encyclopedia entitled "Ideological Orientation and Values," Hans De Witte identifies them with values and ideologies, showing how research on this issue has developed over time. Research on values has focused

on single relevant value dimensions, such as conformity versus self-direction or materialism versus post-materialism, but it has also developed more encompassing models, including several value types (e.g., power, security, conformity, or universalism) and their compatibility relations. Prominence attributed by individuals to one or the other of these values has been shown to be a good predictor of political attitudes and voting. Research on ideology has especially focused on the notion of conservatism (as opposed to progressiveness) and has highlighted two different dimensions of it, economic conservatism and sociocultural conservatism. Like values, ideology dimensions are predictive of political attitudes and voting.

In his article "Human Rights," Willem Doise also makes wide reference to values and ideology. The general relevance people attribute to human rights is related to values, and this reaches its highest level in people for whom the values of universalism and social harmony are very important. People may also differ in their representation of human rights according to their values and ideology. For example, for some people, the right to equality means that everybody has to be treated in the same way by the law or by public institutions, whereas for others, equality also implies that all should have equal access to a decent standard of living, education, and health care. Finally, people with different values and ideologies seem to differ in their opinions of the relative role individuals and institutions (e.g., governments) should play in safeguarding human rights.

3. POLITICAL IDENTITY AND CONFLICT

Campbell's early reference to the notion of party identification as a way of explaining people's voting behavior (see Section 1) undoubtedly had the merit of highlighting how through their vote people may express a feeling of belonging to a given party—a feeling made up of a mixture of cognitive and emotional components. However, the notion of identification as developed by Campbell had a limited heuristic validity. He saw strong party identification as a cause of a stable vote for a party, but envisaged no specific measure of identification. On the contrary, it was precisely the observed stability of voting that induced Campbell to infer the presence of identification. As such, his explanation of stable voting through identification amounts to little less than a tautology. In addition, Campbell's

view of identification as being deeply rooted in developmental age failed to explain possible shifts in voting preferences.

Research on identification processes in the political domain has gathered new strength in recent years. Thanks to the substantial progress made by psychosocial research on identity, we know a lot about how people define themselves as individuals or as members of meaningful groups, how they perceive members of other groups, and what processes characterize intergroup relations, leading to overt competition and conflict or, on the contrary, to peaceful coexistence and cooperation. While extension of this approach from the social to the political domain has proved to be fruitful, specific research in this field has also started to highlight some peculiarities of identification processes in the political domain.

3.1. Political Identity

In some circumstances of our lives, we tend to define ourselves as unique and different from anyone else (personal identity). In other circumstances, we define ourselves as members of a group: we perceive ourselves as similar to the other members of the group, sharing the same values and goals (social identity). One may identify with several groups (multiple identities); these may include groups that one cannot choose to belong to (e.g., gender or race) or groups chosen by the individual (e.g., a sports team, an association, a circle of friends). Moreover, some of these groups may be nested, with a more inclusive or superordinate group (e.g., the company one works for) including other less inclusive or subordinate groups (e.g., a specific sector of the company or a specific workgroup). According to the context, a given identity may be perceived as more salient than others. For example, party identity may become especially salient during the electoral period, when people discuss a politically sensitive issue, or when we confront ourselves with people who belong to different parties. Apart from the context, a given identity may also be more "chronically" salient to the individual; this means that a given identity may be especially relevant to the individual's self-definition. As compared to other kinds of identity, political identity seems to be especially characterized by the need for expressing the group's values in public and, more generally, for acting together in order to gain further consensus around these values. As Bert Klandermans highlights in his article "Collective Action," a shared identity is one of the main antecedents of people's

involvement in collective action. At the same time, being involved in collective action leads to enhanced political identity.

An analysis of autobiographical accounts of political activists carried out by Catellani et al. has shown the presence of three main levels of political identity, characterized by a different degree of abstractedness and embedded within each other: ideological identity, party identity, and sub-party identity. These identity levels are likely to satisfy different needs, and, accordingly, the relative salience each of them assumes for the individual is likely to vary depending on circumstances. Ideological identity is characterized by the highest degree of abstractedness. When people identify themselves with left-wing or right-wing people, they state their inclusion within a social category that is difficult to visualize, with wide and ill-defined boundaries, including a large number of heterogeneous individuals. At the same time, such an abstract category of identification is likely to be perceived as more stable over time and less subject to transformations as compared to a more concrete category, such as a political party. In fact, ideological identity has been shown to be especially salient after a political schism, when a previous existing party splits into two or more new parties. In these changed circumstances, stressing one's ideological identity has the function of safeguarding a certain degree of continuity with the past, to keep a balance in one's own identity.

3.2. Regional, National, and Supranational Identity

Investigation of how multiple or nested identities may exist and coexist in the political domain may be usefully extended to the analysis of regional, national, and supranational identities. The issue has become of increasing relevance in a global world that is witnessing an ever-increasing close cohabitation of citizens of different nationalities as well as attempts to create solid supranational realities such as the European Union.

As already mentioned, a superordinate social category may be more difficult to visualize, because it is formed by a large number of people, possibly rather heterogeneous. Developing identification with a category of this type first requires developing a perception of its existence. Some studies by Castano et al. have investigated how a political institution such as the European Union may be perceived by people not so much as an abstract and far-away entity but as a real community of citizens. These studies have referred to the notion of entitativity, the extent to which a social category is perceived as having a real existence. It is assumed that four factors especially contribute to enhance a social category's entitativity: common fate, similarity, proximity, and boundedness. If we ask people to read a journal article or to see a video stressing either common trends or differences in the economic development of European countries, we are manipulating the common fate factor. If we show people a map in which the boundaries of single European nations are thin lines but the external perimeter of the European Union is a thick line (or vice versa), we are manipulating the boundedness factor. Similarity and proximity may also be manipulated in various ways. Such manipulations have been shown to be effective in increasing people's degree of identification with the European Union. Their effect, however, seems to be felt mainly by people holding moderate attitudes toward the European Union and is not perceived by the so-called Euro-skeptics or Euro-enthusiasts.

Investigation of a higher order identity, such as supranational identity, usually focuses not only on its conditions of existence, but also on its conditions of coexistence with lower order identities. For example, can people strongly identify with Europe and at the same time strongly identify with their nation or region? Studies carried out in different countries have shown that citizens may show high identification with both the superordinate and the subordinate categories. These results suggest that regional, national, and supranational identities may indeed coexist in the citizens minds. This is more likely to happen when the frame of reference is one of integration between different identities, in particular when stressing the superordinate identity does not mean absorbing lower level identities and forcing homogeneity but, on the contrary, accepting a certain degree of internal heterogeneity. Ideally, diversity will become one of the core values of the superordinate identity. This means that belonging to a social category made up of different components that integrate with each other may become a core feature of, for example, North American or European identity. When, however, the frame of reference is one of competition between different identities, in particular when stressing the superordinate identity means absorbing lower order identities or threatening them, competition easily turns into open conflict, and fear of losing a given regional or national identity may hinder development of a supranational identity.

3.3. International Conflict

Analysis of what conditions may favor development of a new supranational identity starting from well-established national identities may be useful in highlighting strategies of international conflict resolution. In his article "International Conflict," Herbert Kelman describes psychosocial processes that underlie conflict insurgence and its escalation, as well as psychosocial processes that may instead favor a break in the spiral of conflict in the direction of conflict resolution. An essential step of an effective strategy of conflict resolution is the acknowledgement of each party's needs. An effective, long-term solution is unlikely to arise if either party has the feeling that its needs or its very existence is being denied or simply ignored by the other party. A similar premise may be found in the dual-identity model of conflict resolution, according to which a first essential step in negotiation between groups consists of creating conditions for the already existing group identities to be expressed and safeguarded. Although open expression of each group's identity and related needs may initially enhance intergroup conflict, it also has the advantage of enhancing each group member's perception of having a well-established identity. This is an ideal psychological premise for an effective interaction with the other party, in order to find solutions that address not only a single party's interests but also superordinate interests. If, however, the first step—expressing one's group identity—is lacking, members of each group may feel that their group's identity is threatened. The resulting uncertainty prevents the group from taking the next crucial step in the negotiation process, finding a solution that satisfies superordinate interests.

4. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

When we think of politics, we are likely to think of a phenomenon encountered largely through the mass media. The link between politicians, events, and issues on the one hand and most citizens on the other is mediated through the complex web of information generated by newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the Internet. While the mass media has significantly increased the opportunity for politicians to reach citizens, communicate, inform, and put forward persuasive messages, it has also offered citizens the means to scrutinize politics and politicians more closely while offering information on a previously

unthinkable scale. However, if the media multiply the opportunities for communication, it must also be recognized that the process of mediation is not neutral. Through the people who control them, the media select, classify, and shape political information, thus contributing to the creation of political reality.

The influence exerted by the media on political information processing and the degree to which citizens are aware of this influence will be the first issues dealt with in this section. Next, we will consider how political actors communicate and employ language and other communicative strategies in order to fulfill their goals. Our attention will be especially focused on two communicative contexts, political interviews and political discourses.

4.1. Mass Media and Politics

Studies on information processing have shown that a concept or an attitude that has been frequently retrieved in the past becomes more accessible to the individual's mind, that is, more likely to be retrieved again and to be perceived as relevant. Therefore, when media coverage of a given political issue is high, individuals are repeatedly exposed to it, and its accessibility is likely to become higher. Studying the cause–effect relationship between media coverage and accessibility or perceived relevance of a political issue is not an easy task. Is a political issue perceived as relevant because it is widely covered by media, or is it the other way round? Adopting a temporal series technique, some studies have measured perceived relevance of a number of political issues at different moments in time and have monitored media coverage of the same issues in between. Results suggest that media coverage significantly increases the relevance of political issues to which people already attribute a certain degree of relevance. In other words, media have the effect of amplifying the importance of a given issue and possibly of altering the hierarchy of the relevance of political issues. This may have not only generic consequences on the evaluation of political reality, but also more specific effects on the evaluation of a given politician. For example, before the Gulf War, U.S. citizens' evaluation of three main policy areas of President George Bush (foreign affairs, domestic affairs, and economic affairs) equally contributed to form the global judgment of Bush, whereas after the Gulf War, evaluation of Bush was based significantly more on his foreign affairs policy. Thus, media coverage of a political issue leads people to perceive that

issue as more important for the country than they thought before; consequently, that issue weighs more in their evaluation of political leaders.

Are we aware of media influence? Yes and no. We are inclined to think that the mass media influence "people" or "others," but not ourselves. This is the so-called third person effect, according to which we over-estimate media influence on others and underestimate media influence on ourselves. This tendency has been defined as a self-serving bias, in the sense that the perception of having full control on the surrounding reality and on one's own choices contributes to raise the individual's self-esteem. Thus, one's capacity of resistance to media influence is enhanced if compared with others' vulnerability to the same influence. The third person effect is more evident in those who perceive the media as untrustworthy and perceive target people as distant from themselves. In a post-electoral survey carried out in Australia by Duck *et al.*, people asked to evaluate the influence of a number of television programs (political debates, news, electoral spots, etc.) on voting choice declared themselves to be the least vulnerable to that influence, followed by voters of their party, voters of the opposing party, and voters in general.

4.2. Political Language

We may undoubtedly say that politics is made up of words. Politics deals not only with concrete, tangible objects, but also with abstract concepts or notions to which people attribute a shared meaning (e.g., democracy, liberalism, welfare state). Moreover, the planning of future events is an essential component of politics, which therefore often refers to something that does not necessarily exist now but that might become real in the future. Such referential elusiveness explains why political language has often been described as polysemous, many-faceted and, in the end, ambiguous. At the same time, such elusiveness makes it clear that political reality is mainly construed through language. Politicians propose a certain interpretation of political issues and events, which may be defined as successful when it becomes shared by a large number of people. Such interpretation often implies stressing similarities or differences between political groups, thus favoring or hindering citizens' identification with these groups.

In studying political language, psychology focuses on the analysis of cognitive, motivational, and psychosocial factors that guide speakers and listeners in the political domain (politicians, activists, journalists, or citizens). Special attention is devoted to the study of the various kinds of communicative contexts in which politicians find themselves. Although each context has peculiar characteristics, politicians' communication is generally guided by three main goals that may be found across contexts: (1) presenting a positive image of themselves and their party, (2) presenting a negative image of opposing parties, and (3) trying to gain consensus. This means that on the one hand, politicians try to define themselves, to make clear what their political views are and how they differ from other politicians' views. On the other hand, they aim to extend the boundaries of their party to include as many people as possible. Language helps politicians in the difficult and contradictory task of defining their group and at the same time trying to widen the boundaries of this group. In the communicative contexts we discuss below, we will consider how politicians defend their image when interviewed and how they use political discourse to define and depict social categories in order to gain consensus.

4.3. Interviewing Politicians

Thanks to the growing media-centered and spectacular character of politics, interviews have become one of the main channels through which politicians present themselves and their political positions. Psychosocial research on question–answer exchanges has shown many, often subtle, strategies employed by interviewer and interviewee to pursue their communicative goals. Extension of this approach to the analysis of political interviews started from two considerations that easily arise when listening to political interviews: (1) journalists' questions are often not neutral and (2) politicians often do not reply to journalists' questions. A systematic examination of interviews given by politicians has led to identifying an interesting typology of questions and answers as well as conditions that make non-replies more likely. As already mentioned, one of the politician's main goals is to present a positive image of him- or herself. According to the so-called face model of political interviews, developed by Bull *et al.*, during interviews politicians tend to defend (1) their personal-political face; (2) their party face; and (3) the face of significant others. Journalists' questions that are perceived as face-threatening are therefore more likely to get a non-reply. Questions may threaten a politician's personal-political face in various ways, for example, by creating a negative impression of the politician (e.g., "Isn't all this emphasis on personality a cover for the

fact that you haven't got a big idea?"), hinting at possible future difficulties, highlighting contradictions with past statements, or stressing difficulties in clarifying personal beliefs (e.g., "I wonder whether wavering voters aren't influenced by not quite knowing where you, Prime Minister, stand"). Similar threats may be found in questions regarding the politician's party (e.g., "Things aren't looking that good for your party, are they?"). Finally, questions may focus on other people or groups but still imply a threat to the politician's face. This is the case for questions implying that the politician does not care for the electorate or support a friendly country, and for questions luring the politician into awkward admissions regarding opposing parties (e.g., "Is there really a shift of opinion toward the Liberal Democrats or is it because they have run a better campaign than you have?", a situation in which confirming either alternative offered by the question would lead the interviewee to support an opposing party).

Although the interviewer has various ways to threaten the politician's face, the politician has various ways to avoid replying. Not replying does not mean being silent, but rather adopting communicative strategies aimed at avoiding a direct reply without necessarily appearing rude or not collaborative. The outcome will be a reply that may be defined as equivocal, because it is not consistent with the interviewer's communicative intention; it is, however, consistent with the politician's intention of presenting a positive face to the electorate. Equivocal replies may include ignoring the question, replying with another question, criticizing the question, or refusing to answer.

4.4. Political Discourse

In their discourses, the politicians' ultimate goal is gaining the widest possible consensus from their audience. They aim to create in their public a political identity that is consistent with their own and that of their party, so as to favor mobilization in their favor. To do so, politicians address not only single individuals but also significant groups to which their audiences belong and are likely to identify with. For example, they can explicitly address blue-collar workers, entrepreneurs, or housewives. They may also address wider social categories, such as the citizens of their country, or some vague social categories, such as all honest people: making these categories salient means addressing millions of potential voters. Whatever social category they are trying to make salient to their audience, politicians will use arguments that highlight the fact that the values and goals of that category are consistent with the ones their party is ready to fight for (e.g., "Citizens want to be able to walk safely in their neighborhoods, and that's exactly what we're aiming for with our new bill on criminal offenses"). Very likely, they will also argue that the same values and goals are inconsistent with those of the opposing party. Whenever this is possible, politicians also try to present themselves as prototypical members of the salient category (e.g., "I am a father/mother myself" when speaking about school reform), thus implicitly stating that they are trustworthy and entitled to represent the category.

A confirmation of the relevance social categories have in politicians' discourses has been offered by some studies that compared how politicians of opposing parties interpret the same political event. Differences were observed regarding not only the description of facts, but also the definition of social categories involved in the event, as well as of the values and goals presented as typical of those categories.

An example may be found in Reicher and Hopkins' 1996 study on how a famous miners' strike in England was reconstructed from opposite perspectives by political leaders Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Party) and Neil Kinnock (Labour Party). In her interpretation of the events, Mrs. Thatcher created a picture in which miners that did not participate in the strike, as well as their relatives, were attributed personality traits such as courage and determination that were presented as typical of authentic English people. Mrs. Thatcher's definition of the category of strikers, on the other hand, identified them with violent people and even with terrorist groups. Thus, through her discourse Thatcher evoked a large ingroup of "no-strikers/authentic English people" on the one hand and a small outgroup of "strikers/terrorists" on the other. She consistently presented the Conservatives' reaction to the strike as a way of defending the nation at large against a minority of destabilizing forces. A similar though opposite argumentative strategy may be found in Mr. Kinnock's interpretation of the same event. He described the strikers as people who wanted to defend their rights against the repressive policy of Mrs. Thatcher. In doing so, Mr. Kinnock compared strikers to all Labour voters and more generally to all the people who were against Mrs. Thatcher, so that the initially small category of strikers ended up being redefined as the large ingroup of "strikers/liberals."

To conclude, the way in which both a political event and the people involved in it are defined is of crucial

relevance to increasing the public's feeling that the politician, the politician's party, and the public belong to the same wide ingroup and share the same goals and values. Politicians try to define the boundaries and the characteristics of social categories in order to mobilize people in a direction that is favorable to them and unfavorable to the political adversaries. Social and political categories are not stable and unchangeable; on the contrary, they are constantly being redefined, and political leaders contribute to their redefinitions through political discourse.

4.5. Political Persuasion

So far, we have focused our attention on how politicians present their political identity and try to shape the public's political identity. Research on political persuasion, however, has been more generally aimed at investigating how politicians' messages may have an impact on the target's (i.e., the public's) political attitudes. The typical research design of this kind of study implies a comparison of the target's attitude toward a given political issue (e.g., the tax system) before and after exposure to a persuasive message regarding that issue (e.g., a political discourse in favor of a reduction of the tax load on wages). Recent studies in the area have focused on the so-called matching effect, according to which the persuasive impact of different types of messages varies as a function of given characteristics of the target. For example, Lavine *et al.* investigated the different persuasive impact that threat-related and reward-related political messages may have on individuals characterized by different degrees of authoritarianism. The messages were intended to persuade young people to vote in presidential elections. While threat-related messages highlighted the possible negative consequences of non-voting (e.g., "Not voting allows others to take away your right to express your values"), reward-related messages highlighted the possible positive consequences of voting (e.g., "Voting enables one to bring about the kinds of public policies he or she believes in"). The change in attitudes toward voting after exposure to either type of message was then measured, comparing participants with high versus low degrees of authoritarianism. Threat-related messages had a high persuasive impact on authoritarian people and a low impact on non-authoritarian people, and the opposite was true of reward-related messages. Thus, the matching effect suggests that tailoring political messages with regard to the target's characteristics (e.g., authoritarianism) may help to increase the persuasive effect of those messages.

5. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

For most people, voting is the only practical way to take part in political life. At the same time, in a democratic regime, it is also the most important one. In this section, we will focus on how voting behavior has been explained, by referring to motivational, cognitive, and social factors that may underlie political choice. Finally, we will briefly hint at more involved forms of political participation.

5.1. Voting Behavior

Since the pioneer work by Campbell *et al.* on party identification, that is, on voting as the stable result of an identification process that dates back to developmental age and to family influences, several other explanations have been proposed. As we have seen in Section 1, the extension of rational choice theory from mathematics and economics to politics has led to the view of voting behavior as the outcome of a rational process. In other words, people consider all the information they have regarding the various possible alternatives (parties or candidates), and choose the one that is characterized by the highest possible utility for them. However, ideas of human rationality and utilitarian goals implied by this approach have been seriously challenged by subsequent psychological and empirical research on voting behavior. The main acquisitions of this research are summarized here.

5.1.1. Cognitive Factors

When deciding how they will vote, people do not necessarily consider all the information they have acquired over time about the various parties or candidates. Given that the quantity of information they can pay attention to at a given moment is limited, they tend to focus only on information they perceive as salient and relevant at that very moment. Their decision-making process does not consider all pros and cons of each alternative. Instead, a series of heuristics or simplification strategies is adopted, which allow making a decision through a limited consumption of mental energy. Thus, people base their decision on a limited amount of information they perceive to be relevant at a given moment. Such information may be categorized into the following four main dimensions:

1. *Trait-based voting.* As we have already seen (see Section 2), candidate evaluation is a very good predictor

of voting behavior. The relevance of this dimension is likely to have increased in recent years, due to the growing personalization of politics favored by the media.

2. *Issue-based voting.* Voting choice may be based on parties' political programs or their positions on given political issues, such as social welfare, the tax system, or immigration rules, and people will choose the party or candidate whose positions on those issues are more consistent with their own. According to the so-called consumer model, recent years have been characterized by an increasing tendency for people to base their voting choice on their agreement with a party position on one or more relevant issues. This would lead to a party choice that is related to specific issues and consequently that is not stable over time.

3. *Ideology-based voting.* In contrast with the consumer model, the ideological model assumes that people choose parties or candidates with whom they share not so much a position on a given issue but general beliefs based on shared ideology or values. As the organization of political attitudes around abstract principles is typical of politically sophisticated people, ideology-based voting is likely to be more concentrated among this kind of people.

4. *Performance-based voting.* Voting choice may also be influenced by the evaluation of past performance of a party or a political leader. Actually, representation of the past is often the main source of information people use to make predictions about the future. Not only reference to the actual past, but also mental simulations of how things might have developed differently, significantly contribute to shape people's interpretation of political reality. For example, one may think that the armed intervention of the United States and their allies in Iraq in 2003 was appropriate if the most readily available alternative to the individual's mind was a course of events implying Saddam Hussein's alliance with Al Qaeda and a rise of terrorist attacks in Western countries. On the other hand, one may evaluate the same intervention as inappropriate if to the individual's mind the available alternative was a successful mediation process handled by the United Nations. A negative evaluation of past action of politicians may sometimes lead to strong disenchantment with politics and increase the possibility of success for new emerging or extremist political parties.

While each of the preceding factors has been shown to play a significant role in people's choices, recent research has been developing more complex predictive models of voting behavior aimed at assessing the relative weight of each factor on voting. Through application of these models, one may be able to assess how much the electoral success of a given party may be attributable to the party leader, to party ideology, to past performance of either the party or the leader, and so on.

5.1.2. Personal Interest

According to rational choice theory, utility pursued in voting decision corresponds to self-interest, intended as material, economic interest. Recent empirical research in political cognition has reconsidered this issue in a different perspective, focusing attention on political attitudes that are perceived by people as personally important. Issues of domestic policy, such as welfare or taxation, are usually perceived as more personally important than other issues. When asked to express their attitudes regarding issues considered personally important, people reply more readily than regarding other issues. This suggests that attitudes toward domestic policy issues are more immediately accessible to the individual's mind and therefore are more likely to influence voting behavior. The same does not hold for attitudes toward issues of foreign policy, such as defense expenses or non-intervention in war. Though these issues are perceived as more important than domestic issues at a national level, related attitudes are less easily accessible to the individual's mind and therefore are less predictive of voting behavior. Meta-analysis of a number of survey data sets in the United States has confirmed that attitudes on policy issues that are personally important are more stable over time and are more predictive of candidate preferences and voting.

Analysis of what factors may be at the origin of a political attitude's personal importance has shown that self-interest, as defined by rational choice theory, is just one of these factors. Another factor that significantly contributes to raise the personal importance of a political attitude is its relation with one or more core values, values that hold a high position in the individual's hierarchy. This means that, for example, some people may perceive having an efficient public health system as important not only because of the personal advantage implied by such a system but also because solidarity is one of their core values.

5.1.3. Social Factors

In addition to self-interest and core values, a third factor that has been shown to underlie the personal

importance of political attitudes is social identification with reference groups. As we have seen in Section 3, social identity is that part of an individual's self-concept that derives from awareness of belonging to one or more groups. If voting for a given party is a shared and relevant characteristic of a group one identifies with, voting for that party may become a way of expressing and reinforcing one's group identity. A confirmation of this can be found in research that has investigated psychological antecedents of the so-called regional vote, that is, the prevalence of a given party in a given region or area of a country. For example, Scottish people are traditionally more in favor of the Labour Party: research results by Abrams and Emler show that Scottish people who vote for the Labour Party have a higher Scottish identity than Scottish people who vote for the conservatives. Although people with higher Scottish identity feel they have fewer economic opportunities as compared to people living in England, these people are also more willing to remain in Scotland. These data suggest that voting may be a way of expressing one's social identity, in this case, regional identity. Even more, they suggest that in voting behavior, expression of group identity may challenge, if not overcome, the pursuit of economic self-interest.

In conclusion, empirical research on voting behavior has shown that vote is not the outcome of fully rational thinking aimed at maximizing personal benefits and minimizing personal costs. It is a more complex process that implies selective information processing, reference to values or other abstract principles, and the expression of one's own identification with one or more social groups. All these factors allows one to overcome the so-called voter's paradox described by rational choice theorists, which portrays voting as an apparently contradictory action: The costs implied by the act of voting (e.g., acquiring knowledge of the issue, renouncing a day's leisure) are higher than the benefits the single citizen may expect from that act, since one single vote cannot decide the outcome of the election. Thus, if voting were based on a mere cost–benefit ratio, no single citizen would vote. As we have seen, however, voting decision is not the outcome of a simple cost–benefit ratio but rather of a range of cognitive and psychosocial factors that must be taken into account if satisfactory predictive models of voting behavior are to be developed.

5.2. Collective Action

When we shift our attention from voting as the basic level of political participation to more involved forms of participation, such as demonstrations, sit-ins, or strikes, finding satisfactory explanations of why people get involved in such actions becomes even more challenging. On the one hand, the cost of similar actions may be very high for the individual, in terms of time, money, and energy spent in participation, but also, in extreme cases, in terms of stigmatization or physical damage suffered because of participation. On the other hand, possible benefits deriving from the success of collective action may be enjoyed just as much by people who did not actively participate in that action, which may be one further reason to not undertake the risk of participation. In his article "Collective Action," Bert Klandermans deals with this issue in detail, focusing on three main motivations that lead people to get involved in collective action: instrumentality, identity, and ideology. Klandermans also offers an articulate definition of collective action, distinguishing it from other types of group actions. Finally, he analyzes a number of factors that play a role in transforming potential participation into actual participation.

See Also the Following Articles

Collective Action ▪ Ideological Orientations and Values ▪ International Conflict

Further Reading

Abrams, D., & Emler, N. (1992). Self-denial as a paradox of political and regional social identity: Findings from a study of 16- and 18-year olds. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 22, 279–295.

Boninger, D. S., Krosnick, J. A., & Berent, M. K. (1995). Origins of attitude importance: Self-interest, social identification, and value relevance. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 68, 61–80.

Bull, P., Elliot, J., Palmer, D., & Walker, L. (1996). Why politicians are three-faced: The face model of political interviews. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 35, 267–284.

Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1960). *The American voter*. New York: Wiley.

Caprara, G. V., Barbaranelli, C., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1999). Personality profiles and political parties. *Political Psychology*, 20, 175–197.

Castano, E., Yzerbyt, V., & Bourguignon, D. (2003). We are one and I like it: The impact of ingroup entitivity on ingroup identification. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, 735–754.

Catellani, P., & Quadrio, A. (1991). Ideal and real in the representation of politics. *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale, 4,* 231–256.

Catellani, P., Milesi, P., & Crescentini, A. (in press). One root, different branches: Identity, injustice, and schism. In B. Klandermans, & N. Mayer (Eds.), *The psychology of right-wing extremism in Europe.* London: Routledge.

Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy.* New York: Harper & Row.

Duck, J. M., Hogg, M. A., & Terry, D. J. (1995). Me, us, and them: Political identification and the third-person effect in the 1993 Australian federal election. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 25,* 195–215.

Gaertner, S. L., Rust, M. C., Dovidio, J. F., Bachman, B. A., & Anastasio, P. A. (1994). The contact hypothesis: The role of a common ingroup identity on reducing intergroup bias. *Small Group Research, 25,* 224–249.

Granberg, D. (1993). Political perception. In W. J. McGuire, & S. Iyengar (Eds.), *Explorations in political psychology* (pp. 70–112). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Haslam, S. A. (2001). *Psychology in organizations. The social identity approach.* London: Sage.

Krosnick, J. A., & Brannon, L. A. (1993). The media and the foundations of presidential support: George Bush and the Persian Gulf conflict. *Journal of Social Issues, 49,* 167–182.

Lavine, H., Burgess, D., Snyder, M., Transue, J., Sullivan, J. L., Haney, B., & Wagner, S. H. (1999). Threat, authoritarianism, and voting: An investigation of personality and persuasion. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 25,* 337–347.

McGraw, K. M. (2000). Contributions of the cognitive approach to political psychology. *Political Psychology, 21,* 805–832.

Miller, A. H., Wattenberg, M., & Malanchuk, O. (1986). Schematic assessment of presidential candidates. *American Political Science Review, 80,* 521–540.

Reicher, S., & Hopkins, N. (1996). Self-category constructions in political rhetoric; an analysis of Thatcher's and Kinnock's speeches concerning the British miners' strike (1984–5). *European Journal of Social Psychology, 26,* 353–371.