

**The Impact of Political Communication and Persuasion on Voter Decision-Making**

Carson P. Mills

Department of Communication: James Madison University

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Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman

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In the ever-evolving realm of politics, the ability to sway public opinion stands at the cornerstone of all political success. Politicians and aspiring leaders across the globe recognize the profound impact that their language and persuasion techniques constitute and ultimately have an aspiring impact on voter attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. From charming speeches delivered to packed arenas to carefully constructed social media posts, these political figures acknowledge the fact that political communication is both a science and a form of art, that is capable of shaping the course of history. Understanding how politicians and world leaders navigate these means of persuasion and language to influence voter opinion remains a crucial endeavor for comprehending the function of democratic societies.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the wide range of strategies deployed by politicians and world leaders in their attempts to sway voter opinion through the deployment of language and persuasion. With the help of the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (ELM) a theory proposed by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo at Ohio State in the mid-1970s it allows a way to understand how persuasion works in political communication, the theory states that there are two routes by which people process persuasive messages; The Central route and the Peripheral route (Petty, Briñol 2011). The Central route focuses on the ability and the people's motivation for the perceived message whereas the Peripheral route focuses more on “heuristic cues” (Schill, 2023). By integrating ELM into the analysis, allows for a better understanding of how politicians strategically integrate persuasion and language to influence voter opinion. This would help society understand why people think the way they do and what facts determine voter decisions. Furthermore, this research's purpose is to understand how politicians use political communication to influence public opinion through ELM.

### **Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion is in our everyday lives whether it is recognized or not, the matter of the fact is that people make decisions based on how the messages are received based on their cognitive perspective on the subject matter at hand. ELM is a theoretical framework widely accepted and used in the field of persuasion and communication studies. Grounded in cognitive psychology and social psychology, ELM aims to understand why individuals are persuaded to change their behavior and/or attitudes based on persuasive messages and how they are perceived (Petty et Al, 2009). At the core of ELM, there are two routes to the way that we perceive messages: the central and peripheral routes, under the central route, is focused on how a person's attitude changes after engaging in a systemic thought process of the perceived message, taking into consideration the argument and evidence supported by the speaker, focusing on the logos aspect of rhetoric proposed by Aristotle, whereas the peripheral route where attitude changes occur because the person associates the attitude issue or object with positive or negative cues or makes a simple inference about the merits of the advocated position, these are often called heuristic cues (Petty & Cacioppo 1983). The peripheral route is stated to not be as cognitively draining as others, requiring less critical thinking and less intellectual ability, focusing on mental shortcuts that influence one's decision about a certain person or message (Williams, 2005).

In the field of politics and communication, this is a huge factor on how people develop the attitudes and beliefs about certain politicians and inevitably has a direct impact on how citizens choose to cast their votes on election day. That is why it is crucial for the processes in which people perceive information and make informed decisions about their acceptability of information and politicians to be a front-page study since it does and will continue to affect the everyday lives and futures of all citizens.

## Literature Review

The fact that the amount of media and access thereof have jurasically increased in the past decade can create huge problems for communication scholars across the globe. The channel in which people get their news and how this news comes to the surface is key to understanding the hows and whys people believe a certain thing or think a certain way. The persuasiveness of political messages is important in the political aspect of news and media. Being exposed to alternative news outlets and entertainment programs encompasses the potential to change or shape political attitudes. The classical persuasion paradigm generally assumes repeated messages through campaigns which would often reach people multiply, and then the credibility of messages is reinforced (Çiftçi, 2018). Some political comedy shows like The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and Saturday Night Live are the few examples of repeated exposure in entertainment media (Bennett & Iyengar 2010). These shows wait for the surface-level news to hit and then evaluate how it is perceived by the public, if the media being presented is drawing a lot of attention and causing commotion throughout the nation, then the different news outlets and media can take these stories in and cover them with their own twist, which creates media bias, or bias reporting. This is seen as a big issue for most as it affects morality and the credibility of these sources. As stated by the National Academy of Science “An explosion of misinformation and disinformation have weakened public deliberation and undermined confidence in science, even as the world faces interconnecting crises such as war, climate change, and the pandemic and other health emergencies” (Waldrop, 2023). As we can see this is not just an issue in the field of politics, but similar to all else, the root of the problem starts there, the information surfacing the web in today's time is filled with misinformation, which is a global problem that needs to be addressed but in reality is almost impossible to control, this poses a threat to communication scholars due to the fact that if this information is not cut at the source and

continues to circulate through society, people are more likely to believe it, due to the reinforcement and resurfacing of that information which from the ELM model it can be inferred that the more the information is viewed the more likely that the information is to be believed and processed by the central route of the mind.

### **Framing and Persuasion in Political Context**

When the average person thinks of framing, their mind probably immediately draws to the criminal justice side of things in that regard, for example, when law enforcement has a suspect and they see someone that looks similar to the perceived suspect, and still enact in taking them into custody, just to get a case closed, that is framing but not in the same context. In a political sense, this technique is used frequently whether that being local elections or on the national stage. Framing is one of the most widely discussed subjects in political communication, also drawing attention from psychology, behavioral economics, political science, and sociology (Cacciatore et al, 2016). The most popular and widely accepted definition comes from Robert Entman from Northwestern University where he exclaims that framing involves the selection and salience of information (Entman, 1993). Meaning, that politicians can use this method to strategically present information often time about the counter-opponent in a way that shapes public opinion about the opposing party. Entman also argues that framing is a process, noting that the potential of the framing concept lies in the focus of the communicative processes, further summarizing that communication is not static, but a dynamic process that involves the terms frame-building which is how the frames emerge and frame setting which can be described as the interaction between media and audience predispositions (De Vereese, 2005). Vereese then goes on to state, the frames have several locations including the communicator, text, and receiver, these components are part of the 3-step process enclosed in framing: frame-building frame-

setting, and individual/societal consequences of framing (D'Angelo, 2002). In political discourse, framing plays an important role in how politicians convey messages and define terms of the debate. Framing can also be presented positively or negatively, for example, Donald Trump the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States just released his Agenda 47 plan for if he takes back the white house as we draw closer to end of the Biden administration first term, Trump highlights key issues such as the current stance of the economy, immigration concerns, and ending veteran homelessness in the United States in effort to persuade voters to trust in his plan of action (Trump et al, 2024). This is a prime example of using positive framing strategically to highlight the potential benefits if citizens take part in voting for Trump in the upcoming election. Coincided with positive framing there is also negative framing which can be explained by when politicians use negative language and contexts about the opposing sides to draw negative connotations towards the opponents' policies. This is also seen in Trump's Agenda 47 when he speaks negatively about the current administration's policies on key issues such as immigration, and the current status of abortion, and addresses the state of health care in the country. This framing emphasizes concerns about government intrusion, inefficiency, and loss of public choice. Nevertheless, in the public sphere framing generally holds a negative connotation because framing effects suggest that distributions of public preferences are arbitrary and that political elites can manipulate popular preferences to serve their own interests (Chong & Druckman, 2007). This all draws back to ELM in the contemporary that it can work together with framing to help produce the outcome that the higher-ups are seeking. When the audience lacks motivation or the ability to centrally process the framing techniques, they focus on the heuristic cues that make them vulnerable to disingenuous appeals, in contrast to if the information is processed centrally, highly involved, highly motivated will take a more rational approach taking into account policy predispositions or systemically processing the persuasive

message (Perloff, 2013). Furthermore, politicians also house various rhetorical strategies when trying to persuade voters. Throughout history as we know it, rhetoric has been a pivotal part of the growth of society and has been predominantly a written guide for lawyers and politicians, however, these instructions presume to all classes of society. Aristotle laid the foundation, rhetoric, followed by Cicero and Quintilian who took Aristotle's philosophies containing rhetoric and divided the work into three groups: Ethical appeal (Ethos), logical argument (Logos), and emotional argument (Pathos). Since Cicero and Quintilian discovered these philosophies, they have been commonly referred to as Aristotle's three modes of proof (McCormick, 2014).

Looking at these rhetorical strategies displayed throughout today's political era is pivotal to understanding how these strategies are implemented and persuade political outcomes. In the 1990s political persuasion research would be perceived through modes of propaganda and public opinion. Moving onto the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was important groundwork for the social scientific examination of persuasion, following World War II, scholars transitioned away from the term “propaganda” and began exploring different aspects and mechanisms of persuasion (Demirdöğen, 2010). It is important to understand the history of how these rhetorical devices were studied and analyzed to help better analyze them being used in today's political world. Today politicians use Ethos, Logos, and Pathos theoretically on a day-to-day basis. Former president Trump displayed many cases of Ethos throughout his time at the Whitehouse, through speeches, rallies, and extraneous events drawing upon his credibility and authority. Politicians have been seen throughout history drawing upon expertise and experience in certain aspects and for former president Trump that was his socio-economic knowledge that drew many voters his way (Charteris-Black, 2009). Shifting to the Logos aspect, Obama displayed this aspect above par. After the 2010 elections, Obama focused more on practical issues hitting home on logical argument than on ideological debates, evidence shows that this way of communicating resonated

better with the public, because by 2011 views on the Tea Party turned negative a policy implemented to stop the policies of the Obama administration suggesting that extreme ideological approaches were not the answer (Azari, 2014). Furthermore, the Pathos aspect of the triangle oftentimes can go undetected but is a very important piece of the puzzle. Current President Biden has displayed this tactic very effectively throughout his presidency and since his beginning time in the political realm. A study done by the English and Literature department at Philadelphia University examined Biden's inauguration speech and found that 55% of the time he used Pathos compared to 37% Ethos, and 8% logos (Amaireh, 2023). During his speech, he tried to stimulate emotions such as fury, modesty, friendliness, distress, self-assurance, and adoration, making sure to steer clear of emotions of hatred and envy. The group also dove into the speech given to America on the Afghan American war going on when he took office. Biden displayed an us versus them appeal that gained the trust and appealed to the emotions of liberty and power giving Americans reassurance that the United States was in good hands (Amarieh & Rababah, 2022). Lastly inspecting Biden, in his first 100 days of his presidency, he expressed a great deal of sympathy for the LGBTQ community and inevitably won the support of a wide margin of that community, reassuring them of the benefits for being a marginalized community during one of his speeches (Leonard, 2021). It is clear that political candidates are better at applying different aspects of the triangle than others but, none of these strategies work if there is not high involvement for the issue in terms of how the information is being processed, meaning that politicians have to implement their strategies considering these rhetorical strategies as well as taking into consideration ELM (Petty et al, 1993).

### **Psychological Factors in Voter Decision-Making**



As been discussed, there are many factors that go into how politicians gain their support and how people perceive these perspective messages, but furthermore, there is another subject matter that is overlooked in terms of this topic, and that is the potential psychological barriers that can be consumed within one's own decision making. In reality and in the world of academics, scholars will never be able to understand precisely why people vote the way that they do. Darren Lilleker a communications scholar notes that academic research primarily focuses on constructing models derived from self-reported behavior and establishing correlations between behavior and various factors such as attitudes, demographics, and other aspects linked to reception, understanding, and approval of campaign messages (Lilleker, 2014). However, there are certain strong correlations that stick out on the subject. One example of this is the concept of Cognitive bias. A study was conducted at Laguna State Polytechnical Institute and their research concluded that cognitive biases have a very strong correlation with how one casts their ballot, explaining how people sought out information to confirm their beliefs hence enhancing their views allocating to their candidate (Calosa et Al, 2023).

Furthermore, these biases can lead voters to make decisions based on flawed reasoning rather than objective analysis of set issues. Within the category of cognitive bias, there is a subset of terms often referred to as the 3 C's, Confirmation, Coverage, and Concision bias. First confirmation, when too many people fall victim to this type of bias progress to solving socio-political issues is halted due to the bipartisan effort needed to create change, there has to be agreement on both sides of the spectrum. An excellent example of this was noted during a 2019 survey where 70% of Democrats noted that their candidate needed to "stand up" to Trump regardless of whether less gets done for the country, on the other side 51% of Republicans believed that Trump should "stand up" to the Democrats (Lu, 2020). Next up is coverage bias, where it is defined as candidates being disproportionately covered by the media, and particular

candidates being portrayed a certain way by the media. In 2016, Trump said quote, "the traditional press is the true enemy of the people" (Soontjens, 2021). To reiterate that he was being treated unfairly by the media, systemically labeling items about him as fake news. This phenomenon of criticizing the media from the elite powers is nothing new, the Nixon administration turned media criticism into policy strategy as he gave speeches across the country attacking the news media (Soontjens, 2021). The last of the 3 C's is Concision bias where politicians focus on information that is easy to get across to the general public. This is most often used in terms of "sound bites" where little clips of the politician's speeches are taken out and posted to media and can leave out key information, or on the flip side can be used to make the politicians views sound more appealing to the public (Tumber & Bromley, 1998). Prime examples of this tactic can be seen on The Daily Show with John Stewart and The Daily Wire with Ben Shapiro, these hosts take out key information due to knowing the buzz it creates when it is released to media (Brigham, 2024). In the end, there are other psychological factors that can contribute to how someone votes as well such as upbringing, geographical location, and potential stigma within peers based on their voting style, but above it has been highlighted the ones that are controlled by the media and politicians themselves, as they use these tactics to gain advantages over their peers and to hopefully push them to the finish line, by keeping in mind all these potential factors and deep diving into the involvement of their audience through ELM it allows politicians to gain a competitive advantage against their opponents due to politicians' ability use these psychological tactics to persuade to vote in their favor. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the influence of politicians on society and how their employment of persuasion tactics ultimately shapes the functioning of the country.

H1: Political framing has an effect on credibility.

H2: Political framing affects voter decisions.

### **Method**

This study will be conducted using the survey method, the survey questionnaire will capture a vast range of questions to help participants understand how politicians use framing to gain votes as well as use their framing tactics to increase their credibility. The survey will be an online survey that will take 15-20 minutes to complete, and there will be an informed consent box at the top that will need to be checked off before moving forward. They will also be assigned at random a piece of political propaganda; this will be attempting to display a frame against another potential candidate. The focus of the survey is to see how people perceive the status of political framing and how it affects their credibility and influence on their voters.

### **Participants**

Participants will be recruited through a local community that also is home to a large southeastern university that holds many students. The researcher will use convenience sampling to conduct this survey drawing upon at least 100 survey submissions. The convenience sample will be composed of citizens from the surrounding community who have access to the city bulletin and local social media pages that will house the survey. The convenience sample will be used for simplicity and easy access to participants. There will be no restrictions demographically on who can complete the survey, although the goal is to have a wide range of ages, political backgrounds, and equal representation of sex.

### **Procedure**

Once the participants have access to the link that holds the survey, they will be prompted to an applied consent form that will ask permission for the researcher to include their results in

their data analysis, this box will need to be checked off upon moving forward. It will be reiterated that if at any point they wish not to continue, they may log off and their results will not be calculated. The survey will be anonymous, no names will be provided. Following the consent form, there will be a wide series of questions asked regarding demographics and socio-economic status. After this the participant will be presented with a piece of framing propaganda at random, applying the stimuli in the middle allows for the researcher to ask calming questions first before applying the stimuli. Following this, the participants will be asked how likely they are to vote in the next election and how they feel this piece was helpful/hurtful to the candidate's credibility. After completing all the questions, the participant will be prompted one more consent screen before they submit their results. See appendix for survey.

### **Measures**

The independent variable of the type of propaganda that is perceived by the participant is measured based on a 10-point scale of how the participant felt the piece affected the candidate's credibility. The Dependent variable will be measured based on the likelihood based on the survey results of how likely the participant is willing to vote in the upcoming election and if the propaganda persuaded their support for the prospective candidate. These variables and measures are derived from a study conducted by a scholar at Ohio State University (Capron, 2019).

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**Appendix**

Survey Questions:

1. What is your age? (Demographics)

2. What is your sex?

- Male ● Female

3. What is your ethnicity?

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian ● Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Mixed race
- Other

4. What is the highest level of education you have received?

- Some high school ● High school diploma or GED
- Some college, no degree



- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional or law degree
- Doctorate

5. What is your employment status?

- Unemployed
- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Student
- Retired
- Other

6. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, an Independent, or something else? (Political affiliation)

- Republican ● Democrat
- Independent ● Something else

7. Do you typically lean more liberal or conservative?

- Liberal ----- Neutral -----● Conservative

8. Are you currently eligible to vote in your state? (Political Ideology)

- Yes

- No

- Unsure

9. If you are eligible to vote, are you registered to vote?

- Yes

- No

- Unsure

10. If you are registered to vote, are you registered with a political party?

- Yes

- No

- Unsure

11. How likely are you to vote in this year's election? 1-10

12. How much did this propaganda help/hurt this candidate's credibility? 1-10

