

Panel proposal

2012.10.04

Panel title: Motivated reasoning in politics: Considerate arguments, persuasive rhetoric, and the affect effect

Panel chairs: Alessandro Nai (University of Geneva) and Yves Schemel (IEP Grenoble)

Abstract

When facing difficult choices—such as candidates to elect, ballots to support, ideas to defend and more generally decisions to endorse—individuals engage in mental processes to justify their choice. Such processes depend on who they are, what kind of information they get, how much knowledge they have on the issue at stake, and to which extent engaging with it is emotional. Decades of research on motivated reasoning, memory retrieval, cognitive paths to opinion formation and—more recently—affective and emotional predispositions clearly show that: 1) differences in individual profiles (sociodemographics, political knowledge and competence, cognitive needs, motivation, and so forth) shape the decisions made; and 2) such effects are strongly mediated by the nature and content of the information available as well as the knowledge stored.

In any given political situation, the political arguments on the issues at stake that are exchanged in the public space are manipulated by individuals according to A) their social and ideological profile and their political preferences; and B) the dramatically expanding available information online and memorized knowledge. Ordinary citizens endlessly face new arguments, which are all potentially counterintuitive, and they must frequently decide with little delay on how to process them. Political elites, at their end, ought to imagine communicative strategies that are based on persuasive arguments, and then implement such plans during political campaigns, whatever the psychological costs of a discrepancy between such public rhetoric and their personal creeds may be. Both may feel deeply frustrated by the resulting oversimplification of their arguments.

This panel deals with political reasoning in a broad sense, taking into consideration the dual use of rhetorical arguments: by individuals, who are stimulated by the nature and content of political information; and by the elites, compelled to a race to the top in elaborating communicative strategies. Its aim is to provide answers to such questions as (a) the causal relations between the ways individuals play with counterintuitive arguments or dissonant information and synchronize them with their level of political sophistication; (b) the argumentative quality of political persuasion and its impact on actual opinion formation.

The panel welcomes theoretical papers modelling the interactions between political reasoning, political judgment, and political knowledge as well as evidence-based papers dealing with reasoning within a limited set of political information or political knowledge. It is addressed to scholars working in subfields as, e.g., electoral behaviour, political communication, cognitive psychology, and political sociology. Contributions may be based either on survey data, or on experimental approaches. They may address single-case, paired comparisons, or larger N comparative studies.