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## SELECTIVE ELABORATION

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*See* SELECTIVE PROCESSES, EXPOSURE,  
PERCEPTION, MEMORY

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## SELECTIVE PROCESSES, EXPOSURE, PERCEPTION, MEMORY

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Selective processes are the means by which individuals' preexisting beliefs shape their use of information in a complex environment. Current interests and opinions influence the acquisition (selective exposure), evaluation (selective perception), and retention (selective memory) of political information. As a consequence, individuals tend to be more knowledgeable about personally salient topics than about topics that do not interest them, and they tend to know more of the evidence supporting their political opinions than they know about other perspectives. These characteristics limit individuals' ability to revise their political beliefs in response to new evidence and promote political polarization because existing opinions receive systematic reinforcement. Though these processes have rich roots in political communication, there is also significant research on the processes in nonpolitical contexts.

Selective processing is related to motivated reasoning, the idea that individuals' cognitive processes are goal-oriented and are often biased in favor of their political predispositions. Motivated reasoning concerns the mechanisms by which individuals construct justifications for their positions, specifically how they recall and interpret information, whereas selective processes concern the mechanisms that shape individuals' awareness of the political information that they use to form such justifications. Selective processing and motivated reasoning overlap with regard to the evaluation of opinion-relevant information. Individuals' tendency to be more critical of information that challenges their political opinions is cited as an example of both concepts.

Two key factors motivate selective processing. The first is the complexity of the information environment. People do not have the time or the cognitive ability to consider every argument, so they must be selective, choosing a subset of information that adequately, though incompletely, addresses the information need at hand. The second is that individuals experience a

negative emotional response, referred to as *cognitive dissonance*, to information that conflicts with their existing opinions. Individuals seek to minimize dissonance by seeking out opinion reinforcement and finding fault with opinion-challenging information.

### Selective Exposure

*Selective exposure* refers to the idea that individuals' political interests and opinions influence the information to which they attend. Within political communication the term *selective attention* is sometimes used synonymously. Selective attention has a somewhat different meaning within the field of cognitive psychology. Human cognition is limited, which means that people are unable to process the volume of information conveyed by the senses, so some stimuli go undetected. In this context, selective attention refers to the nonrandom process through which certain stimuli are attended to while other stimuli are ignored.

The evidence that political interests influence individuals' exposure decisions is unambiguous. Individuals pay more attention to political information the more it interests them or is personally salient. There is substantial debate, however, regarding the influence that political opinions have on information exposure. Opinion-motivated selective exposure is said to occur when individuals choose an information source that supports their opinion over one that challenges their opinion. Some scholars argue that decades of research have yielded little compelling evidence of the phenomenon, while others maintain that it remains an important concept for the field. The most recent research suggests that opinion-motivated selective exposure does occur under certain conditions. First, individuals must be committed to their opinion for this form of selective exposure to occur. Confidence has the opposite effect: The more confident an individual is about his or her opinion, the less likely he or she is to practice selective exposure. Second, to the extent that an individual engages in selective exposure, its effect is moderated by a variety of environmental factors. For example, environments in which individuals feel threatened or which place limits on their ability to acquire information produce stronger selective exposure effects. Third, there are some circumstances under which individuals will seek out opinion-challenging information. For example, individuals who expect that they will have to defend their opinion often seek other viewpoints prior to debate.

## Selective Perception

Individuals tend to interpret novel political information in a manner that is consistent with their preexisting beliefs. *Selective perception* occurs in at least two ways. First, individuals fail to notice, or they misperceive, information that does not match their beliefs. For example, individuals tend to think that the positions held by a favored candidate or party mirror their own and will misinterpret evidence to the contrary rather than updating their views or preferences. Second, individuals frequently accept evidence supporting their opinions without hesitation but will scrutinize information that challenges their position carefully, critiquing the methods by which data were collected and analyzed and questioning the interpretation of results. This form of selective perception is often referred to as *selective judgment* or *biased assimilation*. It should be noted, however, that this bias may have a rational basis: Questioning new information that contradicts prior knowledge and experience can be an effective assessment strategy in a complex information environment. If one invests considerable energy in evaluating available evidence when forming an opinion, he or she may be justified in thinking that new, contradictory information is less trustworthy.

## Selective Memory

Individuals are more likely to retain political information the more personal importance they attach to the topic. This effect is partially due to interest-motivated selective exposure. As noted previously, individuals exert more effort seeking out information about topics they deem important. The other mechanism underlying selective memory is that individuals devote significant cognitive resources to elaborating on interest-relevant information. Taken together, these processes yield greater political awareness and higher knowledge accuracy for personally important political issues than for issues that an individual considers unimportant. Recent research, however, suggests that there is not a memory congeniality effect: People do not exhibit a bias for opinion-consistent or against opinion-inconsistent information. Thus, selective memory is influenced by political interests but not political opinions.

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See also Hostile Media Effect; Limited Effects Theory; Public Opinion

## Further Readings

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## SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968, THE

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*The Selling of the President 1968*, written by Joe McGinniss, is widely considered to be the first book of its kind. Joe McGinniss essentially infiltrated the Nixon campaign and, in his book, told America what was really happening behind closed doors in political campaigning. McGinniss reveals how Nixon's team developed an image of Nixon as a good and decent man and found ways to ensure the perfect image was presented to the public according to a concise plan. This "planned image" ran counter to the beliefs of the general public that candidates were presented as themselves and not as creations of a campaign team.

*The Selling of the President 1968* describes how the Nixon campaign believed the perfect image was necessary to get Nixon elected in 1968. Nixon had previously run for president and lost to John Fitzgerald