Cognitive science of political thought: Some final reflections

"Divide and conquer" appears to be a strategy with much currency and success in the political and social spheres of the United States and other polities. Understanding the determinants and origins of political thought with the goal of restoring a more fact- and reason-based exchange across partisan divides never seems to have been more important as societal challenges mount, from the obesity and opioid epidemics, income inequality and the future of work, to environmental degradation and climate change.

Thus I was pleased to hear about plans for a special issue on the "Cognitive Science of Political Thought" almost two years ago and gladly accepted the invitation to join Steven Sloman as co-editor. Political psychology, the interdisciplinary attempt to understand political behavior from a psychological perspective, has a long history of providing cognitive and social explanations for a broad range of political behavior, from leadership, to genocide, and voting (see, for example, Cottam, Dietz-Uhler, Mastors, & Preston, 2010). The theories and methods of cognitive science are most fruitfully applied with a narrower scope, looking at political thought and examining the cognitive and motivational processes that shape the beliefs, opinions, and forecasts that in turn create and influence our political actions and reality.

Two years later, I am very happy with the contributions collected in this special issue. Some papers start with a political thought phenomenon in need of understanding and perhaps correction and find explanatory processes: Selective exposure to belief-confirming sources (Dorison et al.), violent extremism (Kruglanski et al.), biased judgments of political leaders (Amit et al.), or partisan evaluations (Van Boven et al.). Other papers start with a process and explore its implications for political thought. Among those papers, some processes are exemplary and prescriptive and lead to good outcomes: Actively open-minded thinking (Baron) and training in proper forecasting (Mellers et al.). More of them are less functional, more commonly observed, and lead to thoughts and judgments that are problematic: Community-level stereotyping (Fiske et al.), epistemic spillover to non-relevant domains (Marks et al.), reliance on low-effort processing (Pennycook et al.), and incorrect inference of attribute-importance from choice (Barasz et al.). One paper demonstrates in a simulation that ostensibly rational processes like Bayesian updating by agents can lead to problematic outcomes in specific social environments (Lewandowsky et al.). Two papers address individual differences in political thought and their consequences: Differences in the importance and hence role of political identity (Chen et al.), and differences in epistemic humility (Mellers et al.).

Individually and collectively the body of research in this special issue delivers in a "combine and conquer" fashion. It contrasts and weaves together cognition and motivation as two interconnected pillars for understanding political thought and action, adding network theory and group processes to further understand the dynamics of the thought of people in their social, political, and physical environment. One of my first papers, entitled "Combine and Conquer" argued that two analytic approaches typically used in isolation could and should be used in combination to better understand people's interpretation of the concept of risk (Weber, 1984). In a recent commentary (Weber, 2019) I propose applying the "combine and conquer" approach to laboratory and naturalistic decision-making research, showing the complementary strengths and contributions of the two research traditions. In a blogpost (Weber, 2017) I argue against creating false dichotomies between cognitive and social psychological contributions to decision making, as those are rarely mutually exclusive. I am gratified how widely this view is shared by the authors in this special issue and thank everyone for their contribution.

References

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