Political Attitudes: Interactions of Cognition and Affect

Baldwin M. Way
University of California at Los Angeles

Roger D. Masters
Dartmouth College

Commonly held political opinions provide an ecologically relevant focus for studying the interactions of environmental context, affect or emotion, and cognition. To explore this approach to information processing, John T. Lanzetta helped initiate a series of experiments examining how emotional responses to politicians' nonverbal displays influence changes in attitude toward these leaders. Although this line of research has revealed how a number of variables interact when humans respond to known individuals in meaningful situations, the precise relationship between mood state or affect prior to a stimulus and subsequent emotions and cognitions remains unclear. Based on recent theories of modular brain function, an experimental paradigm was designed to test the hypothesis that the effects of a mood state on information processing depend on the subject's awareness of the affect as well as on its valence. Preliminary data from such a study, in which preconscious images of emotionally evocative stimuli were used to induce positive or negative affect prior to viewing the leader, suggests that the induction of negative affective states can lead to more positive attitudes. Reflected in such public opinion phenomena as the "rally-round-the-flag" effect, this mood-incongruent attitude change challenges many traditional theories of emotion and cognition.

1This research was supported by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center for the Social Sciences and the William H. Spoor Grant for Leadership Issues. We would like to extend a note of special appreciation to William N. Morris, Ph.D.

2Address all correspondence concerning this article to Roger D. Masters, Ph.D., Nelson A. Rockefeller Professor of Government, 6108 Silsby Hall, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire 03755.
The research of John T. Lanzetta has contributed greatly to the understanding of nonverbal behavior and emotion in social psychology. One of us (R.D.M.) was fortunate enough to work with him, along with Denis G. Sullivan, Gregory McHugo, and Basil Englis, in studies of emotional and attitudinal response to leaders' nonverbal facial displays. In addition to providing insight into how politicians often influence the electorate, the studies initiated with Lanzetta also provide unconventional insights into the relationship between cognition and emotion.

Since political beliefs tend to be well developed and strongly held, these studies predominantly examined the extent to which such beliefs influence self-reported and psychophysiological emotional responses to leaders' displays. Although the effects of preexisting mood on attitude were largely unexplored, many other situational, emotional, and cognitive factors were found to play a role in political information processing. Using a brief review of these studies as a foundation, we develop a theoretical and methodological framework for addressing a question Lanzetta had posed in the original research group: How does an individual's affective state prior to the viewing experience influence his response to the leader?

Both common sense and experimental research confirm that affective states or moods sometimes have congruent effects on attitude (e.g., happiness leading to greater approval, fear to rejection). Paradoxically, however, polling data and our preliminary experimental evidence indicate that, in certain contexts, affect can influence political attitude in a valence-inconsistent direction. How can the induction of a negative affect lead to more positive attitudes? In suggesting an answer to this question, we rely upon recent findings in cognitive neuroscience. With Lanzetta's strong interest in psychophysiological measures and ethology, we feel he would have been excited by recent neuroscientific findings that illuminate the interaction between the "rational" realm of politics and the emotional realm of facial expressions—or more simply, between cognition and emotion.

FACIAL DISPLAYS, EMOTIONAL RESPONSE AND ATTITUDE: THE LEGACY OF LANZETTA'S RESEARCH

Before embarking on the study of leaders, Lanzetta and his coworkers had demonstrated that facial expressions of fear function as "prepared" stimuli (for further elaboration see Dimberg & Öhman, 1996). As Lanzetta showed, a conditioned association between such expressions and an aversive outcome is more rapidly acquired (Orr & Lanzetta, 1980) and more resistant to extinction (Lanzetta & Orr, 1980) than response to neutral or happy expressions. In our interpretation, faces of fear automatically elicit emo-