One of the key determinants of attitude formation, which can be driven by peripheral processing, is the perception of proximity. If an individual feels close to an organisation or individual, that they represent them in some way, or that they espouse similar values, then that individual would logically be also more likely to offer them electoral support. A degree of cognitive involvement is stimulated through establishing close proximity. Therefore, a perception of close proximity, determined by the communicated behaviour of a political actor, may subsequently situate an individual towards the centre of the processing spectrum. They may well use the individual as a peripheral cue, or a political reference point, but they may also be more likely to listen more closely to their arguments, assimilating their positions with their own, providing those positions do not contrast with their deeply held values. Thus establishing proximity is a crucial dimension for the political persuasion process.

Political scientists have long argued that a key determinant of support for a particular party at elections is driven by valence (Clarke et al., 2004). Valence describes the extent to which a candidate or party focuses on the issues that are of most concern to the individual; basically it is a perception of relevance. Indeed many simplistic measures of the extent to which a party or candidate is market-oriented are based on the extent to which manifestoes prioritise the concerns of the public as extrapolated from public opinion data (Lilleker & Negrine, 2006; Ormrod & Henneberg, 2006). Valence issues of proximity are another way of talking about the most important problems, the issues that are recognised as being universally important and require attention from decision makers. The stance on an issue of importance – for example, within the current economic climate where cuts to public spending are made and who would be most disadvantaged by government spending
adjustments – can be used as a measure of perceived proximity. The extent to which proximity is established on an issue of maximum importance leads to positive valence; in other words does the receiver perceive the politician or party to be representing their views on the issue that will most effect their lives, will act as a shortcut for decision making by the receiver? For example, if the receiver’s values direct them to support prudence, and they believe that welfare spending is imprudent, they support the candidate or party who is closest to that position; owing to this measure of fit between sender and receiver they may also assimilate with stances on policies where the receiver has less interest. Providing foreign policy, for example, does not contrast with the values that lead to supporting economic prudence; they will take the cue from the party or candidate they feel closest to. Basically it is argued that people seek to use the minimum effort in decision making, and seek to match resources to the importance of the decision and the likelihood of a desired outcome. As political decisions, such as voter choices, are important but choice is limited and outcomes cannot be controlled by the behaviour of any single individual, shortcuts will be sought that involve minimal central processing and subsequent use of peripheral cues linked to previous positive associations (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999). Hence proximity and valence are important for accepting political communication and engaging with the communicator, to explain why we explore the core tenets of social judgement theory.

Social judgement theory and political communication

The concepts underpinning valence and proximity politics are not new, practically and theoretically their importance have long been recognised. Employing social judgement theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) this chapter explores the way that acceptance of messages can be controlled through the strategic design of their content. The reason that it is here posited, that social judgement takes place somewhere between peripheral and central processing, is because the theory suggests an individual makes a quick conscious decision on whether to consider an incoming message based on an assessment of message stimuli (Sherif, 1963). Stimuli are any aspect of a message that will contain information that determines the mood of the receiver. While music and imagery can be very important stimuli, so can simple words and phrases; the combination of all of these builds a rich set of stimuli that can indicate the level of valence and proximity between sender and receiver. Any new message stimuli will be judged against information that is already contained in