



2019

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Recommended Citation

Nielsen, Ben (2019) "The Sizzle or the Steak? How Individuals Process Political Cues," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 24

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol24/iss1/9>

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The Sizzle or the Steak? How Individuals Process Political Cues

Abstract

The majority of the American electorate is uninformed with regards to politics, and to compensate for their lack of knowledge, they take political cues from perceived experts. This study examines the impact of political cues from various sources, and considers how individuals analyze source credibility and framing. The study was conducted on Illinois Wesleyan University's campus, via survey collection. Post data analysis, the surveys proved cues given by perceived experts were more compelling than non-perceived experts, and emotional cues were more compelling than rational cues. These findings confirm individuals use peripheral route processing more frequently than central route processing, in accordance with the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo 1980). The multi-regression model also confirms that individuals with lower levels of political knowledge accept cues at higher frequencies.

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How Individuals Process Political Cues
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KEY WORDS: political cues; framing effects; emotional cues; rational cues



On November 6, 2018 approximately 110 million politically motivated Americans turned out and participated in the midterm elections. This was the highest turnout in 50 years and 27 million more voters than in the 2014 midterm elections. This new political vigor is the result of hyper-polarization, successful get out to vote campaigns, and the assistance of our rather eccentric commander-in-chief. Whether you agree with Trump's policies, rhetoric, or general disposition as the president, he has certainly enticed many people to participate in the democratic system. However, this new influx of voters are so entrenched in their jobs and families, that many of them do not have time to be well read on *every* aspect of political discussion. Voters compensate by taking information shortcuts and relying on cues they have gotten from a wide variety of sources. This process called a *heuristic* (information shortcut) is employed when we watch television, scroll the internet, and learn through interactions with others. This process is especially prominent in the political sphere,

because many voters cannot rationalize *every* complex political argument. It is a lot to ask someone to be fluent in the language of taxation, foreign policy, healthcare, environmental regulations, and agriculture.. There are 16 standing committees in the Senate, 20 standing committees in the House, and even these experienced politicians refer to technocrats to assist them in the decision making process.

This research does not speak to the existence of cue taking in the American political culture. These findings are numerous, with particular emphasis on the association between cue taking and the media (Carter 2013; Boomgaarden and Semetko 2011; Iyengar 1990). Instead of simply identifying the existence of cue taking, this study is interested in what contextual factors impact the cue taking process. What exactly limits or intensifies the probability that the cue will stick to a malleable individual? In addition, what kinds of individuals are more susceptible to cue taking?

1. Literature Review

A large portion of the existing literature regarding political attitudes is dedicated to accurately predicting how an individual will vote, and these algorithms and spatial models that predict a voter's preferences are referred to as voter I.D models. There are numerous voter I.D models that can predict with relatively high accuracy how people will likely vote (Shapiro 1992; Kelley & Mirer 1973; Markus & Converse 1979). All of these models are predicated on two assumptions regarding the voting method of an individual. They theorize

that citizens vote *in the moment* and use *memory-based processes* to arrive at their political conclusions. As far as voting *in the moment*, the models assume that voters gauge their preferences with their current standard of living. *Memory-based processes* implies that voters use their prior political knowledge to measure candidates against one another. This indicates that individuals are politically informed, and have at least a decent understanding of political actors and salient issues. This assumption bodes curiosity, because it is well established that the American public is woefully uninformed regarding political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1994). However despite the lack of information, Americans express opinions on a wide range of issues. This begs the question, where are these voters getting their political attitudes from, if we know they aren't engaging in frequent political learning (Converse 1960; Downs 1957)? This leads experts to believe that Americans frequently participate in political cue taking.

This study of cue taking speaks directly to the research of Richard Petty and John Cacioppo (1980), in which they conclude there are 2 strategies that individuals use to take cues from elites. The utilized methods are *central route processing and peripheral route processing*. (Petty & Cacioppo 1980). "The central route to persuasion entails consideration of substantive content, including evidence and the soundness of an argument's logic. The primary determinant of persuasion through central processing is argument strength"(Gilens & Murakawa 2002, pg. 15). This cue taking

requires relatively high degrees of political knowledge, and an equally high standard of interest in salient issues. Given that the majority of the public cannot sustain adequate interest toward elites for the content of their cues, they partake in another heuristic that is less time consuming, but potentially less accurate. “The peripheral route, in contrast, emphasizes consideration of factors external to message content, such as the credibility and attractiveness of the message source. The primary determinants of peripheral-route persuasion are “persuasion cues” which produce attitude change “without any active thinking about the attributes of the issue or the object under consideration”(Gilens & Murakawa 2002, pg. 16).

With the foundation of central route versus peripheral processing being established, it remains unknown which technique is employed most frequently. It would be incorrect to assume that an individual will only look at substantive evidence, while another only looks at the character of the cue giver. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a key determinant in how an individual will interpret the cue, and furthermore continue to act on the advice the elite is giving. “The ELM states that the amount and nature of the thinking that a person does about a persuasive message is a very important determinant of the kind of persuasion that occurs”(Petty & Cacioppo 1981). Central route theory must result in elaboration, where the subject uses this new evidence and tests it against existing evidence in their schema to draw conclusions. With merit being the driving factor for an individual

analyzing the cue, valence is the key ingredient for how the individual will interpret the message. Conclusions regarding central route processing include “(a) The cue will be relatively easy to be called to mind (accessible), (b) relatively persistent and stable over time, (c) relatively resistant to challenge from competing messages, and (d) relatively predictive of the person’s attitude-relevant judgements and behavior” (Petty & Cacioppo 1981, pg 34).

In contrast to central route processing, peripheral route processing relies on the source’s attractiveness and message length. Instinctively one can assume that individuals tasked with interpreting convoluted issues of tax reform, health care etc. use peripheral cues generally, because previous knowledge is required. But a candidate providing this cue could appear to have a “sincere demeanor and good values” if they are standing in front of an American flag, or visiting veterans. Peripheral route cues will be less accessible, persistent, resistant, and predictive of behavior, than by individuals using central route processing. Both central route and peripheral route processing are utilized by voters to access cues from their perceived experts, but there has been no elaboration about which is employed more frequently among individuals. I do hypothesize that there will be a positive relationship between an individual’s likelihood to accept a cue, when they associate a higher levels of perceived expertise from the source, and higher levels of emotional appeal.

2. Research Design & Data Analysis

There is an assumption among academics that individuals are only taking cues from political elites, where nothing could be further from the truth. Individuals, whether they mean to or not, acquire political cues from a multitude of mediums. Neighbors, social media, TV ads etc. are just some of the political messages that individuals sort through. This provokes a question regarding what political cues are sticking to malleable individuals when others do not, if people aren't focusing on what is being said, but on who is saying it, and how it's being said? Analyzing political opinion has been done a variety of ways. Gallup, Pew, and the Brookings Institute all have various methods to gauge an individual's political knowledge and opinions from issues and candidates alike. But for the importance of this study it is important to focus on a few variables that determine how likely the cue is to "stick."

To look at this, the subjects will be given surveys with a variety of political arguments on them from a source. Anybody from a university professor to your neighbor will be providing the cue to the subject. They will "think carefully about them" and indicate whether they think the cue is agreeable or not. Subjects are then asked to respond to this cue by indicating whether or not they believe this argument to be compelling, and actually shift their view. This dichotomy of agreeableness and compellingness is important, as there are many arguments that individuals agree with, but ultimately the cue is unsuccessful if they do not use that information to shape their beliefs.

"fast and frugal heuristic is 'one-reason decision making,' a method of decision making that uses only one piece of information. The most frequently used variant is called 'take the best,' a decision technique where the single piece of information that is judged best is used alone for decision making. This decision criterion is compared with others. Many of the comparisons are made using real world data that were originally used in statistics textbooks to illustrate regression techniques. These simple techniques can obtain results as good as, or better than, those obtained from more sophisticated statistical techniques, such as regression analysis or Bayesian mechanisms" (Rubin 2018).

The two variables that will influence the subject (according to Peripheral Route Processing) is the strength of expertise a subject believes the cue giver to possess, and the focus of either logic or emotion in the context of the argument. Instinctively the first independent variable looks at how much of an "expert" a cue giver is, before even analyzing the argument at all. Looking at the source's occupation acts as a "pre-test" for the subject, and it would be reasonable to assume that if the subject doesn't have certain qualifications then they are immediately dismissed by the subject. Looking next at how the argument is framed poses some slight methodological problems. "Facts v. Emotion" exists on a continuum

(Pach & Koch 1983), and there is a natural blend of the two in any effective argument. But by viewing the two frames as a dichotomy, it creates a cross table for the questions asked, and it has 4 quadrants. “Experts” that rely heavily on rational appeal, which includes arguments about statistics and logistical claims. “Experts” who use emotional appeal, and utilize mainly anecdotes in their arguments. “Non-experts that use logistical appeal, and “non-experts” that use emotional appeal. . These paradigms have become caricatures in the survey, and analyzing how subjects respond to each of them will assist in identifying critical variables for the likelihood a cue will stick. The main analysis will be the difference of means test between the initial question of agreeableness from the source, and the question of compellingness regarding the sources argument. If there is a significant difference between both questions, we can conclude that a certain source was perceived as more credible. To analyze the characteristics of malleable individuals, performing a multiple regression will illustrate how much explained variance we can identify in the subjects.

Representing the expert, who uses logistical emphasis in their argument, we have Illinois Farm Bureau Director Valerie. Her cue on the survey is, “Since its inception in 1990, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) allowed for an economic boom in the agriculture industry. In 2016 alone, Midwest states including Illinois and Iowa have exports that exceed 1 billion dollars in soy, corn, and cattle. The disintegration of NAFTA would cause a collapse of the Midwest farmer.”

She operates within the realm of agriculture in the Midwest, and also employs statistics that show her expertise, on the issue of NAFTA. This relationship between expertise, and logic represents a large portion of technocratic influence in congressional committees, bureaucrats, and party leadership.

Perceived political experts are not only obligated to using logic when framing their argument, but many of them employ emotional appeal when framing arguments involving the environment, immigration, and gun violence (Walton) Representing this section of the crosstab is Professor of Mexican history Jude Barta. For example, Jude’s cue involves immigration, a highly debated topic in the political sphere. “Illegal immigrants are not only taking jobs away from Americans in various markets, but are committing crimes at significantly higher rates than U.S citizens. We need to secure our borders, and deport individuals that did not come to this country legally.” There is perceived expertise by the subject, simply because they’ve earned the title of a professor which shows merit based successes in the field of academia. In addition, the subject could perceive additional expertise about immigration, by associating a relationship with “Mexican history,” and a majority of the immigration debate is about illegal immigrants from Mexico. This argument shows no sign of statistical evidence, and doesn’t reference data in any way. However, there is strong emotional appeal, by equating the loss of American jobs and increased crime rate, to the presence of illegal immigrants.

Individuals do not simply take political cues

from “experts,” but they take them from individuals in their day to day lives. Some could argue the process of political socialization takes place almost exclusively without “expertise” influencing your decisions. Parents, neighbors, schools, and celebrities all provide cues to individuals, whether or not they truly have expertise on any subjects. An example of a “non-expert” that uses logistical appeal in the survey is Moses Montefiore Rabbi Colleen Marza. Her cue given in the survey is, “The Congressional Budget Office estimates the federal budget deficit was \$782 billion in fiscal year 2018, and it was \$116 billion more than the shortfall recorded in fiscal year 2017. This is why we need reduce military spending which increased 36 billion dollars in 2018.” As a clergywoman, there is no indication given to the subject that she is experienced in the realm of fiscal policy, but she evaluates Congressional budget office statistics. Many of the statistics, and census data is available to anyone, however individuals (according to PRT) would not perceive her as an expert without an additional degree, or career associated with economics, because it doesn’t demonstrate a passion, or interest in the domain.

The last individuals that can provide us with cues, is the perceived “non-expert” that uses emotional appeal. Seemingly the weakest argument, we are surrounded by neighbors and relatives that provide anecdotal evidence with little to no source credibility. However, through socialization these play the greatest role in an individual’s path to political identity formation (Blum-Kulka) Representing this group is my

neighbor Thomas Mackie. The cue he provides in the survey is, “Climate change is this current generation’s greatest threat. If our current rate of carbon emission continue, we will live in a world consumed by natural disasters. We need to increase federal spending into clean energy, and increase restrictions on fossil fuel production.” This cue provides us with no sources, data, or actual evidence regarding our “current carbon emissions.” His hyperbole regarding the imminent danger we are all in sets the tone for the subject to feel scared, and accept this cue, so that their posterity will survive. These 4 paradigms represent who individuals get information from, but there’s more to the equation than simply who is giving the cue.

To avoid any confirmation bias among politically active individuals, I decided not to attach partisanship to any of the cue givers, as research has shown a strong linkage to confirmation bias among individuals who seek cues (Zaller 1992, Gigerenzer 1992). But there needs to be an established level of political knowledge among the subjects, as high levels of political knowledge can result in high levels of confirmation bias (Popkin 1994). To measure political knowledge the subjects were given 5 questions from *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996).

What are the first 10 amendments of the Constitution called?

What is the name of the current Vice President?

Under the Constitution who nominates Federal judges?

What political party currently controls the U.S House of Representatives?

What is the current unemployment rate in the United States?

These authors found a high level of correlation between accuracy on these questions, and more general political knowledge. By determining a subjects interest in politics, we can also determine whether they would be more malleable than others. This will be tested by asking questions about how much news they consume on average per week. We have given liberty to the subject to define “news” which can range from social media, to political ads, or cable television. There was considerable variation to the issue of the political arguments that are being analyzed by the subject. This is to allow for a diversity of emotional and logistical appeals, and also to possibly shed some light on the political malleability certain individuals have as it pertains to certain subjects. The raw data was collected over a period of approximately 3 weeks, and there were 201 surveys that comprised the N, in the study. These surveys were conducted by myself in classes with expressed permission from professors, and in Ames library from willing participants.

3. Results

The coding process for the surveys was consistent for both the “agreeableness” question and the “compellingness” question. “Agreeableness” was the question asking the subject, “Do you agree with the statement?” and “compellingness” is the question that asked the subject “Is this argument compelling?” A

“yes” was coded as 1.00, and a “no” was coded as 0.00. In order to provide a reliable and valid score of the true attitudes regarding political cues, the inclusion of the option “I don’t know” was necessary. Coding the “I don’t know” answers as missing cases provided a true value for the attitudes towards both the “agreeable” and “compelling” questions. The pro-NAFTA cue given by the Farm Bureau caricature had the most missing cases (51), and this is likely due to lack of political knowledge associated with agriculture. The knowledge questions were gauged on a scale of 1-4 for accuracy. The question “*Which party currently controls the House of Representatives*” was omitted from the study, because the survey was administered shortly after the midterm elections. The Democratic party had just won back the house from the Republicans, the timing and wording of this question resulted in many many answers, and would have created noise in the individual knowledge scores. When subjects identified their political party, there was a sliding scale of 1-5, which Democrats being coded as 1.00, Independents as 3.00, and Republicans as 5.00. Regardless of their answer for this question, the subjects had to indicate what political preferences they “usually” align with. This sliding scale included 2 additional options into the above measure with “slightly democratic” coded as 2.0, and “slightly republican” as 4.0. This question is meant to tease out individuals who identify themselves as independents. Gallup reports that about 1/3 of the American electorate consists of independent voters, however given our two-party system, we thought it was

necessary to keep individuals honest in their political preferences. Age was coded as the number they provided, and the median age of the study was 20. The final question that was coded, referred to the subject's perceived interest in politics, by asking about how much news they consume in a weekly basis. "0-1 hours" was a 1.00, "2-3 hours" was a 3.00, "4-5 hours" was a 5.00, "6-7 hours" was a 7.00, and "more than 7 hours" was coded as an 8.00.

Before any real conclusions could be drawn from the surveys, I initially had to determine if the cues my caricatures provided were fair and balanced. The study doesn't hold much weight if every cue was undeniable, or if every cue contained a weak argument. Because of this,

the caricatures vary depending on their hypothetical ideological arguments. There were 5 "liberal" arguments and 5 "conservative" arguments. This variance was supposed to represent a fair, and balanced panel of political sources. The *Chart 1* shows the distribution of "agreeableness" among survey respondents, and what can be seen is a relatively normally distributed graph. A "truly" fair set of questions would result in a mean of .5, concluding that about half of my statements were agreeable, and half were not. The mean was .56, which indicates a level of neutrality, and might suggest that individuals slightly more often than not agreed with the cue provided to them.

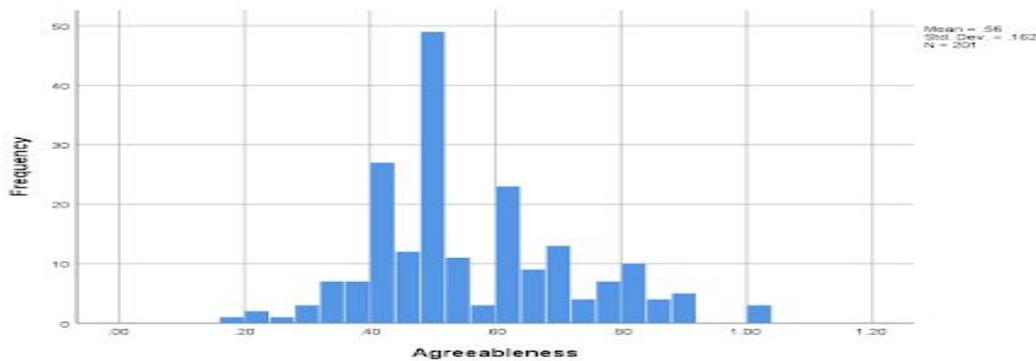


Chart 1: Mean=.56; SD=.152; N=201

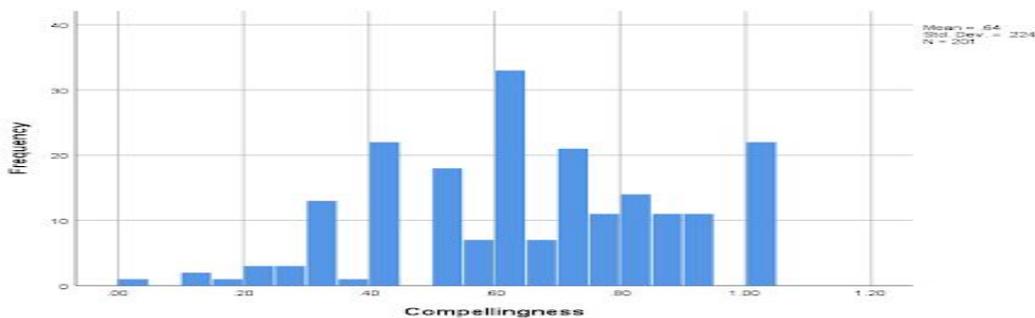


Chart 2: Mean=.64; SD=.224; N=201

The *Chart 2* speaks to the “agreeableness,” however there was less consistency when we analyzed the distribution of “compellingness” answers from the surveys. The graphs mean distribution of .64, implies there was no overwhelming bias in the framing of the cues, and it highlights a subject was more likely to accept the cue than reject it.

After determining the cues were fair, and can accurately be analyzed, next was looking at what sources gave the most effective cues in the survey. The data measured indicates that there was no significant difference in the level between “agreeableness” for sources with perceived expertise, and sources with no perceived expertise. With a mean of .56 for “agreeableness” and .55 for “compellingness, this again indicates a level of fairness and confirms that arguments were agreeable, regardless of the perceived expertise from the source. However, there is significant difference when we compare the mean “compellingness” scores against perceived experts, and non-experts. *See Table 1.*

The overall mean “compellingness” score with perceived experts was .68, while non-experts mean score was .59. This difference seems slight, but given the smaller question size, this difference indicates the subjects trusted the perceived expert’s cue in about 1 more question than the non-expert. With half of our theoretical crosstab explained, with regards to survey respondents opinions on the sources, the next test is to determine what frame is most effective in an argument. My initial hypothesis claimed that higher levels of

emotional appeal would compel the subjects significantly more than rational appeal, however this wasn’t the case. The frequency table displayed a slight edge to emotional appeal with mean of .63 for cues that leaned on a rational frame, and a mean of .65 for cues that leaned on an emotional frame. This slight difference implies almost little to no difference in how individuals processed rational versus emotional cues. *See Table 2.*

These findings may speak to the preferences of individuals that have limited information to make a decision. This would confirm that individuals partake in peripheral route processing theory at higher rates, as more significant emphasis seems to be put in the expertise of the source providing the cue and not as much in the framing of the cue.

The “agreeableness” multi-regression model calculates how much explained variance exists within the survey questions that were aimed at determining the malleability of an individual. The regression model was able to explain .17 (adjusted r-square) of the variance, which leaves a lot of the unexplained variance in the data, but it means we have part of the puzzle. The explained variance dropped significantly, when we switched to the regression model for “compellingness.” I would argue this demonstrates framing had little to no effect on the subject’s perception of the cue. This aligns with our evidence above, that suggested the mean scores of emotional cues had no significant difference from rational cues. *See Table 3.*

Table 1:

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Agreeableness	201	0.17	1	0.5568	0.16239
Compellingness	201	0	1	0.6405	0.22439
Agreeableness Expert	201	0	1	0.5613	0.23087
Agreeableness Non-Expert	201	0	1	0.5543	0.22223
Valid N (listwise)	201				

Table 2:

Statistics

		Compellingness Expert	Compellingness Non-Expert
N	Valid	201	201
	Missing	4	4
Mean		0.6841	0.5988

Table 3: Statistics

		Compellingness Rational	Compellingness Emotional
N	Valid	201	201
	Missing	4	4
Mean		0.626	0.6502

The regression models reveal there is still a lot of unexplained variance in an individual’s probability they will accept a cue, but both regression models identified there were two significant variables in the model. *See Table 4, 5, 6, 7.* With a negative beta weight of -.03 for “agreeableness” and -.04 for “compellingness”,

this confirms that individuals with less political knowledge will not only agree with political cues, but they will find them more compelling as well. This intuitively confirms the suspicion that individuals who don’t have an existing schema of political knowledge, must accept the survey’s cues at higher levels. In addition,

when asked to define their “usual political preferences,” the regression model identifies a slight leaning towards the republican party with concerns to the “agreeableness” regression, in addition to the “compellingness” model. I would argue this trend is susceptible to change if the study is repeated, especially if the cues leaned more towards a democratic bias. Interest in politics, age, and gender could not explain very much variance in either model.

With multiple lines of evidence, we can confirm that individuals are partaking in

peripheral route processing at higher levels than central route processing. The mean scores for the frame of the cues were not significantly different depending on the sources tendency to lean either on rational or emotional arguments. However, expertise played a much more significant role in the subject’s likelihood to accept the cues.

Table 4: Model Summary - Agreeableness

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.438a	0.191	0.17	0.14794

a Predictors: (Constant), Decision Making, Regardless Political Party, Knowledge, News Consumption, Gender

Table 5: Coefficients A

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.498	0.037		13.481	0
Gender	0.035	0.024	0.108	1.455	0.147
Regardless Political Party	0.043	0.008	0.363	5.28	0
Knowledge	-0.025	0.01	-0.176	-2.531	0.012
News Consumption	-0.002	0.007	-0.017	-0.234	0.816
Decision Making	8.47E-05	0	0.014	0.22	0.826

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
1	.268a	0.072	0.047	0.21964

a Predictors: (Constant), Decision Making, Regardless Political Party, Knowledge, News Consumption, Gender

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	0.647	0.055		11.809	0
Gender	-0.004	0.036	-0.009	-0.116	0.908
Regardless Political Party	0.031	0.012	0.187	2.536	0.012
Knowledge	-0.03	0.014	-0.156	-2.105	0.037
News Consumption	-0.002	0.01	-0.015	-0.191	0.849
Decision Making	0.001	0.001	0.106	1.503	0.134

a Dependent Variable: Compellingness

4. Conclusions

Many individuals displayed a tendency to accept expert cues at higher rates in the raw data, which allows me to confirm at least part of my hypothesis. But given the lack of support to suggest emotional cues are significantly more compelling than rational cues, I am forced to reject the whole hypothesis. Petty and Cacioppo's ELM theory speaks directly to the data, and this would suggest that individuals pay much closer attention to the source providing the cue, rather than the content of the cue itself. This strategy of peripheral route processing worries me, because in a time where there are immense collections of information from competing experts, individuals could potentially accept clusters of incorrect cues from polarized political elites. Voters can exist in their own echo chambers, where facts can be distorted to appeal to their existing biases. Not to mention, by *significantly* analyzing the cue's source over the message, an individual could stop a dialogue from occurring before one can even begin. Donald Trump may not be the most likeable individual, and he may even tweet the occasional false statement, however it

would be wrong to simply disregard every word that he speaks, simply because you do not trust him. At the very least it implies that all individuals should at least make an effort to expose themselves to sources who potentially will provide them with different cues. Striving for more political knowledge can only improve the democratic process, as 1 more informed voter helps bring the collective closer to choosing the "correct" candidate for office. Individuals that don't possess prior knowledge on politics need to make an attempt to familiarize themselves with political actors, institutions, and salient issues. Utilizing a heuristic is a good start, and should be used to fill small gaps in a voter's political knowledge. However, solely relying on cue taking potentially leaves a voter capable of casting an "uninformed vote," and potentially damaging the democratic process.

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