

Conversation Among Critics

discussion of *Persuasion in Parallel*

Author: Alex Coppock, Yale University
Critics: Diana Mutz, University of Pennsylvania
John Sides, Vanderbilt University
Eunji Kim, Columbia University
Andrew Little, University of California, Berkeley
Jamie Druckman, Northwestern University

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Abstract

Persuasion in Parallel was slated for an “Author meets critics” panel at APSA’s 2023 conference in Los Angeles, which was affected by a hotel workers strike. Instead of having the panel in person at the convention center or virtually on Zoom, I asked my five critics to meet me on Slack to have text-based version of the conversation. What follows is a lightly-edited transcript of this “Conversation among critics.”

Alex Coppock: In light of the Los Angeles hotel workers strike, we morphed our in-person “Author meets critics” panel for *Persuasion in Parallel* (Coppock, 2023) into an online “Conversation among critics” over Slack, the messaging app. My sincere thanks to the panelists, Jamie Druckman, Eunji Kim, Andrew Little, Diana Mutz, and John Sides, for trying out this untested new format.

Our critics will have their conversation over the next 90 minutes, moving from topic to topic (and back) as is appropriate. The panelists should feel free to cite any work of their own or of others and to upload any figures or photos that may be useful. I will compile the whole conversation into a pdf that will be shared on social media and posted to my website.

So the panelists can have a free and engaged conversation among themselves, I won’t participate in any way for the duration of the session.

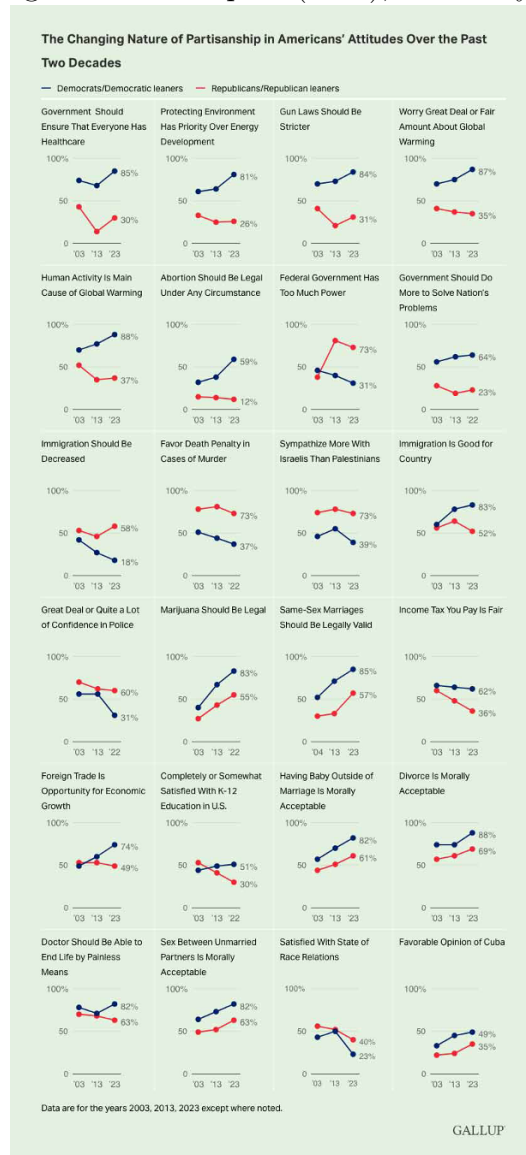
John, Diana, Andrew, Eunji, and Jamie – thank you all so much for being here. Please take it away!

- Diana Mutz:** A general question: Your book asks us to reconsider whether consensus is possible because people move in the same direction when exposed to experimental treatments intended to persuade them in a particular direction. But the parallel persuasion arguments seems to suggest that they will never converge, or am I misunderstanding something here? How does PiP suggest that consensus is achievable?
- Jamie Druckman:** I think Alex’s point is that since there is common movement the original gaps do not dissipate substantially.
- Andrew Little:** I think Diana asks a great question. It could be even harder because the book generally studies a case where people see common information. If people see different information, this might even imply that we should see divergence over time.
- Diana Mutz:** Exactly, but then why are there any implications for consensus?
- Eunji Kim:** I agree with Andrew’s point, on the importance of thinking real-world exposure
- Andrew Little:** Even though the book studies an impressive variety of outcomes, I wonder if they happen to be the kinds of questions where more information won’t necessarily lead to consensus
- Jamie Druckman:** So what issue would lead to a consensus as that would entail different values not mattering, right?
- Andrew Little:** At least in the more classical Bayesian learning tradition, results about consensus are usually about beliefs about facts
- Jamie Druckman:** right you could get there with beliefs about facts but not on policy views...
- Jamie Druckman:** I think a related question is: the book focuses on general persuasive messages and how those influence the population. Two questions though arise: 1) how common are these messages in an age of increased targeting and 2) how uniform would the effects be if the heterogeneity lied not with people but with context/dosage?
- Eunji Kim:** but beliefs about “facts” are tricky now... I am thinking about how we can understand, using PIP framework, the fact that so many Republicans believe in election denials or climate denials? on Jamie’s Q1, most of the persuasive messaging in the current media environment contains group cues, which is outside the scope of the core argument of the book
- Jamie Druckman:** Won’t Alex argue that we could persuade people with consistent messages on denialism (no evidence) or climate (evidence) but this requires a common understanding of evidence which I think is implicit in Alex’s book, right... there is common, shared knowledge...
- John Sides:** I was typing the same question as Eunji: how common are persuasive messages that arrive without the salient “group cues” that

Alex sets aside in the book? That's also the answer to Eunji's question about climate change and election denial

Jamie Druckman: And yes I suppose that is my question a la Eunji, how frequent are the types of messages Alex studies?

Figure 1: Figure from Newport (2023), shared by John Sides



John Sides:

That's the graph that inspired my question. Lots of issues in that graph, a few cases of PiP (mainly on gay rights and pot legalization), but also lots of polarization. If you had to divide politics into "issues where persuasive information dominates" and "issues where group cues dominate," what percentage of politics or political issues would fall into each category?

- Jamie Druckman:** In fairness to Alex, though, he is clear he is not looking at group cues and thus perhaps discussions of partisanship are not in his scope... there are not party cues.
- John Sides:** I absolutely understand that, but if most of politics is group cues, then, well...
- Andrew Little:** It would seem like there is an upper bound to the effect that party/group cues can have: once you know what the group cue is is there an effect of seeing that again and again? On the other hand with persuasive information it's possible to see new arguments/new "considerations?" And maybe a consequence of the book is that would-be persuaders should be using more information messages rather than just group cues!
- Jamie Druckman:** And even in the presence of cues, there are scenarios where content matters and even competes with group cues as the recent Tappin et al. NHB paper (Tappin, Berinsky, and Rand, 2023) shows and Bullock showed in 2011 (Bullock, 2011)...
- Jamie Druckman:** I suppose a bigger question for me is how often are communicators these days sending GENERAL messages instead of targeted messages?
- John Sides:** What is a real-world case where persuasive information mattered as much as or more than group cues in the presence of competing group cues? At some point, we have to ask whether these survey experiments are getting us anywhere.
- Jamie Druckman:** I think that's a bit of a tricky way to ask the question John. You are asking if information matters as much or more but one could ask "does it matter" – and I think there are cases where it clearly matters.
- Andrew Little:** Maybe I'm misunderstanding the question, but would you attribute the dramatic change in views on, say, gay marriage to a change in group cues?
- Diana Mutz:** No
- Eunji Kim:** attitudes toward LGBTQ communities, according to Joe Biden's hypothesis, were largely influenced by Will and Grace. :grin:
- Eunji Kim:** but John's point on our grappling with survey experiments, in general, resonates with me. My question for the distinguished senior scholars in this room (everyone except me) was what is next after PIP - for instance, thinking about a typical graduate dissertation in American political behavior that attempts to use survey experiments.
- John Sides:** I think the large-scale cultural changes on gay rights and marijuana legalization are the best real-world prima facie evidence for PiP. Although note that group cues are driving down GOP support for the "morality" of gay relationships: Jones (2023)

- Jamie Druckman:** I am not sure if Alex would dismiss the power of group cues. For his argument to matter, I think it's more that one has to accept that content matters somewhat...
- Diana Mutz:** Survey-experiments as a method are not the same thing as persuasion experiments. They have many other uses.
- John Sides:** What I'm saying is that we have many survey experiments showing that information can be persuasive, even in the presence of group cues. And then we leave the rarified confines of survey experiments where we force people to consume that information, and what we see in actual public opinion is lots of non-parallel trends. I'm asking whether we should perhaps be less optimistic about the prospects for PiP.
- Jamie Druckman:** On Eunji's question, I think Alex's book leaves a lot of open questions. For instance, we know from dual process models of persuasion that there are heterogeneities based on ability and motivation. Alex doesn't explore those. We also know there are distinct types of targeted messages (with or without groups cues) that Alex does not explore. Further, there is variations in context that Alex does not explore... so I suppose for me, even within the narrow area of persuasive survey experiments, Alex may set a baseline which is great but much to do.
- Andrew Little:** I don't see a major contradiction between the book and the data John presents, because we may well see divergence in cases where partisans are seeing different information. I'm probably the least qualified to answer Eunji's question but trying to reconcile macro patterns with the micro evidence would be a great topic.
- Jamie Druckman:** I think John asks a great question but we do also see on many moral issues – PiP trends: see Baldassarri and Park (2020).
- Diana Mutz:** This thought is apropos of John's last comment above. The book is very clearly written, and Alex puts a lot of effort put into specifying scope conditions. But as I progressed through it, I felt like maybe I was losing the thread of what precisely Alex is pushing back against. What previous assumptions are you assuming to be incorrect? Is it the assumption that persuasion occurs at all with respect to policy attitudes? Or the assumption that it affects groups differently? Or is it the idea that backlash is possible? Or probable? That motivated reasoning can occur? I'd be curious which of these he sees (or the rest of you see) as the headline/biggest news to political scientists?
- Jamie Druckman:** My take in the end was he was pushing back somewhat against motivated reasoning. But a concern here is I wasn't sure if he was suggesting "motivated reasoning doesn't always occur" or "motivated reasoning never occurs."

- Eunji Kim:** yes, this was my read too (pushing against motivated reasoning) (i.e., no backfire effects). But I wonder whether Alex took a very hard stance on that
- Jamie Druckman:** That said, I think the homogeneity of effects are important to Alex because I think he would say it suggests people can process information in a common way and thus there are general arguments that can sway people, a little bit, and endure...
- Diana Mutz:** Are there many previous studies that might lead scholars to anticipate backlash within the type of persuasion/policy attitudes his framework is meant to apply?
- Eunji Kim:** (But I agree with Diana's point on how this book is so clearly written (exceptionally well); I know we are here to offer criticisms but compliments are much deserved.)
- Jamie Druckman:** Yes, I definitely agree with the praise – there also are various methodological implications and it is beautifully written and presented. And so thoughtful... To Diana, I do think there was a fair amount of push from some in poli psych about backlash effects... and Dan Kahan perhaps most forcefully.
- John Sides:** The combo of PiP plus the Wood, Porter, Nyhan, and Reifler collaboration (Nyhan et al., 2020) has really tipped the scales against backlash effects.
- Jamie Druckman:** And on these, a lot of people took the trends like John put up earlier and said must be that it is backlash when in fact it could be distinct priors and not due to backlash... that's my read.
- Jamie Druckman:** YES but Alex started this book before Wood, Porter, Nyhan, Reifler.... :slightly_smiling_face:
- Diana Mutz:** I confess I didn't think of Kahan as a political psychologist...
- Jamie Druckman:** I agree with you Diana but he influenced many :slightly_smiling_face:
- Andrew Little:** I'm happy to see the consensus turning against backlash being common, and see that as a main contribution of book to really put nails in that coffin. My potentially more controversial view (already hashed out with Alex) is that a big mistake was thinking that motivated reasoning leads to backlash in the first place. For a book which is so careful about empirical evidence, the reason provided for motivated reasoning leading to backlash mostly boils down to "Taber and Lodge said so." (chapter 7 is more thoughtful on this point) Taber and Lodge (2006).
- Diana Mutz:** Is there any evidence that it does? I though it led to null effects, but not backlash necessarily.
- Andrew Little:** I come at this from a theoretical angle, but from working on several models of motivated reasoning I think it will often attenuate the effects of information but predicting backlash is hard

- Jamie Druckman:** Well there is other evidence in communication, particularly on climate change (e.g., Nisbet's work, Nisbet (2009)). I also want to be careful here that Alex does not show motivated reasoning does not occur... he can only show no evidence of backlash. He doesn't look at all parts of motivated reasoning theory (e.g., information search) and he does not measure or manipulate motivations. This is not mean to be critical but I don't think you can take PiP as definitive evidence that directional reasoning does not occur.
- Andrew Little:** Yes I would go farther and argue that motivated reasoning may be why we don't see convergence!
- Jamie Druckman:** Which I think accords with Andrew's comment... (also I think Alex's point was not to claim that it never occurs, in fairness.)
- John Sides:** To Andrew's point, I wondered about the cases in which both parties move in the same direction in response to persuasive information, but one party moves more. I recognize Alex's point that parallel movement in latent opinions can result in asymmetric movement when you map latent opinions to survey indicators, but still. If persuasive information makes Democrats moves 2x or 3x as much as Republicans, is that PiP or is it motivated reasoning that's preventing truly parallel shifts or convergence? It strikes me as interesting because there's a difference between asymmetric movement that creates convergence (one party "catches up" to the other) and asymmetric movement that creates more divergence between the parties even though they are moving in the same direction. Or, at least, those two possibilities have pretty different political implications.
- Andrew Little:** A related point raised by the book and which I've been thinking about a lot: is there even a rational benchmark for how attitudes should change in response to information?
- John Sides:** I thought a really instructive part of the book is where Alex shows how hard it is to establish such a benchmark.
- Jamie Druckman:** That is a great question. It certainly would still be Bayesian with people having different relative evaluations of the evidence but is it PiP in the strict sense... not sure?
- Andrew Little:** The pedantic way to ask it is how can we do Bayes' rule on an attitude?
- Jamie Druckman:** Oh that was in response to John – I suppose overall then there is PiP as an empirical finding that is distinct from a theory of updating, right????"
- Diana Mutz:** I don't believe so; the information may not be novel to some, or it may address dimensions of the policy that are relevant to some but not others. But I am also reminded of the old studies showing that

longer messages are more persuasive than shorter ones, even when they say absolutely nothing different from the shorter message. How much does the specific information actually matter?

Jamie Druckman: So that would not be PiP... what is the “theory of updating” for Alex?

John Sides: At the end of Chapter 7, he says he thinks the “Bayesian metaphor for information processing is correct enough to be useful.” This is because he thinks people’s likelihood functions don’t vary that much.

Jamie Druckman: Yep I saw that. so is the theory Bayesian... the problem is Bayesian can accommodate a LOT. Perhaps not backlash but could be NOT PiP... as many have suggested...

Eunji Kim: This is a different point but one implication this book hints at is that if people know persuasion is possible/people do update in response to information, then we might be able to reduce animosity towards ‘others’. This is a testable hypothesis, but I’m curious to know what you all thought about this implication, i.e. affective polarization

John Sides: Yes, and I think he showed that point too. Which is why I said earlier that I think he makes clear how hard it is to establish benchmarks for “rationality” and the like.

John Sides: To Eunji’s question, cooperative games appear to reduce affective polarization. One interpretation of those games is that they are supplying new persuasive information about the other party (“Hey, actually these people aren’t so bad”).

John Sides: Or this from Jamie and others: Mernyk et al. (2022)

John Sides: I think the challenge is finding ways to make de-polarizing “treatments” louder than the vast amount of polarizing information that people confront.

Jamie Druckman: True – a challenge though coming back to the earlier comments is how often is information provided in a vacuum like this... one upside for Alex is he avoids party conflicts...

Jamie Druckman: Or yes what John just said at the end of his comment (I found in another paper that these misperception corrections are NOT robust to competing info....)

John Sides: Alex doesn’t talk much about deliberative polling, but there’s a case where some combination of new information and deliberation among peers creates attitude changes and some reduced affective polarization (Fishkin et al., 2021). Tough to scale that up though...

Eunji Kim: (Jamie would you mind dropping the link for that paper?) John’s point makes me think of Matt’s excellent new book: Levendusky (2023).

- Jamie Druckman:** it's a great question about deliberative polling... Eunji, the paper is coming out next week I think as a note in PNAS but here is a longer version: Druckman (2022).
- Andrew Little:** It seems like a common theme of the conversation is that we really need to know more about the relationship between what we can observe in persuasion experiments and what the aggregate effects are from people observing messages like these and others in more natural contexts (on partisan media, in conversations with others)
- John Sides:** That paper is going straight into a blog post on Good Authority, Jamie!
- Andrew Little:** Questions of persistence are important here too. The book treatment of this is great but also highlights how hard it is to study.
- Jamie Druckman:** Ha thanks John (and very excited for Good Authority). I think Andrew captured it very well and back to deliberative polling... would Alex suggest that we don't need to go to such effort at least for information exchange (putting aside partisan animosity)?
- John Sides:** I agree with Andrew on natural contexts and it's how I'd answer Eunji's earlier question about what I'd suggest for scholars starting out. For example, we know (e.g. from Barabas and Jerit: Barabas and Jerit (2010); Jerit, Barabas, and Clifford (2013)) that field experiments likely produce smaller effect sizes than survey experiments. But the low cost and convenience of survey experiments means that we're generating survey experimental findings far more rapidly than we can test them in natural contexts.
- Eunji Kim:** The phrase from Jamie's new paper, "victim of competitive information environments" can be applied to most political messaging... and at least from conversations at political communication pre-conference, I think we are thinking a lot about the durability of any political messaging in this high choice media environment
- John Sides:** To Jamie's question: I think it would be good to disaggregate the information effects from the deliberation effects. One of Don Green's studies shows that the deliberation itself appears to matter: Farrar et al. (2010)
- Andrew Little:** Agree with Eunji that taking people's choices seriously has to be central for any "real world aggregation" (not that the experimental literature ignores it
- Jamie Druckman:** Thanks John and agreed Eunji. Perhaps survey experiments should be focused more on what types of messages get people to want to access information further...
- Alex Coppock:** Friends, we're nearing the end of our time! Is there one last topic someone would like to bring up?

- Diana Mutz:** As many of you already know, my pet peeve is that most of those survey experiments do not even bother to determine whether they have manipulated the IV [independent variable] successfully; they just assume so.
- Jamie Druckman:** Thanks Alex, I do want to point out that an entire other foundational contribution of the book (and I do think the book is foundational for persuasion to be clear!) is methodological... and the use of samples. See Alex's work in PNAS and Research and Politics... Coppock, Leeper, and Mullinix (2018); Peyton, Huber, and Coppock (2022)
- Eunji Kim:** and also your amazing visualizations (thanks for plotting raw data) Alex!
- John Sides:** It's just confirmation of that Druckman and Kam Druckman and Kam (2011) piece on convenience samples! :grinning:
- Jamie Druckman:** Yes, Diana writes about this wonderfully in a chapter in *Advances in Exp. Political Science* (Mutz, 2021). It is a great question for Alex – is he interested in the “message” as the treatment or the “information” in the message if that makes sense.
- John Sides:** What's the difference, Jamie?
- Diana Mutz:** Yes, The MC [manipulation check] in this case would be believing the information itself.
- Diana Mutz:** Regardless of whether it changes opinions.
- Jamie Druckman:** If it's the message that inattention to the message is important to think about .. if it's the information than you want to make sure everyone processes it. Or put another way, is the IV the message or is the IV processing the information and then updating in some way.
- Andrew Little:** I'll add that my favorite thing about the book is that it expends so much effort to document a small set of important facts carefully (persuasively!) and thinking clearly about what they mean
- Diana Mutz:** That's not what I meant exactly. I mean assuming attention, do they buy the info?
- Jamie Druckman:** Totally agree with Andrew...
- Diana Mutz:** Ditto!
- Eunji Kim:** is there a way to easily disentangle the two? (IV the message vs the IV processing the information and then updating in some way)
- Jamie Druckman:** I agree and I take it that is what Alex is interested in... but one could also be interested in studying the message exposure as the IV thinking where inattention is okay... but I agree that is not what I think interests Alex per se... it's what do people do with information and the lack of MCs in the studies is an issue (but

note not really Alex's fault given a lot of these were studies others did and didn't include MCs, me included...)

Diana Mutz: I meant as a general criticism of survey-experiments, not his in particular.

Jamie Druckman: I think to Eunji... not but in one case, you then the MC has different implications than the other... it's like are you interested in whether a TV show can capture attention AND move attitudes or do you assume attention and see if the show moves people. Diana discusses this also in her Population experiment book really nicely (Mutz, 2011)

Jamie Druckman: Yes, yes on survey experiments in general.. and there is a new working paper that shows sadly that MCs have not increased even since your content analysis Diana...

Jamie Druckman: Last comment – CONGRATS Alex– it's a masterful achievement something we will all think about and benefit from for the rest of our careers..

John Sides: Thank you, Alex, and congratulations on the book!

Diana Mutz: CONGRATS INDEED!

Andrew Little: It was a pleasure to read and discuss with all of you!

Eunji Kim: Congratulations!! and yes, thanks for including me in this discussion!

Diana Mutz: I'm only sad we didnt get to chat with Alex!

Alex Coppock: To the esteemed panelists – thank you! This conversation was so exciting to watch in real time – as you might imagine I was bursting from not responding!

Alex Coppock: ...and we're out. Thanks everyone!

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