

“There Must Be a Reason”: Osama, Saddam, and Inferred Justification

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One of the most curious aspects of the 2004 presidential election was the strength and resilience of the belief among many Americans that Saddam Hussein was linked to the terrorist attacks of September 11. Scholars have suggested that this belief was the result of a campaign of false information and innuendo from the Bush administration. We call this the information environment explanation. Using a technique of “challenge interviews” on a sample of voters who reported believing in a link between Saddam and 9/11, we propose instead a social psychological explanation for the belief in this link. We identify a number of social psychological mechanisms voters use to maintain false beliefs in the face of disconfirming information, and we show that for a subset of voters the main reason to believe in the link was that it made sense of the administration’s decision to go to war against Iraq. We call this *inferred justification*: for these voters, the fact of the war led to a search for a justification for it, which led them to infer the existence of ties between Iraq and 9/11.

Ronald Reagan once remarked that “the trouble with our liberal friends is not that they are ignorant, but that they know so much that isn’t so” (Reagan 1964). His comment goes to the heart of one of the most contentious issues in democratic theory: how should democracies handle mistaken beliefs? False beliefs present a potentially serious challenge to democratic theory and practice, as citizens with incorrect information cannot form appropriate preferences or evaluate the preferences of others. Kuklinski and colleagues (2002) have demonstrated that incorrect beliefs—as distinct from mere lack of information, a more thoroughly studied phenomenon (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997)—are widespread and underlie substantial differences in policy preferences.

One of the most curious “false beliefs” of the 2004 presidential election was the strength and resilience of the belief among many Americans that

Saddam Hussein was linked to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Over the course of the campaign, several polls showed that majorities of respondents believed that Saddam Hussein was either partly or largely responsible for the 9/11 attacks (see Althaus and Largio 2004, for a summary of polling evidence, and Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003, on closely related questions). This percentage declined slowly, dipping below 50 percent only in late 2003 (Everts and Isernia 2005). This misperception persisted despite mounting evidence and a broad official consensus that no such link existed.

Explanations for this have generally suggested that the misperception of a link resulted from a campaign of innuendo carried out by the Bush administration that explicitly and implicitly linked Saddam with Al Qaeda. For example, Gershkoff and Kushner (2005:525) argue that “the Bush administration successfully convinced [a majority of the public] that a link existed between Saddam Hussein and terrorism generally, and between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda specifically.” We characterize this explanation as being about the *information environment*: it implies that if voters had possessed the correct information, they would not have believed in the link. Underlying this explanation is a psychological model of information processing that scholars have labeled “Bayesian updating,” which envisions decision makers incrementally and rationally changing their opinions in accordance with new information (Gerber and Green 1999).

In this article we present data that contest this explanation, and we develop a *social psychological* explanation for the belief in the link between Saddam and Al Qaeda. We argue that the primary causal agent for misperception is not the presence or absence of correct information but a respondent’s willingness to believe particular kinds of information. Our explanation draws on a psychological model of information processing that scholars have labeled motivated reasoning. This model envisions respondents as processing and responding to information defensively, accepting and seeking out confirming information, while ignoring, discrediting the source of, or arguing against the substance of contrary information (DiMaggio 1997; Kunda 1990; Lodge and Tabor 2000). Motivated reasoning is a descendant of the social psychological theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959; Kunda 1990), which posits an unconscious impulse to relieve cognitive tension when a respondent is presented with information that contradicts preexisting beliefs or preferences. Recent literature on motivated reasoning builds on cognitive dissonance theory to explain *how* citizens relieve cognitive dissonance: they avoid inconsistency, ignore challenging information altogether, discredit the information source, or argue substantively against the challenge (Jobe, Tourangeau, and Smith 1993; Lodge and Taber 2000; Westen et al. 2006). The process of substantive counterarguing is especially consequential, as the cognitive exercise of generating counterarguments often has the ironic effect of solidifying and strengthening the original opinion leading to entrenched,

polarized attitudes (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000; Sunstein 2000; Lodge and Taber 2000). This confirmation bias means that people value evidence that confirms their previously held beliefs more highly than evidence that contradicts them, regardless of the source (DiMaggio 1997; Nickerson 1998, Wason 1968).

We also draw on social psychological theories that focus on the use of heuristics, decision-making shortcuts that allow respondents to avoid time- and resource-intensive processes of rational deliberation. Within political psychology, scholars have shown that heuristics such as party, ideology, endorsements, opinion polls, and candidate appearance allow voters to evaluate a candidate quickly by matching an easily available external marker to preferences held by the voter, without investing the time necessary to investigate the background, preferences, and positions of every individual candidate (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; see also Popkin 1994).

One set of heuristics particularly relevant for the case at hand is situational heuristics, markers that are associated with the situation in which the voter finds him- or herself. Decision making is not only a process of matching external heuristics such as party or appearance to preferences; important cues about how to act are revealed to the agent by the situation itself. For example, social psychologists have shown in the “Tom Sawyer Studies” that an individual’s understanding of an experience is powerfully influenced by situational cues (Ariely, Lowenstein, and Prelec 2006; Lowenstein 2001). In one experiment, researchers paid one group of subjects to listen to some poems, but requested money from a second group of subjects to listen to the same poems. They then asked how much subjects would bid to listen to the poems again, with negative bids allowed. Those who had first been asked to pay gave positive bids, that is, they were willing to pay to listen to the poems again; but those who had first been paid to listen gave negative bids, that is, they would only listen again if paid to do so. The cue of being paid suggested to participants that this was a negative experience, one that they would only undergo again if paid to do so. The cue of being asked to pay suggested to participants that it was a positive experience, one that they were subsequently willing to pay for. Lowenstein (2001:503) concludes that people “first attempt to figure out what kind of situation they are in and then adopt choice rules that seem appropriate for that situation.”

Situational cues have been shown to be relevant in other scenarios as well, for instance, police line ups (Wells et al. 1998) and response to fictitious questions. Hartley (1946) showed that college students were willing to communicate their opinions about places that did not exist: the students assumed that the location existed simply because they were being asked about it. The study of “uninformed response bias” has since then shown that respondents are willing to pass judgment on nonexistent legislation (Bishop et al. 1980; Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick 1986) and nonexistent political figures (Kolson and Green 1970)

as well as to give directions to fictitious places (Collett and O'Shea 1976). Graef (2003) suggests that respondents are willing to give answers because they are guided by "a heuristic that researchers do not ask fictitious questions" (p. 645), that is, by an assumption that there is a substantive reason why a question is being asked (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000).

We build on these literatures to suggest that the situation of going to war is a powerful situational heuristic that allows voters to conclude that there is something about their world that justifies going to war. We argue that some citizens believe leaders would not take an action as drastic as war if it were not justified. They then develop affective ties to this conclusion and seek information that confirms it while dismissing information that contradicts it, producing the correlation between information and belief. These social psychological processes were an important feature of the misperception of a link between Saddam and 9/11. The belief in this link was so resilient because it made sense of the administration's decision to go to war against Iraq.

How can we distinguish empirically between the informational explanation and the social psychological explanation? If the information environment explanation is accurate and the belief is explained by incorrect information given or suggested by the administration, then we would expect correct information given by the administration to reduce rates of belief in the link. However, if the belief is maintained through social psychological processes, then we would expect little change in the face of correct information given by the administration. To distinguish empirically between these hypotheses, we need to present respondents who believe in this link with information from the Bush administration itself that casts doubt on the link. If voters show a willingness to change their minds in the face of this information, we can conclude that the belief in the link was a product of incorrect (prior) information given or implied by the administration. However, if they show resistance to the correct information, then social psychological processes are likely to be at work.

Research Design and Methods

To investigate the question of whether correct information from a trusted source reduces mistaken beliefs, we surveyed voters about their beliefs regarding the link between Saddam and September 11 and followed up with in-depth interviews that presented voters with information that contradicted their beliefs. We chose the Saddam–9/11 link as the particular belief we wanted to investigate for two reasons. First, unlike many political issues, there is a correct answer. At the time of our questioning, no evidence had been found connecting Saddam to the 9/11 attacks (nor has any such evidence emerged since). Second, the belief in the link was widespread during the time that we were in the field and gave rise to much speculation among commentators.

We chose to focus on Republican partisans because of the well-documented partisan difference in the perception of the validity of this link. We assumed that Democratic partisans would not have a strong desire to defend the Bush administration on this issue, thus severely reducing the variation we would capture in responses. Our choice of subjects means that we are investigating how partisanship produces and reinforces political (mis)information. Our choice of subjects should not be taken to imply that the processes we are examining here are particular to conservatives: we expect that, had we conducted this study in the late 1990s, we would have found a high degree of motivated reasoning regarding the behavior of President Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal. Previous research on motivated reasoning has found it among respondents of all classes, ages, races, genders, and affiliations (see Lodge and Tabor 2000).

We selected counties in the researchers' home states that had below-average income, a majority white population, and had voted for Bush in 2000.¹ We then selected the precinct within each county that had gone most heavily Republican in 2000 and identified potential respondents using publicly available voter registration data. All potential respondents were sent a survey with one question on the survey replicating the Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis (2003) question. We mailed a total of 1,062 surveys, of which 12 were ineligible because of non-deliverable addresses. Of the remaining 1,050, 267 surveys were returned to us: 133 from midwestern states and 134 from southern states, for an overall adjusted response rate of 25.4 percent. Of these surveys, 21 were unusable in this study, so the analysis of the surveys is based on 246 respondents.²

We then conducted in-depth "challenge" interviews with those survey respondents who agreed to be interviewed. The "challenge interview" is a technique that we developed for this project, and it may be of interest to other researchers. Interviewers led participants through a dialogue on some of the most prominent issues raised over the course of the election campaign, tested their levels of information about political issues, and then presented them with substantive challenges to their political opinions as stated on their surveys. The interview centered on two challenges during which participants were asked to respond to evidence that President Bush's tax cuts directly benefited the wealthiest Americans and to evidence that Saddam Hussein was not involved in the September 11 attacks in the United States. We chose these two issues because they were important political issues that—unlike many political issues—had a correct answer, and because research showed widespread misunderstanding of both issues. This article presents the results of the foreign policy challenge. (The domestic policy challenge is analyzed in a separate article.)

The foreign policy challenge included material casting doubt on the link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11. To accurately assess the influence of information on beliefs, we needed a source of information that our respondents

would trust. We used two newspaper articles, one showing that the 9/11 Commission had not found any evidence linking Saddam and 9/11, and another quoting President Bush himself denying a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Because we felt that President Bush himself would be the most trustworthy source of information for these Republican partisans, we emphasized the newspaper article by reading the full quote to respondents while showing them the newspaper clip. The exact wording of the challenge was:

[. . .] let's talk about Iraq. As you see in these quotes, the 9/11 Commission found that Saddam Hussein was not behind the September 11 attacks. President Bush himself said, "This administration never said that the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated between Saddam and Al Qaeda." What do you think about that? [show newspaper clips]

However, because we wished interviewers to follow the natural flow of the conversation, interviewers sometimes changed the exact wording of the challenge. We investigated whether changes in wording affected the substantive findings that we describe below: they did not.

Each interview took between 30 minutes and 2 hours, with most lasting approximately 1 hour. We carried out a total of 84 interviews: 51 in Illinois and 33 in North Carolina. Interviews were transcribed and coded by the authors and undergraduate research assistants. Forty-nine interviews met the criteria for inclusion in this article (voting for Bush, plus responding that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the 9/11 attacks or had given substantial help³).

A methodological clarification is necessary here: we are drawing on these 49 interviews not to generalize about the original set of 1,050 community members to whom surveys were sent, but rather, in order to generalize about Bush voters who believe in the link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11. That is, our article is an attempt to get behind the survey answers that found majorities believing in the link. For this purpose, the population that is relevant for us is Bush voters who reported believing in the link on our survey (community members who did not return the survey and survey respondents who did not believe in the link are not in this population). In short, we are not making claims about the population of 1,050 in this part of the project. We *are* making the claim that our 49 interviews shed light on the population of Bush voters who claim to believe in a link between Saddam and Osama. As the number of Bush voters who believe in this link in our study is 160, our sample of 49 is 30.6 percent of that population.

We gave each subject a code representing the subject's level of political information (above average, average, or below average); this was assessed from the test of information, the responses to the challenges, and other places in the interviews relevant to a measurement of political information. To test the validity

of the measure, a second code was conducted on 16 of the interviews, producing a Krippendorff's alpha inter-coder reliability score of .8063. Krippendorff's alpha is generally considered the best measure of intercoder reliability for text coding; it is a slightly conservative measure, as it penalizes for intercoder agreement that may result by chance, and also penalizes for scores that are far apart from each other; thus, .8063 is considered a reliable level of agreement for this measure (Krippendorff 1980; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002).

To determine whether a respondent was showing Bayesian updating (the willingness to change one's mind in the face of contradictory information from a trusted source) or motivated reasoning (resisting contradictory information), we analyzed our data in two different ways. First, we examined whether our respondents deflected the information, and we categorized the strategies that they used to do so. Second, to conduct a more stringent test of the motivated reasoning hypothesis, we examined whether respondents *attended* to the contradictory data at all. Lupia (2002) argues that Bayesian updating happens in three stages: to successfully change opinion, a piece of information must be attended to, remembered, and used in decision making. The first stage, attention, is a prerequisite for the second and third stages. By coding whether our respondents attended to the information we produced a minimum estimate for motivated reasoning, which can also happen at the second or third stages.

We coded attentiveness according to whether the interviewee gave any verbal indication of having attended to the challenge. It is possible that some of our respondents did attend to the information, but did not verbalize or demonstrate that attention. To guard against this, we allowed minimal demonstrations or verbalizations to count as having attended to the challenge, and we did not judge the respondent's reasons for resisting the information; if the respondent simply said "I don't believe it," and gave no reason, we considered that the respondent had attended to the information. The criteria we developed for coding attentiveness are available from the authors.

Findings

Figure 1 shows that 72.76 percent of our 246 survey respondents believed that Saddam Hussein was either directly responsible for the 9/11 attacks or gave substantial help to those who were responsible. Table 1 shows that survey responses to this question were highly correlated with the decision to vote for Bush. Giving the correct answer ("There is no evidence of a link between Saddam Hussein and the September 11 attacks.") reduced the odds of voting for Bush over Kerry by a significant amount even when age, education, gender, income, and religious attendance were taken into account.⁴ This replicates the work of others who have found a correlation between information and vote intention. But which came first? We investigate whether possessing the correct

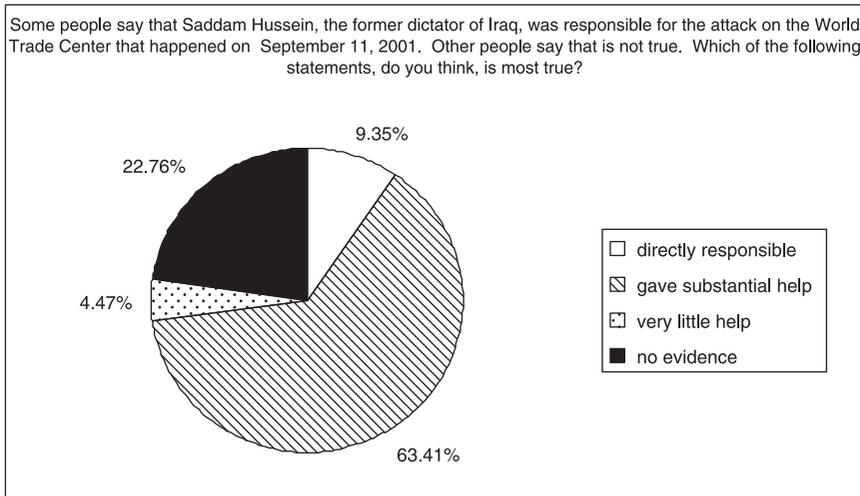


Figure 1
Perceptions of the Relationship between Saddam and September 11 (*n* = 246).

Table 1
Support for Bush over Kerry in the 2000 Presidential Election (*n* = 246)

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|--|---------|---------|
| Believes no evidence linking Saddam and September 11 | .186*** | .053*** |
| Believes Bush tax cuts primarily benefit the wealthy | .073*** | .123*** |
| Age (years) | — | 1.001 |
| Education | — | 1.047 |
| Gender | — | .713 |
| Income | — | 1.104 |
| Religious attendance | — | 1.135 |

****p* < .001; Logistic regression of vote choice (1 = Bush, 0 = Kerry), on the predictors shown, for 246 survey respondents; columns show odds ratios; Prasad et al. 2009.

information produced the decision not to vote for Bush, or whether that decision produced the willingness to believe the correct information. Figure 2 displays the breakdown in the different kinds of responses interviewees gave to the foreign policy challenge. Note that Figure 1 and Table 1 show the full set of 246

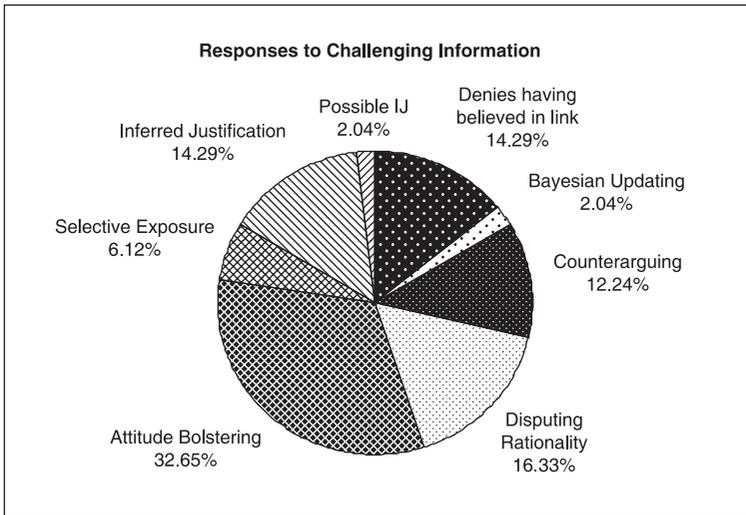


Figure 2

Participant Reactions to Information Showing No Link between Saddam and September 11.

survey respondents, which included Kerry voters; however, Figure 2 shows only the 49 interviewees—those who had voted for Bush, reported believing in a link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11, and were willing to be interviewed.

Denying Belief in the Link

The first surprise in our findings is that several interview respondents denied believing Saddam Hussein was linked to Al Qaeda, even though they had indicated such a belief on the survey. In the following example, a respondent denies thinking that Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attacks, despite answering that this was the case on his survey. In the interview, he first states that he did think Iraq was involved, but then corrects himself and says he had thought it was Afghanistan all along. When the interviewer shows him his survey response, he indicates that it was a mistake and he had never actually believed Iraq was involved with 9/11:

RESPONDENT: So I went to watch it [coverage of 9/11 in immediate aftermath] and a little bit more on the news, watching 'em burn and all that. But I thought maybe we was gonna go to war over that.

INTERVIEWER: Who'd you think we'd go to war with?

RESPONDENT: Iraq?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. You thought it was Iraq that was behind it?

RESPONDENT: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What made you . . .

RESPONDENT: Well, they've, they've kind of been hintin' about that on the news and stuff before that, so I just, right away I just kind of presumed it was Iraq and, or, not Iraq, Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWER: Oh right, right. Yeah.

RESPONDENT: Get things straightened up here then. But I, they'd been having a lot of trouble over there and everything, especially the way they was treatin' people and everything, so I just, kind of thought we'd go to war with them right away. Well, we ended up sending off a lot of troops over there right away. But that, for the next 2 or 3 days, that was about all that was on the news.

INTERVIEWER: You said on your survey, if I can find it . . . You said on your survey that you thought that Saddam Hussein had helped the terrorists.

RESPONDENT: Have what?

INTERVIEWER: You said on your survey that you thought Saddam Hussein, Saddam Hussein of uh Iraq had helped . . .

RESPONDENT: No, what on that 9/11?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

RESPONDENT: No, no. If I said that, I probably did. Just like I did right there, I meant Afghanistan.

INTERVIEWER: Oh oh oh, ok, ok.

RESPONDENT: No, I meant Afghanistan, not Iraq. I probably, I probably did say Iraq.

INTERVIEWER: Mmhmm. It says Saddam Hussein.

RESPONDENT: Yeah, well . . .

INTERVIEWER: Well, some people say . . .

RESPONDENT: You can change that or something if you want to . . .

INTERVIEWER: OK [laughs].

RESPONDENT: . . . but, yeah, no I meant Afghanistan, not Iraq.

INTERVIEWER: Mmhmm. Well, some people think he was behind it, Saddam Hussein, in Iraq.

RESPONDENT: Well, I know they keep saying that and everything but they've never come up with any kind of proof or something, so 'til they get some kind of proof or anything, I'm not gonna say one way or the other. . . . But right now, the way things are right now, I think Afghanistan was in on it all and just, just them.

This “denial” category provides one clue to the survey findings of high rates of belief in a link between Iraq and 9/11: some respondents may make a mistake

on the survey because of a general unfamiliarity with the region, even if they do know the current state of the evidence. By engaging in a dialogue with the respondent, we were able to show that he had a clear sense of the state of evidence, but slipped in his more general knowledge and mental classification of Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a finding that is not possible using simple survey methods. Seven interview participants out of 49 (14.3 percent) fell into this “denial” category. This suggests that polls asking about a link between Iraq and 9/11 may overstate the true level of belief in the link.

Bayesian Updating

Only one respondent changed his mind about a link between Saddam and 9/11 (although not about voting for Bush) based on the evidence we presented:

INTERVIEWER: . . . this is a quote here from George Bush down here, he says the administration never said that the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated between Saddam and Al Qaeda.

RESPONDENT: Why did he say that, because I know at one time, here’s another case here, you know. Does he, does he or does any politician listen to what they say? Do they keep track? . . . If there is no link, then I think he should have made it plain at the beginning, we’re out for Osama bin Laden, he’s the guy that done this, but, while we’re at it, and while we’re over there, this guy has brutalized his people and butchered his people for too long. You know, and it is a safe haven or whatever. Let’s do something with him too.

INTERVIEWER: Right, right.

RESPONDENT: But you know, back to politicians, it’s kind of like backing into a buzz saw, you don’t know which tooth got you first.

While there were other respondents who considered the information carefully, this was the only respondent who used the new information to conclude that there was no link, and that the Bush administration should have made the real reasons for wanting to go to war with Iraq clear from the beginning.

Strategies for Resisting Information

Most respondents used one of the strategies to resist persuasion that social psychologists have identified (Jacks and Cameron 2003): *counterarguing* (directly rebutting the information), *attitude bolstering* (bringing facts that support one’s position to mind without directly refuting the contradictory information), and *selective exposure* (ignoring the information without rebutting it or supporting other positions). In addition, we identified two other strategies of resisting information that have not been previously noted by social psychologists: *disputing rationality* (arguing that opinions do not need to be grounded in facts or reasoning) and—the most unusual of our findings—*inferred justification* (a strategy that infers evidence which would support the respondent’s beliefs).

Counterarguing

Slightly over one-tenth of respondents (10.2 percent) knew that no evidence had currently been found linking Saddam Hussein to 9/11 but nevertheless believed that Saddam was responsible for 9/11 and were able to give a reason for that belief. Several responded that Saddam must have been involved in 9/11 because his general antipathy toward the United States propels his support for terrorism in general: “I believe he was definitely involved with in it because he was definitely pumping money into the terrorist organizations every way he could. And he would even send \$25,000 to somebody who committed suicide to kill another person, to their family.” Another respondent combined a sense that Saddam generally supported terrorism with a skepticism toward the possibility of finding hard evidence that could prove or disprove a link: “And, I think, in that region there was not a lot of evidence to get anyway, my general feeling that just they would support terrorist groups even though they don’t officially condone and they just can have a meeting with Saddam and Saddam could have them in his backyard.”

This is the only set of respondents who were true believers in the validity of the link. They knew the current state of evidence and maintained a cogent reason for dismissing it. Some analysts (e.g., Gerber and Green 1999) might include these respondents in the category of Bayesian updaters, because they have rational reasons for not accepting the new information. However, this category was a fairly small portion of our interview sample, and was limited to partisans who were coded as either average or above average in their political information.

Attitude Bolstering

The most popular strategy was to quickly switch the topic to other good reasons that the war in Iraq was justified. This strategy was used by nearly one in three respondents and was the single largest category of responses to our questions about the perceived link. This interviewee downplays the significance of the question about the link without actually responding to the question: “There is no doubt in my mind that if we did not deal with Saddam Hussein when we did, it was just a matter of time when we would have to deal with him.” Another respondent brushes aside the issue of a link between Saddam and 9/11 by saying that the decision to invade Iraq was good for other reasons: “We were under the pretense that he had nuclear weapons. That to me is why we went; it wasn’t related to him so much. I think it had more to do with the weapons of mass destruction.”

For these respondents, their survey answers should be interpreted not as a literal indication of their belief in a link between Saddam and 9/11, but as

indicating a general fear and distrust of Saddam Hussein and support for a policy that led to his removal from power. A small group of respondents agreed that there was no link between Saddam and 9/11, but argued that the president had believed in such a link and invaded based on that belief. One respondent suggested that Bush made an honest mistake and should not be judged negatively for having acted decisively on what turned out to be faulty information: “Well, I think he used the information that he had at the time, if that information was faulty I can’t see that it could be his fault.”

These respondents do not deny the lack of evidence but simply defend the actions of the president. They empathize with the difficulty of his decision, and give him the leeway to make mistakes. Thus, attitude bolstering involves both switching topics from the merits of the link between Iraq and 9/11 and adding other plausible reasons for having gone to war in Iraq.

Selective Exposure

This category refers to those who refused to engage the contradictory information at all. Examples of this strategy include: “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about . . . where and what we’re going after.” and “I’m gonna pass on this one, for now.” The respondents in this category were either unwilling to put their knowledge of the state of evidence up to the interviewer’s scrutiny, or were generally puzzled about events. These respondents fit perfectly into the expectations of scholars of motivated reasoning, who predict simple disengagement with data that contradicts one’s beliefs. Their responses on the original survey reporting a belief in the link might be understood as something of a “best guess” or as general support for the president rather than a firmly held belief.

Disputing Rationality

Another subset of the interview respondents (10.2 percent) refused to believe the evidence that there was no link between Saddam and 9/11, but proved unable or unwilling to give a reason why:

INTERVIEWER: . . . the September 11 Commission found no link between Saddam and 9/11, and this is what President Bush said. [pause] This is what the commission said. Do you have any comments on either of those?

RESPONDENT: Well, I bet they say that the Commission didn’t have any proof of it but I guess we still can have our opinions and feel that way even though they say that.

This respondent never offered a substantive reason for her belief in the link. Rather, she distances herself from factual reasoning altogether by grounding her justification in subjectivism—“we still can have our opinions.”

These respondents understand the challenge evidence and continue to believe in the link, even when faced with this lack of confirming evidence.

However, they do not offer reasons for a continuing belief in such a link. We suggest that this sort of reasoning method, offering no substantive reason for believing in something other than personal opinion, is more common than most members of a democracy would generally care to admit (Billig 1989; Garfinkel 1967; Gilbert and Mulkay 1984; Pollner 1974; see also Shi-xu 2000).

Inferred Justification

Finally, our interviews revealed an interesting and creative reasoning style that we call *inferred justification*: recursively inventing the causal links necessary to justify a favored politician's action. Inferred justification operates as a backward chain of reasoning that justifies the favored opinion by assuming the causal evidence that would support it. As with the situational heuristics described above, respondents begin with the situation and then ask themselves what must be true about the world for the situation to hold. People who displayed inferred justification assumed that since a politician they trusted had begun this war, there must be a good reason for it. Moreover, as the 9/11 attacks were the most visible foreign policy event of recent years, they assumed 9/11 was the reason for the war and actively resisted information suggesting otherwise. We found seven clear examples of inferred justification in the interviews. A paradigmatic example is the following:

There's one gal that I was talking to and she don't believe that we should stay in Iraq, like, right now. She don't believe in all of those innocent people dying. I believe that also but there must be a reason why we're still over there or we wouldn't be over there still. We would've pulled all our troops outta there. Or at least most of them anyway.

This respondent's recall of a conversation leads her to search for reasons why U.S. troops are "still over there" and suggests that the answer must emanate from the self-evident fact that we are, indeed, "still over there". The existence of the situation itself is used to infer what must be true about the world for the situation to exist, as in the examples of the Tom Sawyer studies and uninformed response bias discussed above. On such a high-stakes issue as going to war, a leader must have an extraordinarily good reason for wanting to behave in this way.

Another interviewee notes: "Saddam, I can't judge if he did what he's being accused of, but if Bush thinks he did it then he did it." The respondent curiously interprets the quote by Bush saying that there is no direct tie between Saddam and 9/11 to mean the exact opposite: that Bush thinks there is a direct tie. In the face of a newspaper quote by Bush *denying* the tie between Saddam and 9/11, the respondent falls back on a trust of the president that leads him to conclude the exact opposite of what the president says. The president's actions seem more relevant to this respondent than the president's words.

Another respondent takes this argument a step further by speculating that the president must know things the rest of us do not:

I think the best thing you can do with this is to hope that the president has enough information to do the right thing. And then you need to trust him to do that and as part of the country you need to support that. . . . I mean, you may make the comment of saying, “Well, boy I wish they wouldn’t have done that because it just doesn’t seem like from our point of view that that was the right thing to do.” But on the other hand you gotta realize that maybe they know more than what we do about what’s really going on. Now granted, they clearly said that they don’t think there was any link between those two, but that’s not to say that maybe it wasn’t the same problem.

These voters assumed that because we went to war against Saddam Hussein, there must have been a good reason to do so. Furthermore, as the war was the most consequential foreign policy event initiated by the United States in this time period, some citizens readily associated it with the most important foreign policy event visited *upon* the United States in recent years, the 9/11 attacks:

INTERVIEWER: Um, so one of the arguments that people make is that because Saddam Hussein was not directly responsible for September 11th then we shouldn’t have gone into Iraq. What is your feeling on that argument?

RESPONDENT: I think, I, that he was directly involved.

INTERVIEWER: Do you?

RESPONDENT: Uh-huh. [affirmative] Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Uh, we have this quote here that’s from Bush saying that there was no direct link.

RESPONDENT: Yeah, see, I—I, I. He may have said that, I’m, but.

INTERVIEWER: You think there might be something more going on?

RESPONDENT: Yeah, absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

RESPONDENT: I don’t think they just close their eyes and spun around and pick a country to invade. . . . Like I said, I don’t think I need to know everything that the Pres—I mean, there’s a president for a reason.

Another respondent says: “I don’t think that if we weren’t attacked we would just go in and start shooting up the place. I think a lot of it was getting even.” These respondents argue that Iraq *must* have been directly involved, because the administration would not have randomly invaded a harmless country.⁵ They use the war itself as a heuristic leading them to conclude that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11, and for some of them this heuristic is strong enough to allow them to discount contradictory information.

While the respondents in the inferred justification category give perhaps the most direct and unequivocal evidence of the social psychological processes

behind the belief in the link between Saddam and 9/11, it is worth pointing out that all but *one* of those who acknowledged believing in the link deflected the information, either by arguing against it or simply refusing to believe in it. And it is also worth reiterating that the information that was being deflected was a denial *from the president himself* of a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

Attentiveness

In addition to the categorizations given above, we also analyzed our data a second way: by coding whether respondents attended to the contradictory information at all. We found that while all of our “above average” respondents did attend to the information, a substantial minority of our less well-informed respondents—nearly one-third—ignored or refused to engage with information that challenged their political preferences, even when that information came from a source they favor. (These data have not been included here for reasons of space and are available from the authors.)

Supporters of the Bayesian updating hypothesis have argued that poorly informed respondents are more likely to be Bayesian updaters because they will not have the resources or skills with which to counterargue or deflect information. But this assumes that respondents will need to counterargue. In the cases described here, that assumption does not hold: it is possible to deflect contradictory information by simply ignoring it.

Discussion and Limitations

We have shown in this article that when presented with correct information about the lack of a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda from a trusted source, most of our respondents deflected this information. The only exceptions were respondents who denied having believed in the link at all (7 respondents out of 49) and one who did use the information to change his mind about the link. We have also shown that one-third of the respondents coded as average or below average in information simply ignored the challenging information altogether, thus not meeting the most elementary prerequisite for Bayesian updating. To summarize, our evidence suggests that the information environment argument is overstated.

To what extent can these responses, produced in the artificial context of an interview, be taken to show something reliable about real-world political psychology and voting behavior? First, is it possible that our respondents would change their minds after we left? This is unlikely, as social psychologists have shown that the correct recall of information is surprisingly short-lived (see, for example, Schwarz et al. 2007). For this reason, Bayesian updating is most likely during the moment of contact with new information itself: if our respondents ignored or deflected the information at the moment when it was presented, they were not likely to retrieve and act upon it later.

Second, whether or not our interviews explain real-world behavior, they do help to explain the *survey results* showing the belief in this link. Surveys conducted at this time found widespread belief in the link between Saddam and Al Qaeda. If these survey results are evidence of misinformation, then presenting our respondents with correct information from a source they trusted should have led them to correct their beliefs. On the other hand, if survey results are picking up reluctance to believe correct information, then presenting our respondents with correct information would lead them to deflect the information, which is what we found. In addition, our interviews show that one in seven respondents who claimed to believe in the link on our survey *did not actually* believe in the link upon closer probing. Their survey response does not reflect actual belief in the link but a mistake made on the survey. Our interview method allowed respondents to reveal that they did possess the correct information.

Finally, our interviews may not capture behavior in actual political contexts, but they do show what is likely to happen in the kind of interaction envisaged by theorists of deliberative democracy. Theorists of deliberative democracy consider exactly this sort of context, an extended and flexible interaction involving reason giving on both sides of an issue, to be most conducive to democratic deliberation. For that reason, they criticize laboratory findings of motivated reasoning for emphasizing one-shot presentations of information and rigid protocols. Our flexible interview format shows that the finding of motivated reasoning holds outside the laboratory and within the kinds of interaction that deliberative democracy scholars envision.

However, there is one important limitation to this finding. Our study was conducted in October 2004, after almost 2 years of debate and discussion on Iraq in the public sphere. Therefore, it is possible that we are only showing that interviewees wanted to believe in this link at this late date; their original reason for believing in the link may have been misinformation. If this is the case, then our study shows not the *origins* of the belief in the link, but the reasons for its *resilience* through the 2004 presidential election, after the administration had admitted that there was no such link.

We close by considering what our work contributes to the finding of Althaus and Largio (2004), who show that belief in the link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda varies depending on how the question is asked. In polls that asked the open-ended question of who was responsible for the attacks, very few respondents mentioned Saddam Hussein. However, when forced to choose a culprit from a list of possible names, majorities mentioned Saddam Hussein (Althaus and Largio 2004). Our interview findings point out that in some ways, forced-choice questions are closer to tapping the actual decision-making process involved in political thinking and behavior than open-ended questions.

In the real world, open-ended questions are a rarity. Subjects more commonly evaluate situations by recognizing views with which they identify than by articulating those views (Narvaez and Bock 2002; Wyer 1997). By extension, citizens are rarely asked to describe a political or moral position *de novo* but instead are asked to select a position or group with which they agree (including during the moment of voting) (Mutz 2006; Perrin 2006; Walsh 2004).

In this case, when presented with the fact of a president going to war, respondents do not begin from an open-ended position, determining their own belief from first principles and available data and then comparing it with the decision to go to war. Rather, some respondents simply assumed that there was a reason why the president wanted to conduct this war; and because many respondents were either not fully informed of or confused by the actual reasons the administration gave for waging war in Iraq, 9/11 seemed to them to be the most obvious justification. In essence, by invading Iraq the administration presented the public with the equivalent of a forced-choice survey question of whether or not Saddam was responsible for 9/11; in answering this “question,” some respondents concluded that as we had invaded Iraq, it must mean that those in a position to know had concluded that Iraq was behind 9/11.

The main theoretical implication of our research is that “knowledge” as measured on surveys is partly a by-product of the attempt to resolve the social psychological problem of cognitive dissonance. The practical implication of this is that, although scholars have shown a correlation between the perception of links between Iraq and Al Qaeda and support for the war in Iraq, we cannot conclude from this correlation that misinformation led to support for the war. Rather, for at least some respondents, the sequence was the other way around: support for the war led to a search for a justification for it, which led to the misperception of ties between Iraq and 9/11. This suggests a mechanism through which motivated reasoning may be *strongest* when the stakes are *highest*. It is precisely because the stakes of going to war are so high that some of our respondents were willing to believe that “there must be a reason.”

ENDNOTES

¹This project stems from a larger project on white working-class communities; however, we do not expect the racial and socioeconomic characteristics of this population to affect the social psychological process being discussed here. Motivated reasoning is found among all races and across the income spectrum (Lodge and Tabor 2000).

²Although this response rate is on the low end of what survey researchers consider acceptable, our survey results replicate the Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis (2003) results discussed below. And in a separate article on other aspects of the data (Prasad et al. 2009) we found that our conclusions were confirmed by the National Election Studies (NES) 2004 survey. While it is not possible to

assess the specific claim about social psychological processes using NES data, we do know that our respondents match NES 2004 respondents on other characteristics.

³A few interviews were excluded because of poor tape quality and inaudibility.

⁴Giving the correct response to the tax cut question also reduced the odds of supporting Bush (see Prasad et al. 2009).

⁵In addition to these seven cases, we also found one that we categorized as a possible inferred justification response. The respondent had given a clearly inferred justification about the tax cut issue and then gave what might be an inferred justification response about 9/11 (“He has to decide things at certain times, you know. It’s, this, this kind of stuff isn’t thing, anything you can put on paper.”).

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