On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages: A Cautionary Tale of Citizen Cue-Taking

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Recent research documents the widespread use of heuristics, especially a reliance on elite cues among citizens. Scholars have celebrated this mode of decision making as rational and effective. Using experimental survey data collected from white and African-American respondents, we also identify what appears to be a strong influence of elite messages on mass political judgments, but only among our black respondents. More importantly, the data reveal some of the perils of cue-taking. Although rational, this heuristic may not always be effective.

The study of political communications and attitude change is once again becoming an active area of research among students of public opinion. One need not look far to find telling indicators—Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock's *Reasoning and Choice* (1991) and Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992) serve as exemplars. We say "once again," of course, because the research endeavor has a long history in political science, a fact that two decades of relative inactivity can lead us all to forget.[1]

The analyses reported herein too demonstrate that persuasion occurs, although in less than obvious ways. But our principal and larger concern goes beyond the particular patterns the data reveal. We take issue with the assumption, now prominent in the literature, that citizens' use of heuristics, specifically taking cues from political elites, serves the former well. We do not take the draconian and foolhardy step of arguing that such heuristics *ill* serve members of the electorate—and always so; they can and do afford average citizens valuable insights into the policy process. Our message, rather, is cautionary: we need to identify the conditions under which taking cues from elites does and does not serve the interests of the

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[1]Although the study of *political* persuasion has been relatively dormant until recently, McGuire (1985, 258) reports that new studies of communication and persuasion have been averaging about one thousand per year across all disciplinary fields.

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electorate. Moreover, we pose a question that strikes us as lying at the root of political communication and persuasion studies: if taking cues from political activists is an inevitable aspect of contemporary American politics, but also one that involves considerable slippage, what are the implications for the way that our society conducts its political business?

Redeeming the American Citizen: Heuristics as a Pathway to Political Knowledge

For nearly three decades after Converse (1964) published his classic study of mass attitudes, researchers working within the same constraint paradigm accumulated seemingly irrefutable evidence that a large majority of people just don't perform well when it comes to grasping even the rudimentary aspects of American politics. Few students of public opinion would have challenged Kinder's damning conclusion (1983, 397) that "when confronted with policy debates of great and abiding interest to political elites, many Americans can do no better than shrug."

This indictment brought a double dose of bad news. If a nation's extant form of government is a representative democracy, can there be meaningful representation when most citizens do not possess at least a modicum of information about the critical issues of the moment? And if a majority of citizens truly can do no better than shrug, what is left to study? Had two decades of intense labor rendered obsolete those very scholars who had devoted their academic lives to understanding how ordinary people think about politics?

Just when political scientists began to accept the harsh reality that most people neither care about nor understand happenings in their national capital, a new line of research resurrected, and continues to resurrect, the place of mass opinion in American representative democracy. Underlying this new optimism is the idea that ordinary citizens can make good political judgments even when they lack general political acumen or information about the specific issue at hand by taking cues from political actors.

Although much of this work falls under the rubric of political psychology, Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957, especially chaps. 11–14) provided the original impetus for the idea. Downs first demonstrates the irrationality of investing time, attention, and resources to become politically informed; and he then proceeds to reveal the value, from the citizen's standpoint, of informational shortcuts, especially the reliance on trusted experts. Rational citizens, he argues, will turn for guidance to someone more knowledgeable than they who can be trusted and who shares their political goals.

Subsequent investigations have found that members of Congress, the president, and other prominent figures serve as particularly useful sources of information. Many of these national leaders carry with them established political reputations (Calvert 1987, Kingdon 1984); when they speak out on this or that policy, people can and do use these reputations as contextual information (Zaller 1992) to evalu-

ate the statement itself. This mode of political decision making, which offers access to otherwise inaccessible "inside information" (Carmines and Kuklinski 1990), appears to pervade mass judgments (Mondak 1993; Page and Shapiro 1992; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992).

Students of public opinion have taken heart in the finding that ordinary citizens use short-cuts to compensate for their lack of substantive knowledge about politics. All of the authors cited above view cue-taking as a rational and an effective means by which citizens can make the right choices.

Although rational, and probably inevitable given the nature of large political systems, this mechanism may not be as effective as has been suggested. For one thing, members of Congress and the president sometimes mislead the electorate. Page and Shapiro (1992) document numerous instances in which elected officials either blatantly lied or failed to disclose information that could have hurt their cause. These same authors also find that when one segment of the populace moves in a certain direction on some issue domain, so do the others. What, one might ask, has happened to opposing group interests? Has the population become so homogenous in its interests that everyone should view policies in the same light? We doubt it. Moreover, Zaller's impressive analysis (1992) shows that elite consensus generally produces mass consensus. As long as elites always coalesce around the "right" policy, this pattern is not particularly disturbing. But do they? Again, we doubt it. Members of Congress, for example, typically agree to agree when they know that the citizenry-at-large otherwise would not accept the medicine they are about to prescribe. Not unusually, although not always, the need for such legislation arises from the very failure of policies that the same legislators had enacted into law earlier.

Finally, and most importantly, if people function as effective cue-takers, why do they not know more about politics than our traditional surveys indicate? Suppose people make good use of the messages that elites provide. It is unreasonable to expect them to cite all the details of proposed policies; but many certainly should know more than they profess to know.[2] Heuristics, if well grounded, should serve as learning tools for those who use them.

The key phrase, which we take as the point of departure for our research, is the conditional: *if* well grounded. But how might we best ascertain whether the taking of political cues meets this criterion? Our attempt to find out begins with theoretical work in social cognition.

A Warning Sign from Social Cognition: The Messenger Can Overwhelm the Message

During the last decade, social psychologists have begun to develop a full-blown theory of persuasion and attitude change. The intellectual leaders include Chaiken

[2]We recognize that the problem may lie with the way we try to measure informedness and not with the ignorance of citizens themselves. Until better methods to tap political knowledge come along, we will take extant suppositions as given.

and her colleagues (Chaiken 1980; Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989) and Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986a, 1986b). Chaiken distinguishes between systematic and heuristic processing of information, Petty and Cacioppo between central and peripheral processing; for our purposes, any subtle differences between the two perspectives can be put aside. What is important here is that when people process information centrally or systematically, they actively attempt to comprehend and assess the content of the message itself. In other words, they engage in rather detailed processing of the message content. Although the source of the message may be used to assess the validity of the statement, it is used only in a secondary, primarily contextual way. When people process heuristically or peripherally, they exert little cognitive effort to judge the message's validity. Thus, for example, one who processes heuristically might assume the veridicality of a trusted political leader's statement and therefore not spend much time evaluating the statement itself.[3] In the worst case, a cue-taker acts as "a lazy organism who tries to master the message contents only when it is absolutely necessary to make a decision. When the purported source is clearly positively or negatively valenced, he uses this information as a cue to accept or reject the messages's conclusions without really absorbing the arguments used" (McGuire 1969, 198).

What McGuire describes is little more than a visceral reaction to the source, although this need not be the case. As Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly (1989, 213) observe, "perceivers sometimes use heuristics in a highly deliberative, self-conscious fashion. . . ." This latter mode of cue-taking approximates systematic processing in that it is conscious and intentional and presumably leads to well-grounded judgments. But it also requires that recipients be motivated and have the ability to engage in it. Thirty years of research have demonstrated that these conditions typically are not met when it comes to citizens dealing with politics.

Moreover, people will be more inclined to move from the kind of gut-level cue-taking that McGuire describes to a more cognitively based form when they have ample opportunity to ascertain the validity and reliability of the former (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989, 218). That is, if observation shows them that heeding the words of trusted experts continually leads to undesired consequences, they will, in due time, abandon even the weakest version of the heuristic. When it comes to citizens evaluating politics, the opportunity to undertake such a reality check rarely exists. Given the complexity of national policy making, it is the rare citizen who can determine whether or not a particular policy has worked. Even if one can validly conclude that it has not, the assignment of responsibility to this or that legislator can challenge even the most politically astute. Like religion, taking political cues may be a matter of faith.

In short, although the rationality and economy of cue-taking are now well established, it is very possible that citizens-as-cue-takers focus so heavily on the "who" that the "what" recedes to the background. The more frequently this

[3]A classic nonpolitical example is the individual who, when watching a car advertisement, evaluates the car positively largely because he is taken by the beauty of the young woman standing next to it.

occurs, the more one can justifiably question the quality of public opinion that derives from this particular heuristic.

A Second Warning Sign: The Possibility of Interpretation

The psychological literature on communication and persuasion to which we have been referring does not itself explicitly address yet another potentially important aspect of cue-taking: the *interpretation* of the message. Yet a messenger's words do not flow inexorably and unalterably into the auditory canals of citizens who choose to listen to them. To the contrary, the same words may mean different things to different people, depending on who says them. In other words, there may be an interaction among the source, the message, and the receiver of the message such that the communication between elites and citizens is considerably less direct and clear-cut than researchers typically assume.

This is not a new idea, at least as applied to nonpolitical domains, and goes back at least as far as Asch's classic studies (1952). In a series of ground-breaking experiments, Asch demonstrated that how people interpret a sentence depends heavily on who purportedly made it. Indeed, when the experimenter changed the authorship, people would often change their interpretations of the very same words.

Two more recent and distinct streams of literature indicate why this dynamic should occur. Psychological research on dissonance and selective perception predicts that individuals who hold a position on an issue and also respect and trust a political figure who makes a public statement about it will do whatever is necessary to avoid mental discomfort (Abelson et al. 1968; Fazio and Williams 1986; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985; and, not to be forgotten, Heider 1958). It is probably easier to achieve this goal by making the "right" interpretation of the leader's statement than by changing one's own position or his or her evaluation of the message sender. Similarly, work on motive attribution says that people search for understanding; that is, they seek to understand why others behave the way they do or why an event occurs (Kelly 1967; Lau and Russell 1980; Weiner 1980). Attribution gives meaning to just about everything that people observe, and it undoubtedly plays a big role in efforts to comprehend politics. It follows that the motives people attribute to politicians should strongly color their interpretations of anything the latter say or do. (Conover and Feldman 1989).

Suppose, for example, that George Bush and Jesse Jackson each pronounces that "the national government must treat black and white citizens equally." According to both the cognitive dissonance and motive attribution literatures, black citizens who hear these words come from the mouth of Bush will interpret them very differently than if they come from Jackson's. And so will white conservatives.

Interpretation occurs in all facets of life, of course, and inherently there is nothing wrong with it. But to the extent that it renders political preferences problematic, we again must question the quality of mass opinion that arises from elite cues.

Race and Racial Attitudes: A Challenging Test for Cue-Taking

If there is one issue in American life that deserves the distinction "unique," it is race. Converse himself (1964) excepted race from his otherwise dismal conclusion about the political acumen of American adults. Nearly three decades later, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) would write unhesitatingly in their award-winning book that

> ordinary people may have trouble putting their ideas together consistently in some domains of politics; indeed, they can fail to form any idea at all, let alone one consistent with their other opinions. No one, however, supposes that the public is similarly handicapped on issues of race: The average citizen knows what she thinks about increasing government spending to assist blacks, about busing, about affirmative action (211).

If ever there were "true" political attitudes (Converse 1970), then racial attitudes are it; and, therefore, what elites have to say about racial issues should matter little if at all.

Yet racial attitudes do change. Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985; also see Jaynes and Williams 1989; Taylor, Sheatsley, and Greeley 1978) document dramatic changes in support for racial equality during the 1960s and 1970s, changes that cannot be explained solely or even principally by the changing composition of the population. After analyzing nearly every available national survey completed between 1935 and 1990, Page and Shapiro (1992, 68) reach this conclusion:

> The expressed attitudes of white Americans toward black Americans have undergone a great transformation over the last forty or fifty years, a change greater than on any other issue. On a wide range of policies related to public accommodations, employment, schools, neighborhoods and housing, and intermarriage, whites moved from advocating total separation and an inferior status for blacks to favoring legal equality and substantial desegregation (168).

The authors attribute this massive change in public opinion about civil rights to "the dissemination through the population of particular kinds of new information . . ." (Page and Shapiro 1992, 79).

But wherein lie the sources of this information? One very real possibility is the political leaders who take active roles on civil rights issues. Carmines and Stimson (1989; also see Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989),[4] for example, demonstrate that changes in congressional racial policy preceded changes in public opinion during the 1960s and 1970s, evidence that comports nicely with citizen cue-taking. Perhaps, after all, people do take cues on issues dealing with race.

Because the literature almost without exception examines the racial attitudes of whites (but see Sigelman and Welch 1991), our discussion thus far has naturally followed suit. Especially on the topic of cue-taking, however, there is a compelling argument for including black subjects as well. On the one hand, blacks, even more

[4]Zaller (1992) points out, correctly, that Carmines and Stimson do not fully document whether the changes they identify result from elite persuasion or from citizens simply leaving the Democratic party for the Republican. Zaller offers evidence in support of the former process.

than whites, presumably know what they think about black self-reliance. On the other hand, skin color has a much more direct and immediate effect on the lives of blacks, and therefore may operate as a critical linkage between them and political officials. More generally, the study of attitudes across a wide range of racial and ethnic groups can only increase confidence in any generalizations that scholars make.

Data and Logic

In the spring of 1992, we asked black and white subjects chosen from the Chicago metropolitan area to complete a four-page questionnaire.[5] Small groups of subjects filled out the questionnaire under the direction of a project coordinator. Unlike traditional survey researchers, who conduct random surveys so they can make general statements about the geographical area they sample, we began with the objective of assigning both black and white subjects randomly to one of the five conditions noted later. In other words, the underlying logic is experimental; but rather than use student subjects, we selected nonstudents.

The experimental item read:

> We would like to get your reaction to a statement that _____ recently made. He was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that African-Americans must stop making excuses and rely much more on themselves to get ahead in society.
>
> Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with _____'s statement.[6]

For some subjects, the assertion was attributed to Ted Kennedy. Others were told that either Bush, Jackson, or Clarence Thomas had made the statement. A fifth group received the statement without attribution.[7]

Our choice of political figures hinges on two considerations, race and political ideology. Ted Kennedy has served as the leading white spokesman for civil rights throughout his tenure as U.S. senator. To many people, he is the prototypical liberal. Bush, a pragmatic conservative, often reached out for black support during his administration (during which time we completed this study) but often without success. Jackson continues to be the leading black liberal in American politics, as he has been for two decades. Although Thomas will be remembered most for "the Anita Hill incident," his true legacy lies with his emergence as the conservative spokesman for the black community. More than any other event in modern times, his nomination for and selection to the position of U.S. Supreme Court justice brought the issue of blacks doing it on their own directly to the fore.

If attitudes on the fundamental issue of self-reliance are inelastic, as we might expect, especially among blacks, then the "who"—the source of the statement—should

[5] The sample, chosen from two neighborhoods of the western periphery of the city, consists of 152 blacks, 151 whites, 171 males, and 126 females (six subjects failed to indicate their gender). Age ranges from 18 years of age to 68. Each cell has nearly equal distributions with respect to demographics such as education level and gender.

[6] We used a five-point scale to measure extent of agreement.

[7] Of course, the no attribution statement reads slightly differently: "The *New York Times* recently quoted someone as saying . . . ."

not greatly influence people's position on the item. Conversely, to find a systematic bias indicating that people respond more to the source than to the issue itself, or that they completely ignore a valuable contextual cue, namely ideology, should give us pause in extolling the virtues of cue-taking. At the very least, such a finding should serve as a call to probe more deeply into the cue-taking process. We will have more to say about all this later.

Political Cues and Racial Attitudes

Our point of departure is the difference in means between black and white subjects who responded to the item that did not include a leader cue. This item could arguably be interpreted as measuring people's "true" attitudes on the issue of black self-reliance. Because responses to it show what our subjects think in the absence of (manipulated) elite communication, they serve as a baseline comparison for subsequent analyses.

People know where they stand on the issue of black self-reliance. Not a single individual offered a "don't know" response to this question, nor did anyone explicitly express ambivalence. More importantly, black and white respondents do not stand in the same place. On our five-point scale, the difference in means between the two groups, as determined by a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), is nearly a whole point ($Ms = 2.57$ for blacks versus 3.36 for whites, $F(1,59) = 10.29$, $p < .002$). Whites, to a much greater extent than blacks, believe that the latter must look to themselves to get ahead. This difference comports with common observation and is precisely what we would expect a traditional national survey to find.

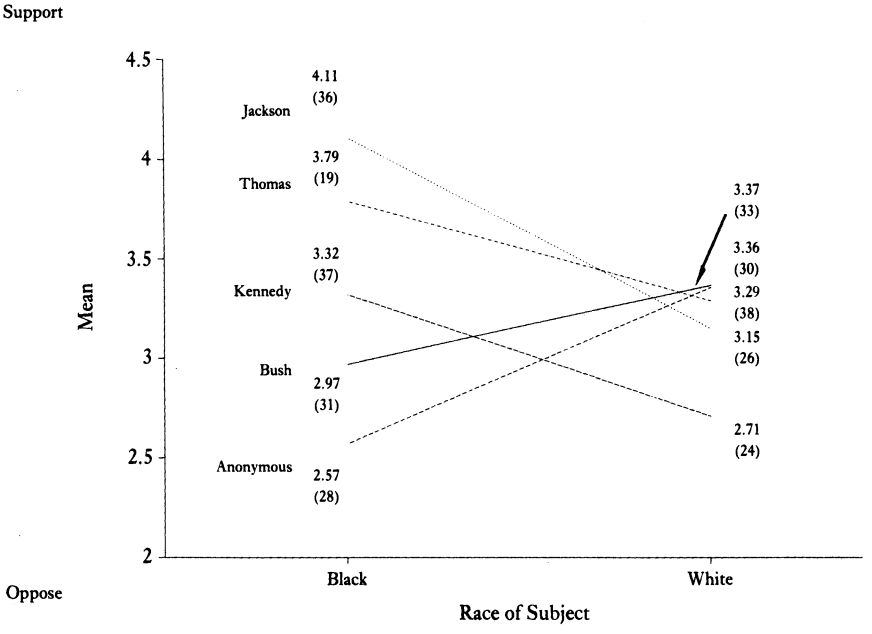
Figure 1, which displays the mean levels of support for black self-reliance by the control condition and all four experimental conditions, tells quite a different story. The story has several facets; and to be sure to highlight them all, let us first consider black subjects.

Quite obviously, attitudes on the basic issue of self-reliance are highly elastic: *Who* advocates self-reliance strongly influences African-Americans' agreement with the idea. The means vary in magnitude from a low of 2.57 in the anonymous condition to a high of 4.11 in the Jesse Jackson condition ($F(4,146) = 7.55$, $p < .001$).[8] Given a five-point scale and an issue on which we expected most people, especially blacks, to hold firm, relatively consensual opinions, this 1.5 point spread is remarkable.

[8]Note that black subjects are least inclined to accept the anonymous condition. That is, associating the target statement with any specific political leader—even George Bush—increases acceptance of the statement. This pattern may indicate that when blacks are given a statement without a source, they (understandably) attribute it to a disparaging or prejudicial motive. Associating the statement with a specific person may decrease this general stereotypic reaction, even when the source and his party have historically not been supportive of black causes. Alternatively, the results in figure 1 may reflect the influence of prestige: any national leader, by the very virtue of his position, has at least some minimal effect on what people think about an issue. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to explore these possibilities further.

FIGURE 1

STANCE ON BLACK SELF-RELIANCE BY SOURCE OF STATEMENT AND RACE OF SUBJECT (*N* IN PARENTHESES)



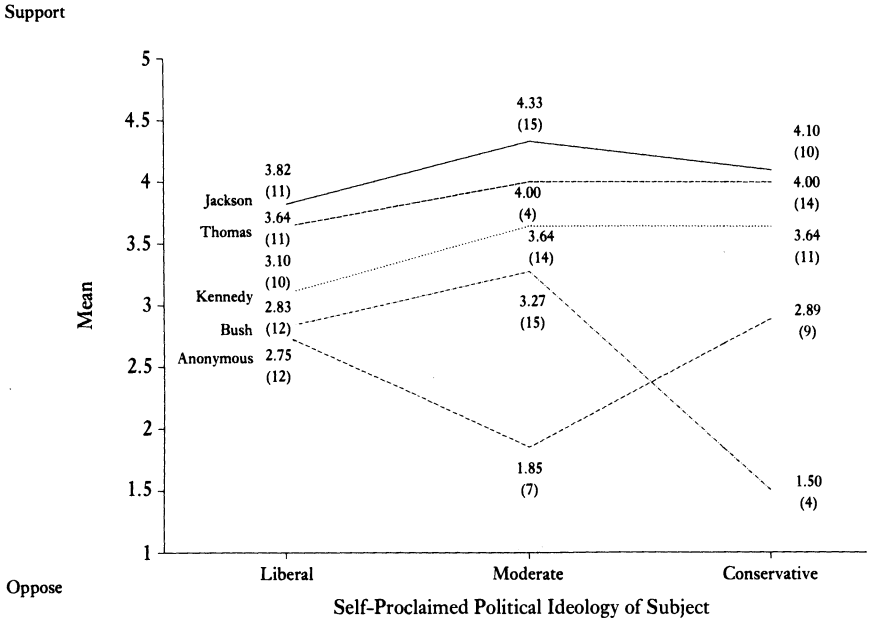
Considering specifically which political leaders have more and which less influence among black subjects lends additional insight into the nature of cue taking. The most influential leaders are not, contrary to expectations, Jackson and Kennedy, the two most prominent advocates of civil rights during the 1970s and 1980s, but Jackson and Thomas, who have functioned largely as adversaries. In other words, the salient cue for black subjects is race, not ideology. An ANOVA in which the independent variables are race and ideology of political figure shows a main effect for the former ($F(1,119) = 11.14$, $p < .001$), no significant effect for the latter ($F(1,119) = 2.14$, $p < .15$), and an insignificant interaction ($F(1,119) = .01$, $p < .92$). When *either* Jackson or Thomas purportedly makes the statement, it holds considerable sway among our black subjects.[9]

Ideology could play a larger role than we have so far identified if black conservatives look principally to Thomas (and perhaps Bush) and black liberals to Jackson (and presumably Kennedy as well). According to figure 2, this appears not to be

[9]Interestingly, while Jackson had been reticent to make such a public statement in the past, he has recently begun to echo the very theme that our hypothetical statement captures. Our experiments suggest that his continuing to do so could dramatically change public attitudes among African-Americans.

FIGURE 2

STANCE ON BLACK SELF-RELIANCE BY SOURCE OF STATEMENT AND SELF-PROCLAIMED POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF SUBJECT (BLACKS ONLY) (*N* IN PARENTHESES)



the case; there is no significant interaction between ideology of subject and ideology of political leader ($F(2,115) = 1.22$, $p < .30$). The small number of black conservatives dictates some caution in any interpretation of the patterns, but there are a good number of liberal blacks, and they are influenced as much by Thomas's statement on black self-reliance as by Jackson's. Perhaps our subjects label themselves without truly comprehending what the labels mean; perhaps they comprehend but race simply dominates any other consideration. Whatever the explanation, ideology does not function as a linkage between elite statements and our black subjects' evaluations of them.[10]

With respect to blacks, then, figure 1 and figure 2 offer two preliminary conclusions: (1) their positions on the issue of black self-reliance are more elastic than we anticipated, suggesting that they tune in to the sources of these statements; and

[10]Moreover, we find education to play no conditioning role. Both highly and less-educated black subjects look to the racial makeup, not the ideological posture, of the source. The interaction among education of subject, ideology of subject, and ideology of political leader is highly insignificant ($F(7,72) = 1.10$, $p < .38$).

(2) subjects deem the race of the political leader, not his ideological reputation, to be the relevant contextual information. Consequently, two political figures as ideologically opposite as Jackson and Thomas can equally "inform" people as to the "right" stance to take on the issue of black self-reliance.

Returning to figure 1, white subjects show a very different pattern. They voice the same level of support for the idea of black self-reliance irrespective of who proposes it ($F(4,146) = 2.13$, $p < .12$).[11] Among those for whom the attributed source of the policy statement was Jackson, the mean response is 3.15; among those for whom the source was Jackson's antagonist, Bush, the mean is only slightly larger (3.37), which is identical to the mean among those who received no source cue at all (3.36).[12] Why African-Americans should evaluate the message in terms of who makes it and whites not is a question begging an answer.

Before offering one, we note, finally, that the experimental results in figure 1 reveal an interesting irony. When either Jackson or Thomas is the advocate of black self-reliance, support for it among black subjects actually exceeds that among white subjects in any of the conditions. Granted, we are only reporting the results of an experiment; but the potential importance of political leaders in shaping the way people think about civil rights should not go unnoticed.

The Affectual Basis of Cue-Taking

Although the predominant view assumes cue-taking to be a largely cognitive process, some available evidence suggests otherwise. Marcus (1988), for example, documents the pervasiveness of emotion and affect in voting decisions. Similarly, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) demonstrate convincingly that both sophisticated and unsophisticated people deal with the complexities of politics by turning to feelings—likes and dislikes, anger, elation, and the like. And, of course, our own findings appear not to be fully compatible with a cognitively based process.

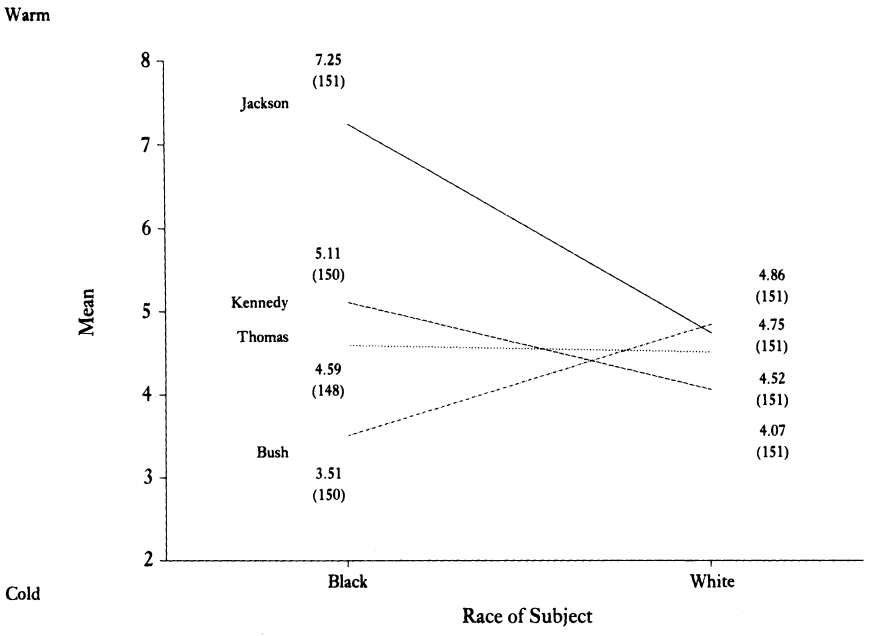
As part of the interview, we asked subjects to indicate, on a 10-point scale, how much they *liked* each of the four political leaders. We also asked them how much they could *trust* Bush, Jackson, Kennedy, and Thomas to do the right thing. Figure 3 and figure 4 plot the means of these responses by political leader, separately for black and white subjects.

[11]This finding is even more pronounced when one eliminates the relatively anomalous effects of Kennedy ($F(3, 123) = .31$, $p < .82$). That whites do not hold Kennedy in high esteem probably reflects their reaction to the William Kennedy Smith incident, which had been in the news almost up to the time we collected our data.

[12]Nor is there any evidence that white liberals respond to liberal politicians and conservatives to conservative ones. Tests of ANOVA indicate no significant interaction between the ideology of the subject and that of the political leader ($F(2,112)$, $p < .83$). This lack of relationship, moreover, is not conditional upon subjects' education levels.

FIGURE 3

WARMTH TOWARD POLITICAL LEADER BY RACE OF SUBJECT
(*N* IN PARENTHESES)



What is most striking about the patterns in figure 3 and figure 4 is the extent to which they parallel those in figure 1. Among blacks, Jackson is the most influential; he is also the best liked and most highly trusted. Next in line, on both counts, are Thomas and Kennedy,[13] with Bush far behind. Among whites, who were not influenced by the source, levels of affection and trust hold constant across all four leaders.

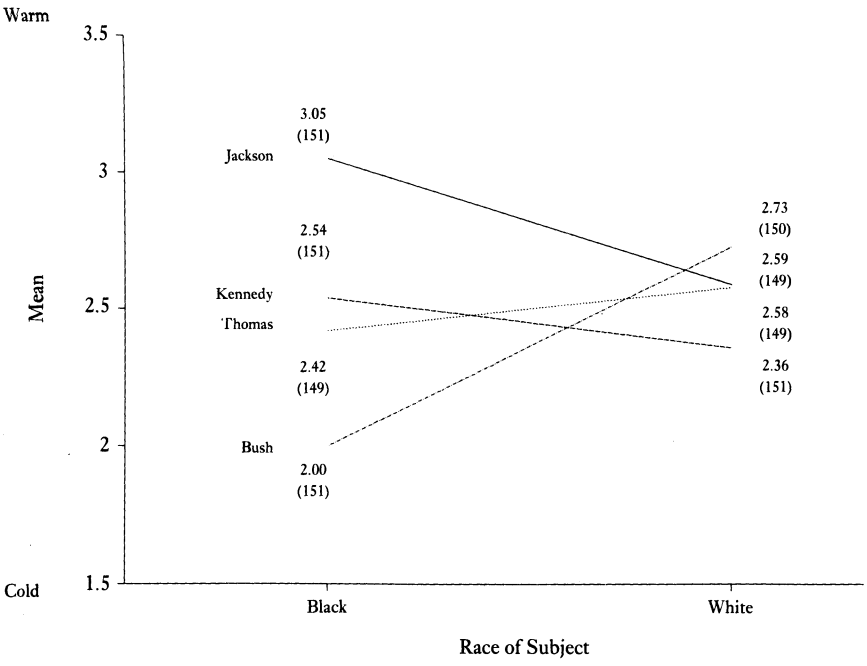
That affection and trust hold constant *across* sources does not mean that whites are homogeneous on these factors *within* a source. One plausible explanation of the apparent lack of source effects among whites is that they are more heterogeneous in their posture toward each of the sources than are our black subjects. That is, for any given source, there may be (conservative or liberal) whites who trust the source and (conservative or liberal) whites who do not, such that the source effects cancel each other.[14]

[13]On both the warmth and trust measures, Thomas and Kennedy are not significantly different from each other ($t = 1.77$ and $t = 1.16$, respectively).

[14]We are deeply indebted to one of the anonymous referees for bringing this possibility to our attention.

FIGURE 4

TRUST IN POLITICAL LEADER BY RACE OF SUBJECT
(*N* IN PARENTHESES)



To test this proposition, we undertook two sets of regression analyses, on black and white subjects separately. In one set, the independent variables are race of the source and (absolute) ideological distance between the subject and the source; in the second, they are race of the source and trust in him. Finding that ideological distance and trust are related to agreement with the black reliance statement would compel us to rethink the conclusions we have offered thus far.

This is not the case. Among blacks, race of the political figure affects people's acceptance of the *New York Times* statement but ideological closeness and trust do not (table 1). And among whites, none of the three factors is related to whether they agree with the statement on self-reliance. Indeed, in the latter case neither of the two regressions attains overall statistical significance. Although we cannot reject the possibility of source effects among white subjects, we find nothing to suggest that they exist.

In addition to the *New York Times* experiment that has served as the centerpiece for our analysis, we conducted a second that sheds additional light on the importance of affectual bonds to cue-taking. Some of the subjects answered two questions each about the political ideologies of Kennedy, Jackson, Bush, and

TABLE 1

EFFECTS OF IDEOLOGICAL DISTANCE AND TRUST ON CUE-TAKING (BLACK AND WHITE SUBJECTS)

	Black Subjects		White Subjects	
Variable	1	2	1	2
Ideological distance from cue-giver[a]	−.08	—	−.24	—
	(−.49)		(−1.62)	
Race of cue-giver[b]	−.74*	−1.70**	−.25	−.65
	(−1.99)	(−2.45)	(−.89)	(−1.67)
Trust	—	.11	—	.03
		(.60)		(.18)
Ideological distance from cue-giver × race of cue-giver	−.02	—	.08	—
	(−.10)		(.41)	
Trust × race of cue-giver	—	.40	—	.29
		(1.58)		(1.45)
Constant	4.09***	3.69***	3.48***	3.17***
Adjusted R^2	.08	.14	.01	.03
N	120	123	118	117

Note: The dependent variable is support for black self-reliance. Cell entries are regression coefficients; (t-scores in parentheses).

[a]Absolute value, subject ideology minus cue-giver ideology.

[b]Race of cue-giver is coded 0 for black and 1 for white.

*$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$; ***$p \leq .001$.

Thomas before they received the item on self-reliance.[15] The other subjects, in the second condition, were asked to indicate how much they liked and trusted each of the four men.

Figure 5 and figure 6 replicate our earlier analyses, absent the anonymous condition, by type of activation, which we have labeled affect and cognition. While there is a minimally significant difference in the spreads of the two conditions among white subjects (the spreads are .87 and 1.13 ($p < .06$) among the cognition and affect conditions, respectively), the more striking difference is among blacks (the corresponding spreads are .75 and 1.55 ($p < .01$)). When people in our experiment, especially African-Americans, focused on liking and trusting the political figures, they gave attention to the messenger (as opposed to the message) more than when they thought about the leader's ideological stance.

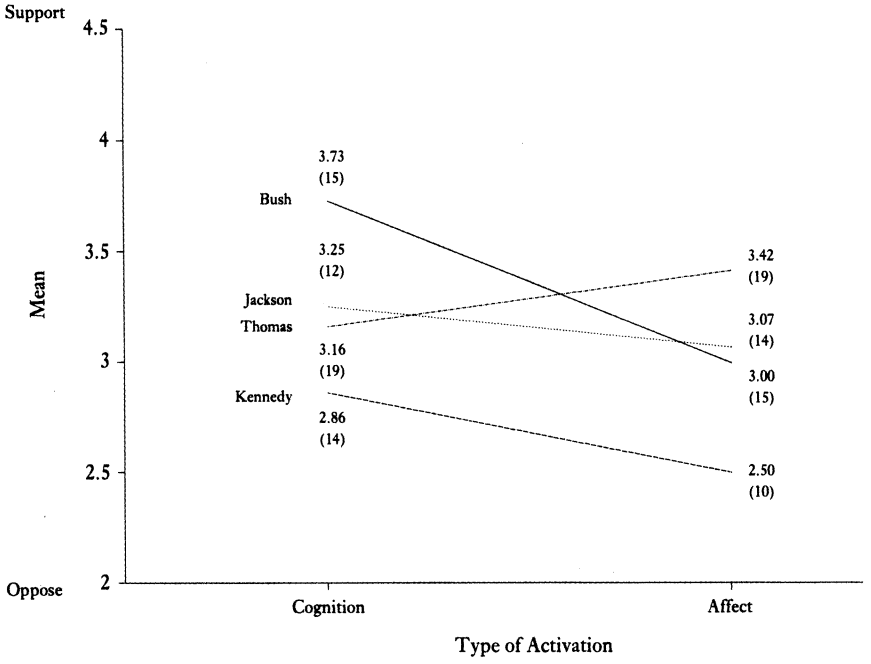
PROBING MORE DEEPLY

Unfortunately, while responses to questionnaires reveal the general contours of the cue-taking process, they cannot provide the kind of evidence we need to assert

[15]The order in which the political leaders' names were introduced was completely randomized.

FIGURE 5

STANCE ON BLACK SELF-RELIANCE BY SOURCE OF STATEMENT AND TYPE OF ACTIVATION (WHITES ONLY) (*N* IN PARENTHESES)



more confidently what is going on within people's heads. Recall measures and protocol analysis can.

In a second study designed to supplement the first, we again asked black subjects to evaluate one of the five versions of the *New York Times* item (attributed either to Bush, Kennedy, Jackson, Thomas, or no one in particular).[16] After approximately 25 minutes, during which time subjects answered other, unrelated survey questions, we asked them to recall, as best they could, the topic of the *New York Times* article about which we had asked earlier.[17]

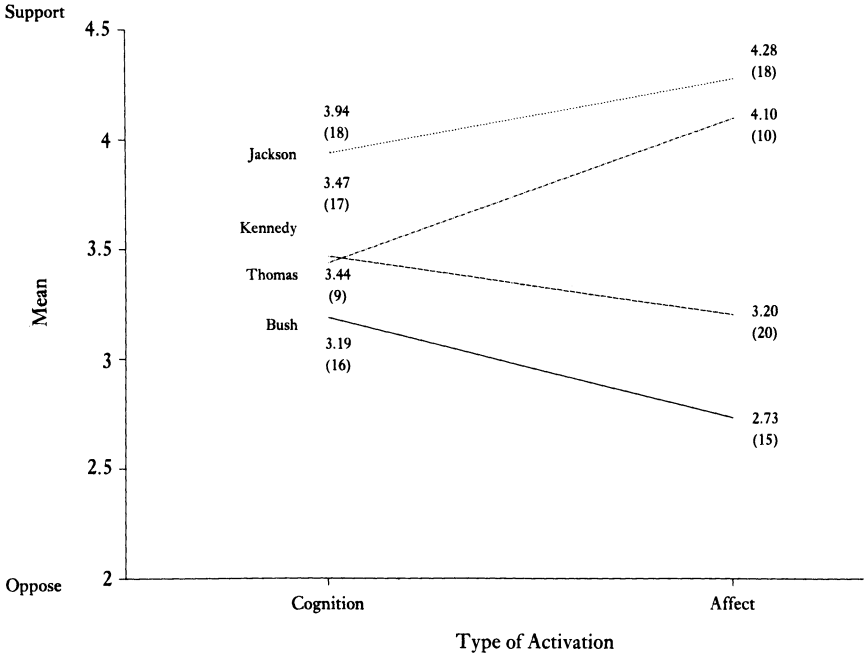
Although recall was high generally, a not surprising finding given only a 25-minute interlude, those who read the statement absent attribution did better at

[16]Our subjects for this second study consist of members of a predominantly black church organization in Champaign, IL. As in the first study, small groups filled out questionnaires under the supervision of a project coordinator.

[17]Subjects turned in a first questionnaire after they completed it. A second questionnaire included the filler items as well as the recall question.

FIGURE 6

STANCE ON BLACK SELF-RELIANCE BY SOURCE OF STATEMENT AND TYPE OF ACTIVATION (BLACKS ONLY) (*N* IN PARENTHESES)



recalling it than those who read a statement that included an attribution: 74% in the former case, 64% in the latter.[18] This result, more than any heretofore presented, supports the proposition that the messenger diverts attention from the message itself.

An even more compelling bit of evidence comes in the form of comparing, among those who received an attributed statement, the percentage who accurately recalled the content with the percentage who recalled the cue-giver's name. Some 14% more recalled the cue-giver than the statement itself (78% versus 64%).[19] Although not the whole story, that people attend to the cue-giver at the cost of hearing the message helps to explain the patterns we uncovered in the preceding section.

[18]Because these percentages are based on only 44 cases, we present the results as only suggestive. The difference is significant at $p < .10$.

[19]These percentages are based on 32 cases, and the difference in percentages just misses statistical significance at $p < .10$.

Some people do not fully absorb the message, presumably because they focus their attention on the message-giver. But others do, at least as measured by recall. Unless we can identify yet another element of cue-taking among the latter that will shed additional insight into our earlier results, we will have explained considerably less than we might wish.

Fortunately, we can add one more chapter to the story. Those subjects who had read an attributed statement and accurately recalled its content were instructed to read it again and indicate, as precisely as possible, what the statement meant to them. Although interpretations ranged widely, they fall nicely into two broad and meaningful categories: "white people are writing us off" and "we black people can do it on our own." Qualitatively, these two categories differ considerably. The first conveys negativism and a sense of rejection, the second optimism and positive assertion. The first also reflects a "we-they" mentality, the second a sense of community and group identity.

Despite the small number of cases, the data in figure 7 speak clearly and unequivocally to how the race of the cue-giver conditioned interpretation of the *New York Times* statement among black subjects. When either Bush or Kennedy, ideological opposites but both white, was the source of the statement in favor of black self-reliance, subjects overwhelmingly interpreted it as abandonment and

FIGURE 7

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACE OF CUE-GIVER AND INTERPRETATION OF HYPOTHETICAL *NEW YORK TIMES* STATEMENT

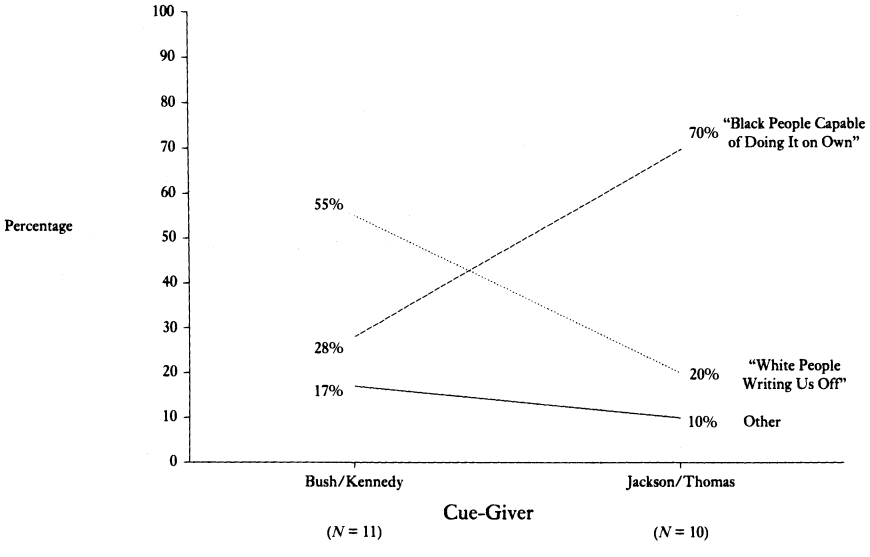
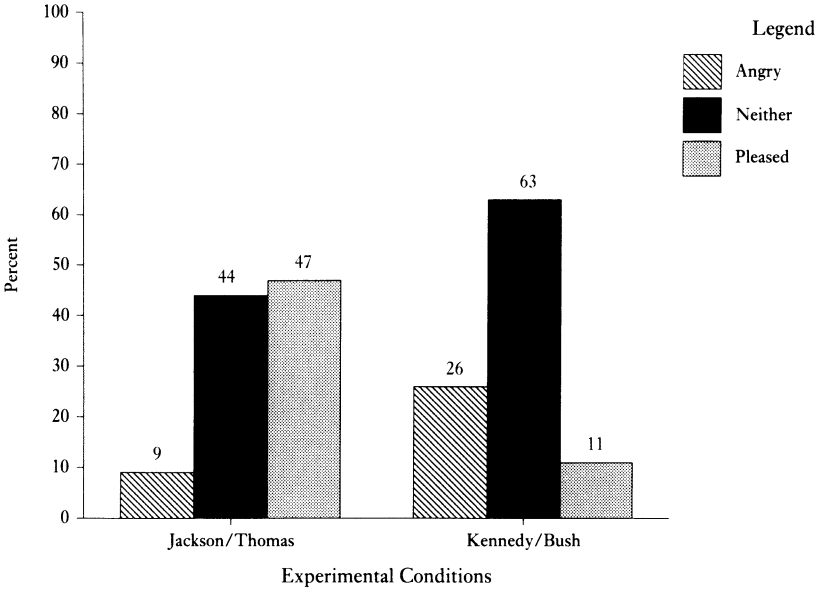


FIGURE 8

SUBJECTS' REACTIONS TO STATEMENT ON BLACK SELF-RELIANCE (BLACKS ONLY)



rejection. Conversely, attributing the statement to either Jackson or Thomas led to a very different interpretation, one that exudes self-pride and a feeling that the black community can move ahead on its own.

We can buttress our interpretation of subjects' interpretations with a final piece of evidence. Immediately upon answering the *New York Times* item, each of them was asked: "Would you say that this statement makes you feel angry, pleased, or neither angry nor pleased?" Black respondents who interpreted the original item in terms of "we can do it on our own"—essentially, those for whom the statement was attributed to Jackson or Thomas—overwhelmingly indicated that it made them feel pleased (figure 8). Conversely, those who received a Kennedy or Bush attribution and thus for the most part interpreted the statement as rejection equally overwhelmingly expressed anger.

QUALIFICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Even on a statement as seemingly straightforward as black self-reliance, people can hear different things. And at least among the black subjects in our study, what they heard, when they heard the message at all, depended on the race of the messenger.

But single studies are just that—one-shot efforts to understand complex phenomena. Before taking our findings as given, therefore, we feel compelled to underline some lingering concerns:

1. Affect apparently drove much of the cue-taking we identified, especially among our black subjects. This finding adds to a growing literature demonstrating the pervasiveness of feelings and visceral reactions in mass political judgments (Kinder 1991; Kuklinski et al. 1991; Marcus 1988; Masters and Sullivan 1993). While convinced that this finding is robust, given our various experimental manipulations, we also recognize that the framing of questions can strongly influence people's responses. We intentionally began our hypothetical *New York Times* statement with the words "African-Americans must stop making excuses . . . ." It is possible that these introductory words pack an emotional wallop, enough perhaps, that, at least for many black subjects, words that come after them recede into the background.[20] Militating against this possibility are two facts: relatively many received the message (i.e., they could recall it), and among those who did, they overwhelmingly used the skin color of the attributed source to interpret it. Nonetheless, even on a relatively simple issue such as black self-reliance, seemingly small differences in how elites frame their public statements may influence, perhaps strongly, citizens' reactions to them. In other words, political communication, a staple of representative democracy, may be considerably more complex than our single study was able to demonstrate.
2. Closely related, our experimental conditions identified the source of the statement prior to the statement itself. Suppose we had reversed this order: subjects first read the statement and only then were told who made it. Whether we would have found different results we cannot say.
3. If there is to be a meaningful theory of how people interpret political messages, studying one issue domain will not suffice. We still know little about the conditions, more generally, under which some people react affectually, others not. Suppose our hypothetical statement had read "Government has a responsibility to improve the welfare of African-Americans." One might reasonably expect a complete reversal of the pattern we uncovered here: strong affectual response from some whites, depending on source cue, little affectual response from blacks. In a similar vein, neither can we say, generally, what form the interpretation of political messages will take.
4. We can only guess whether interpretation preceded acceptance of the statement or vice-versa. Black respondents may have attributed meaning to the statement and then accepted it. Alternatively, and more likely in our view, they first determined they liked (disliked) a particular political leader and then simply accepted (rejected) the statement. Having accepted the statement, they then interpreted it in a way that avoided cognitive dissonance. This latter process, more than the former, places affect and feelings at the very center of American politics.

[20]We are indebted to one of the anonymous referees for this useful critique.

These qualifications duly noted, what do our findings, taken on their own, imply for the workings of American representative democracy? Like others who have recently written on the subject of heuristics, we have taken for granted that people will use cues from the larger political environment when faced with political judgments. This assumption—more likely, fact—already places citizens in a position that the strongest advocates of citizen autonomy (Barber 1984) will find untenable. To deny what appears to be a reality of modern representative democracies, however, will serve no useful purpose. So the question is, how well does the process of cue-taking work?

Also like others who have written on the subject, we too believe that cue-taking often serves as a valuable means by which people can inform themselves about politics. What we found in the analyses reported earlier is, simply, this: when political statements are made in a social context and concern real-world issues, people focus on the pragmatic meaning of the statements, that is, why they were said and not their semantic meaning alone. And the characteristics of the political source influence the pragmatic meaning that people assign.

It is here, we believe, that cue-taking can become problematic, or at least our data suggest. First, and ironically, in the very process of communicating information to citizens, esteemed leaders may sometimes (and perhaps unwittingly) exacerbate an already pervasive problem of mass politics: chronic mental laziness. For some people, what should be the absorption and use of two relevant pieces of information—who conveys the message and the content of the message itself—stops with the messenger. Thus, when asked to recall the message even after a brief interlude, these individuals cannot.

Second, that people interpret political messages is to be expected; that they sometimes do so in a way that might be deemed suboptimal is a matter of some concern. We uncovered evidence that black citizens use skin color as a basis of interpretation, even though all four politicians whose names we used in our study have ideological reputations that presumably could serve as even more telling contextual information than race. This neglect of relevant contextual information probably occurs more frequently than we would like to admit. Under some conditions, this neglect may lead to no negative consequences at all. When black citizens listen to black leaders, for example, they probably get it right most of the time. But there are exceptions to the rule, and it is these exceptions that interest us.

Finally, our work speaks, although in two voices, to the nature of mass attitudes. On the one hand, the elasticity of attitudes on an issue as fundamental as black self-reliance leads us to question how firmly grounded most preferences are today. We found very large swings in attitudes that can be explained only by changes in the source of the message. Perhaps, as Ginsberg (1986) has suggested, public opinion today is as much an echo as a reflection of people's objective assessments of the world in which they live. Or, to draw on another literature (Martin and Tesser 1992; Zaller 1992; but see Sniderman 1993), people may not hold true

attitudes, even on an issue so fundamental as black self-reliance. Rather, "attitudes" are fleeting phenomena that depend on the political winds of the moment.

But there is an alternative view, one that comports with our intuition that people really should know where they stand on the issue of black self-reliance. If valid, this view complicates the study of political attitudes. It goes something like this.

It is the very presence of an attitude that allows people to interpret the messages they receive. In the case of our study, for example, the essential attitude (or belief)[21] could be something like "black leaders will always look out for my interests better than white leaders." This attitude, or premise, as we have called it elsewhere (Kuklinski and Hurley n.d.) in turn serves as a foundation for interpreting political messages of the sort we used in this study. What looks like a lack of true attitudes is illusory, largely a function of what the researcher defines as the essential attitude at the outset.

Final Comment

Needless to say, the potential shortcomings of cue-taking are not restricted to African-Americans. We focused our attention on the reactions of blacks to various political figures because that is where our experimental results revealed the most interesting and problematic phenomena. We close by recommending a more general search for the circumstances under which cue-taking does and does not work in accord with democratic standards. Only then will we be able to reach a firm judgment on its value.

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[21]McGuire (1985, 241) argues persuasively that the thousands of efforts to distinguish attitudes from beliefs have failed, and therefore the distinction should not be made.

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