The central question in the study of political psychology and public opinion is whether citizens can form and update sensible beliefs and attitudes about politics. Though previous research was skeptical about the capacities of the mass public (e.g., Converse 1964), many studies in the 1980s and early 1990s emphasized the potential merits of simple heuristics in helping citizens to make reasonable choices (e.g., Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994).

In subsequent years, however, motivated reasoning has been impossible to avoid for anyone who follows either contemporary politics or the latest developments in psychology and political science. While public opinion may be more coherent at the macro level (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) or when the public is asked to make binary choices that are structured by institutions (Sniderman 2000), it is increasingly difficult for observers to defend micro-level attitude formation and information processing as rational or even consistently reasonable. Evidence continues to mount that people are often biased toward their prior beliefs and prone to reject counter-attitudinal information in the domains of both opinions and politically controversial facts (e.g., Edwards and Smith 1996; Taber and Lodge 2006; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Moreover, these process may not be alleviated but instead made more severe when people are more knowledgeable or sophisticated (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006; Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013).

Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber’s *The Rationalizing Voter* is the most important study of motivated reasoning about politics that has been published to date and arguably the most depressing. While their work is indebted to previous research in psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience, it is focused more specifically on the unique aspects of politics — most notably, the deeply affect-laden nature of how people respond to prominent political figures and issues. In contrast to memory-based theories that interpret the survey response as the result of citizens drawing on the set of available considerations in memory (e.g., Zaller 1992), Lodge and Taber place great emphasis on the ways in which automatic affective responses shape information processing and opinion updating. These affective responses are stored
and updated in long-term memory, they argue, and surface rapidly outside conscious awareness in response to stimuli.

This volume integrates and synthesizes Lodge and Taber’s research program with their collaborators in the Stonybrook diaspora over the last two decades. After an introductory chapter challenging the notion that our thoughts are the result of conscious consideration, they lay out their John Q. Public (JQP) model (chapter 2). The first empirical chapters provide evidence using reaction time-based measures that people routinely engage in “hot cognition” about political figures, groups, and issues (chapter 3) and that these processes influence implicit in- and out-group identifications (chapter 4). In addition, they show that subliminal positive or negative emotional stimuli can influence candidate evaluation (chapter 5) and conscious reflection on political issues (chapter 6) even when they are unrelated to the issues or candidates at hand. These findings, they argue, are consistent with the “affective contagion” that they propose in their model as central to the attitude formation and updating process. Lodge and Taber then provide evidence that people’s priors shape how they select and process information. The more conventional studies presented in this chapter, which employ explicit measures and thought listing tasks, find consistent patterns of motivated reasoning (e.g., selective exposure, confirmation bias, and disconfirmation bias) among sophisticates and people with strong prior attitudes, a pattern that they argue is consistent with their model (chapter 7). Lodge and Taber’s final empirical chapter is an ambitious (though less persuasive) attempt to formalize and test a computational model based on their theory (chapter 8). They conclude with an extended discussion of the differences between their theoretical approach and three prominent alternatives: Zaller’s RAS model (1992), Lau and Redlawsk’s process-tracing approach (2006), and Marcus, MacKuen, and Newman’s theory of affective intelligence (2000).

At this point, political psychology is seemingly dominated by motivated reasoning-based approaches, but memory-based theories and interpretations still persist in the broader discipline (perhaps reflecting its prominence in both prior research and lay theories of public opinion). It is therefore particularly instructive to contrast Lodge and Taber’s JQP model with Zaller’s influential Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model. As the concluding chapter highlights, the differences between Lodge and Taber’s model and Zaller’s center on proposed mechanisms and causal processes. Both models yield similar expectations of selective exposure, confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, etc., but Zaller’s model explains those predictions as the result of bias in
the set of considerations stored in or retrieved from memory, whereas Lodge and Taber see motivated reasoning as a largely automatic process triggered by an affective reaction to a political stimuli. The differences between the models do matter empirically, however, when considering data from thought listing tasks or other respondent self-reports. Scholars working in the RAS framework often try to understand expressed opinions and attitudes using the consciously retrieved set of considerations reported by a survey respondent in these sorts of tasks, but the JQP model suggests that such reports are at least in part rationalizations of respondents’ affective responses and cannot be treated as independent causal factors. Unfortunately, measuring automatic affective responses requires time-consuming and/or technically difficult tasks like response time measurements that can be difficult to implement outside the lab and are often imprecisely measured.

The distinction between those two approaches may turn in part on the domains to which they are applied. As Lodge and Taber note, the survey format is often sterile and artificial, especially when respondents are asked about unknown issues and political figures without realistic contextual cues. The same principle applies to the fictional stimuli and hypothetical scenarios that are often employed in political science and psychology experiments. In such cases, an affect-centered theory of political information processing may seem to offer little additional explanatory leverage over a memory-based approach. However, the politics that real people engage with is typically far more evocative and emotional than we acknowledge in our research. The national debate is dominated by highly controversial political figures and groups who use charged arguments and symbols to debate the most controversial and important issues on the public agenda. In such a context, affective responses are likely to be both common and consequential. To the extent possible, our methodologies should reflect this reality.

Ultimately, this volume is sure to take a central place in political psychology syllabi for years to come. If they can avoid rationalizing any affective responses of their own, even scholars who do not share the views of Lodge and Taber will find much to learn from and consider.

References


