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## Explaining Processes of Institutional Opinion Leadership

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## Explaining Processes of Institutional Opinion Leadership

### Abstract

When and how can institutions lead public opinion? Scholarly controversy exists over whether even a highly esteemed institution such as the Supreme Court can move mass opinion. In this study we use an experimental design embedded within a representative national survey to examine these questions in a context involving multiple institutions and multiple issues. Our findings suggest that the Court's ability to move opinion is potent and based on multiple processes of persuasive influence. Congress's ability to move opinion, while conditional, is surprisingly more potent than previously understood. Moreover, opinion change in response to institutional endorsements is mediated by substantive political thought to a greater extent than heuristic explanations have suggested.

### Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

# Explaining Processes of Institutional Opinion Leadership

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*When and how can institutions lead public opinion? Scholarly controversy exists over whether even a highly esteemed institution such as the Supreme Court can move mass opinion. In this study we use an experimental design embedded within a representative national survey to examine these questions in a context involving multiple institutions and multiple issues. Our findings suggest that the Court's ability to move opinion is potent and based on multiple processes of persuasive influence. Congress's ability to move opinion, while conditional, is surprisingly more potent than previously understood. Moreover, opinion change in response to institutional endorsements is mediated by substantive political thought to a greater extent than heuristic explanations have suggested.*

Can political institutions lead mass opinion by endorsing a certain issue position? There remains considerable scholarly controversy over whether even highly esteemed institutions such as the Supreme Court can lead public opinion (e.g., Hoekstra 1995; Marshall 1989; Mondak 1990). Studies addressing institutional persuasion have almost exclusively analyzed the U.S. Supreme Court (e.g., Baas and Thomas 1984; Hoekstra and Segal 1996; Mondak 1990), with little work on the persuasive abilities of other institutions. Moreover, few works have compared the persuasive capacities of the major institutions of government, nor has research examined the various processes of influence that might account for institutional influence. In this study, we suggest that the key to understanding when and how an institution is capable of moving mass opinion is to understand the psychological processes of persuasion in a cross-institutional, multi-issue framework.

We address three central research questions. First, are U.S. institutions, namely the Supreme Court and Congress, capable of moving public opinion? Second, under what conditions are citizens most likely to be influenced by institutional opinion leadership? Finally, how do the processes of persuasive influence differ between a high-credibility institution such as the

Supreme Court, as opposed to an institution that is perceived as less credible, such as Congress? Using a unique, cross-institutional, experimental design embedded within a representative national survey, we examine the extent to which each institution is able to move opinion, and the processes by which they are able to do so. With the advantages of internal validity conveyed by an experimental design, combined with the generalizability of a representative national sample, we help to resolve conflicting findings in laboratory studies involving student samples (Baas and Thomas 1984; Hoekstra 1995; Mondak 1990) and observational or quasi-experimental studies (Franklin and Kosaki 1989; Hoekstra and Segal 1996; Marshall 1989).

## Can Institutions Move Mass Opinion?

Institutional persuasion—that is, an institution's ability to move people's opinions in the direction of the institution's endorsement<sup>1</sup>—has largely been confined to the study of the Supreme Court, which is widely believed to have a “legitimizing capacity,” that

<sup>1</sup>As mentioned throughout the article, such persuasion may reflect a “wholesale” or “soft” opinion change. For the former, people change from favoring to opposing an issue (or vice versa) in response to an institutional endorsement. For the latter, people shift their degrees of favoring or opposing, e.g., from strongly opposing to opposing somewhat.

is, to confer legitimacy by placing its stamp of approval on policies. However, in early conceptualizations of this legitimating role, the Court exercised it by approving the policies of the other branches of government rather than by shaping mass opinion (see Dahl 1957). Can the Court capitalize on its “reservoir of good will” (Easton 1965) to induce popular acceptance of governmental policies? To the extent that it can, is this because of the Court’s high credibility and symbolic status or some other explanation?

Early observational studies provided a dismal view of the Supreme Court’s role as a leader of mass opinion. Questioning the likelihood of this hypothesis, many pointed to the public’s lack of awareness of Court decisions (Adamany 1973; Kessel 1966; Murphy and Tanenhaus 1968). In addition, other conditions for Court-led opinion change have been suggested, including public recognition of the Court’s guardian role of the Constitution and public perceptions of competence and impartiality. Given that these conditions are rarely fulfilled simultaneously, one would not expect substantial opinion leadership from this perspective (Murphy and Tanenhaus 1968).

Shifts in public opinion following many Supreme Court decision appear to have been minimal (e.g., Adamany 1973; Marshall 1987, 1989). On the other hand, experimental and quasi-experimental work on the Supreme Court’s ability to move opinion has produced generally positive, if inconsistent, results. Conflicting findings have come from laboratory studies involving student samples (Baas and Thomas 1984; Hoekstra 1995; Mondak 1990, 1994), observational studies in naturally occurring contexts (Adamany 1973; Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2003; Marshall 1989), and quasi-experimental studies (Franklin and Kosaki 1989; Hoekstra and Segal 1996). Experimental studies suggest that under certain conditions, the Court is capable of moving opinion in the direction of its decisions (Clawson, Kegler, and Waltenburg 2001; Hoekstra 1995; Mondak 1990, 1992, 1994). The internal validity of these experimental studies makes their causal claims credible, but the use of student samples raises issues of external validity. In addition, the results from quasi-experimental studies typically have been confined to more limited circumstances such as local public opinion (Hoekstra and Segal 1996) and the abortion issue (Franklin and Kosaki 1989). More recent studies have been more promising with respect to this hypothesis, with evidence in support of institutional opinion leadership in the context of the Court’s *Bush v. Gore* decision (Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2003), black citizens’ opinions on affirmative action and capital punishment (Clawson,

Kegler, and Waltenburg 2003), and black citizens’ opinions on the Court’s rulings on the University of Michigan affirmative action cases (Clawson and Waltenburg 2004). In all three cases, the Supreme Court’s power of influence has been attributed to high levels of diffuse support (see Easton 1965), or institutional loyalty (Gibson 1989; Caldeira and Gibson 1992). Thus the Court appears capable of moving public opinion under some circumstances, but there are inconsistencies in results and a lack of empirical evidence regarding the processes underlying its capacity to do so.

In contrast, evidence on Congress’s ability to move opinion is very sparse. In a rare contribution to this area, Hoekstra (1995) finds that unlike the Court, Congress *cannot* change public opinion, and its lack of influence is attributed to its low institutional credibility relative to the Supreme Court (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). To date, there is little additional evidence confirming or disconfirming this finding; it is also possible that the conditions under which Congress can lead opinion have simply yet to be specified. In order to contrast the capacity for opinion leadership across low- and high-credibility institutions, our study incorporates both the Court and Congress as potential opinion leaders for the same issues in order to work toward a more general theory of institutional opinion leadership.

## Processes Underlying Institutional Persuasion

Based on what is known about processes of persuasion, under what conditions should institutions be capable of leading mass opinion? Explanations of the processes by which institutional endorsements affect public opinion have been heavily influenced by dual process models of persuasion. Although there are minor differences between dual process models, the crux of both the central versus peripheral model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986a, 1986b) and the heuristic versus systematic model (Chaiken 1980) is that there are two distinct processes that may account for any given opinion change: one process involves mindful and systematic processing of substantive issue-relevant arguments, and the other consists of the use of heuristics or shortcuts, which influence opinions without systematic processing of substantive issue-relevant arguments. These heuristics or shortcuts can involve a wide range of potential cues, such as the idea that positions held by experts are more likely to be

accurate, or that opinions espoused by a credible source are likely to be correct. The key distinction between these two processes of persuasion is that the use of heuristics is assumed to be a less effortful process, without mindful processing of substantive arguments about the issue, whereas systematic processing of substantive issue arguments is a more effortful and mindful means of rendering an opinion.

Most models of elite opinion leadership are based on the idea that a high-credibility person or institution leads the opinions of an unknowledgeable segment of the public via heuristic processing of elite endorsements (e.g., Gilens and Marukawa 2002; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). This model suggests that the less informed eschew active, mindful processing and rely instead on convenient shortcuts that do not require effortful thinking about the actual substance of an issue. When hearing the views of a trusted institution, people are influenced as they would be by any credible source.

By using heuristic cues, even citizens who have thought little about an issue are able to form and maintain sensible opinions (e.g., Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). People respond to elite cues because they are ill-informed about a given controversy and/or are not motivated to engage in systematic processing of issue-relevant arguments. Persuasive influence that results from cues about institutional decisions or the opinions of political elites is often viewed as a heuristic influence. Although political elites and their institutions obviously make substantive arguments in support of their positions as well, the study of top-down elite influence has focused less on the power of the substance of the arguments made by elites and more on the influence they exercise simply by supplying credible endorsements of a particular issue position. The heuristic model is appealing in that elites seem to fit precisely the description of the kind of source likely to be used as a heuristic cue—at least in theory. The term *elite* suggests a class of people viewed as superior to the average person, who thus could make up for what the average citizen lacks. Of course, in practice, empirical evidence suggests that eliteness is not what it used to be. There is less deference to traditional mantels of authority, less respect for government institutions (particularly Congress), and less trust in politicians as well (Craig 1993; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002; Levi and Stoker 2000; Orren 1997). In our study, we suggest that understanding the processes of institutional persuasion across institutions with differing levels of public esteem may require more complex models

of persuasion than have heretofore been applied to this context.

We suspect that political institutions seldom have the power to sway public opinion in as straightforward a fashion as the heuristic model suggests. To be sure, unreflective acceptance of institutional endorsements does not jibe well with the predominant views most Americans hold of their governmental institutions. It is not safe to simply assume that any influence that occurs because an elite source endorses a given position is a result of heuristic influence. To date, the heuristic processing of institutional endorsements has been inferred in a highly indirect fashion. Although we do not doubt that high-credibility elites can influence the opinions of the ill-informed and politically uninvolved on some occasions, we question the wisdom of using exclusively heuristic models of persuasion to understand the influence of elites and institutions. We turn next to additional alternatives.

### Beyond Heuristic and Systematic Processes

Although the heuristic/systematic and central/peripheral distinctions between types of persuasive influence processes are often portrayed as either/or alternatives, these models have generated plenty of evidence suggesting that they are not mutually exclusive as is often asserted.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is not the case that if an individual engages in substantive, issue-related thinking, then the credibility of the source of an endorsement should no longer matter nor, conversely, that if the person is influenced by an institutional endorsement, then substantive considerations of the issue should not matter (see Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994). For example, if a high-credibility

<sup>2</sup>It is easy to see how the dual process models could be interpreted as suggesting a trade-off between one form of influence and the other. The ELM suggests that *either* message content *or* peripheral cues have the primary impact on persuasion (Stiff 1986, Stiff and Boster 1987; cf. Petty et al. 1987). But it is helpful for purposes of understanding elite cues to note that advocates of both of these theories strongly disavow such intent. For example, Chaiken (1980; Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989) points out that the two types of persuasive influence are not mutually exclusive. Instead, *interaction* and *additivity* effects are also part of the model. *Interaction effects* occur when heuristic cues such as source credibility bias the processing of message content (e.g., Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994). *Additivity effects* occur when both heuristic cues and systematic processing simultaneously influence opinions. Additionally, from a theoretical perspective, it is not clear why one type of processing should block or attenuate processing of the other variety.

institution presents an issue-relevant argument advocating a particular viewpoint, that argument may receive greater consideration and more systematic processing than a low-credibility institution offering the same argument. In this example, high credibility helps the institution lead public opinion by affecting the mindful processing of issue-relevant arguments (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). The Supreme Court, as a high-credibility institution, could thus change opinions both by serving as a heuristic *and* by enhancing the persuasiveness of substantive issue arguments.

In addition, another hybrid process by which institutional endorsements may influence opinions is by affecting the kinds of thoughts and arguments that these announcements prompt when people hear about an institutional endorsement of an issue position (Petty and Cacioppo 1986a). These thoughts can, in turn, affect people's opinions (Brock 1967; Greenwald 1968; Petty, Ostrom, and Brock 1981). Known within psychology as "cognitive responses," these issue-relevant thoughts can be generated by knowing what position an institution has endorsed. People will often attempt to understand, for example, why a particular source would endorse a given issue position, and because they are self-generated, these thoughts are a particularly powerful way to change opinions (Greenwald 1968; Lepper, Ross, and Lau 1986; Petty, Ostrom, and Brock 1981). Thus, an institutional endorsement could affect the direction and/or magnitude of cognitive response, and thereby bring about persuasion by influencing the extent and direction of mindful and substantive processing of issue arguments (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989; Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Petty and Cacioppo 1986a).

In sum, past research on the ability of institutions, and elites in general, to lead public opinion have not sufficiently differentiated between an "empty-headed," purely heuristic interpretation and a variety of other more mindful and systematic processes that suggest a more thoughtful citizenry more actively processing institutional cues. Our study presents a more fully specified design capable of distinguishing between these various processes of influence.

## Research Design

To investigate how institutional endorsements lead mass opinion, we used an experimental design embedded within a national survey, comparing the persuasive capacities of Congress and the Supreme Court.

The design included three experimental factors. A three-level factor randomly assigned people to receive an endorsement of a specific issue position from the Supreme Court, from Congress, or no endorsement at all. In order to avoid producing results that could be specific to a given issue, a two-level factor manipulated which of two issues respondents were cued about, either affirmative action or flag burning. A third factor manipulated whether or not the respondent received a substantive argument for the issue position being advocated. The design is a fully crossed, full factorial experiment with a total of 12 experimental conditions (2 issues [affirmative action or flag burning]  $\times$  3 sources [Court, Congress, or control]  $\times$  2 arguments [present or absent]). The online Appendix A (at <http://journalofpolitics.org/>) includes further details about the wording of manipulations and measurement of variables. Data collection was carried out by the staff of the Survey Center at University of California, Berkeley between June 15 and November 4, 1994.<sup>3</sup> A total of 854 respondents were randomly assigned to one of 12 experimental conditions; those who refused to answer or had no opinions on the relevant issues were eliminated from the sample.

Congress and the Supreme Court are assumed to represent different levels of source credibility. While the Court is known to maintain a relatively esteemed standing in the eyes of the public (Caldeira and Gibson 1992), Congress is widely known to have less credibility (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Our own data verified that, consistent with previous studies, the Court maintains significantly higher levels of credibility than Congress.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>In 1994, Congress possessed among its lowest confidence ratings (below 20%) since the early 1970s, according to the Gallup Poll Online (2007).

<sup>4</sup>Respondents were asked about the perceived credibility of institutions. Control condition respondents were randomly assigned to receive trust and expertise questions about either the Court or Congress, thus providing us with an untainted assessment of baseline levels of perceptions toward these sources. Expertise: "When it comes to making political decisions, INSTITUTION is well informed on the issues." Trustworthiness: "When it comes to making political decisions, INSTITUTION understands the concerns of people like me." The order of the two questions was randomized and responses were coded based on a 4-point agree-disagree scale. For expertise, 69.5% of respondents gave positive ratings to the Court, while only 43.5% of respondents gave positive ratings to Congress. For trustworthiness, 48.8% positively rated the Court, and for Congress, only 23.7% gave positive ratings. The mean level of expertise attributed to the Court (mean = 2.92) was significantly higher than the expertise attributed to Congress (mean = 2.35,  $p < .01$ ). The Court was also perceived as significantly more credible on the trustworthiness dimension (mean = 2.44 compared to Congress mean = 1.90,  $p < .01$ ).

Two controversial issues were chosen on the basis of the significantly different levels of commitment they elicited in a pretest survey, and because they were issues that could credibly be addressed by either Congress or the Supreme Court, thus making institutional leadership cues plausible.<sup>5</sup> Support for affirmative action (low commitment) and support for a federal statute prohibiting flag burning (high commitment) were both issues for which media carried endorsements of particular views by Congress and the Supreme Court during the six months preceding the study. In the experiment, consistent with the actual endorsements at the time, the institution (Congress or the Court) is reported to support laws requiring affirmative action, or to oppose laws banning flag burning. Based on previous research, these issues should be particularly unlikely to elicit evidence of persuasion via elite cues. As Gilens and Murakawa (2002) note, elite endorsements are generally influential for technical, unfamiliar issues, while issues involving values are seldom susceptible to such influence. Flag burning and affirmative action are well known issues among the American public, and for many they involve balancing competing values such as free expression versus honoring one's country's symbols in the case of flag burning, and equality versus fairness in the case of affirmative action.

To further probe the processes by which institutions move opinion, we measured the amount of issue-relevant thought taking place in response to the information participants were given. After receiving one of the 12 experimental manipulations and providing an opinion on the issue, respondents were immediately asked a "thought listing" question designed to tap the amount of issue-relevant thought generated in response to the experimental manipulations. This method involves asking people to list their thoughts or ideas—i.e., their "cognitive responses"—relevant to the message topic (Brock 1967; Greenwald 1968). The idea is to tap the thoughts of subjects as they are exposed to potentially persuasive messages. In order to avoid potentially inducing opinion change in so doing, yet still ask when such thoughts are fresh, our thought-listing question was

asked immediately after eliciting respondents' issue opinions (see the online Appendix A). Items were recorded verbatim and then later "unitized" into individual units of cognitive response (Meichenbaum, Henshaw, and Himel 1980). The number of issue-relevant thoughts per person ranged from 0 to 4. For our analyses, we used these to construct two additional items: (1) a dichotomous indicator of whether the respondent engaged in issue-relevant thought or not, and (2) a measure of the proportion of thoughts that were consistent with the direction of the institutional endorsement.<sup>6</sup>

Institutional endorsements are seldom received in a vacuum. When media report on institutional positions on issues, they typically attribute reasons or rationales to those opinions (see Barnhurst and Mutz 1997). Thus, our design provides respondents with the same kind of information they might encounter along with an institutional endorsement in the real world.<sup>7</sup> The influence of institutional endorsements often has been studied devoid of political substance, in a sense stacking the deck in favor of heuristic processes of persuasion. To avoid this we include an issue argument factor that randomly assigns people to receive (or not) a rationale along with their institutional endorsement. In this way we separate effects of political substance that may bring about agreement via mindful processing from those of institutional credibility alone. Inclusion of this experimental factor also allows us to examine the influence of institutional endorsements in a richer, more substantive political context that should be more generalizable to real-world situations than are examinations of exposure to such endorsements without any rationale or context.

Three different variables allow us to ascertain the processes of influence that explain institutional persuasion. If institutional opinion leadership is purely heuristic, then one would expect a main effect of institutional endorsements that is independent of the rationales accompanying those endorsements. In addition, our measure of issue-relevant thought allows us to examine whether the impact of institutional endorsements on opinion change is concentrated among those respondents devoid of issue-relevant thought. An index that taps levels of objective political information and self-perceived knowledge about

<sup>5</sup>Tests using respondents in the control condition (who received no institutional endorsement) confirmed that affirmative action and flag burning differed significantly from one another in the level of commitment to opinions that they elicited. After giving their opinion on the assigned issue, respondents were asked, on a scale of 0 to 10 (where 10 means "completely committed," and 0 means "not at all committed"), "How committed are you to your stand?" As expected, the level of commitment to attitudes toward flag burning (mean = 8.03) was significantly stronger than toward affirmative action (mean = 6.52;  $t = 4.89$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

<sup>6</sup>Two independent coders analyzed the open-ended verbatim comments and demonstrated 85% agreement in assigning respondents to these categories. Discrepancies were resolved in favor of the more experienced coder.

<sup>7</sup>The two arguments we used were pretested and found to be most persuasive of those tested, and roughly equally so.

these issues allows a further test of whether low levels of information facilitate the heuristic influence of institutional endorsements.<sup>8</sup> If the less sophisticated are influenced to a greater degree by institutional endorsements than those more high sophisticates, this would provide further support for the heuristic model.

The dependent variable is the respondent's opinion on the assigned issue.<sup>9</sup> Given that the institutional endorsement for both institutions at the time supported the liberal position on each issue (against a flag burning prohibition and for affirmative action), higher opinion values are coded so they are more endorsement-consistent, that is, more liberal in orientation.

This design provides several methodological advantages in ascertaining the ability of Congress and the Court to move mass opinion. First, the design has a true control group that receives neither an institutional endorsement nor an issue argument. This group serves as a meaningful baseline for comparison with issue opinions that are untainted by experimental treatments. Any significant movement away from this baseline can be attributed to the influence of institutional cues or the rationales provided. Past designs have not included a control group and have instead compared the Court's or Congress's influence relative to another source, such as a high school principal, a bureaucratic agency, or a nonpartisan think tank (e.g., Clawson, Kegler, and Waltenburg 2001; Hoekstra 1995; Mondak 1990). In our study, the control group makes it possible to know if, and in what direction, opinions have shifted. Such shifts may reflect "soft," or incremental opinion change, where change reflects a softening of opposition or a strengthening of favorability, or "wholesale" opinion change, where change reflects a change from oppose to favor, or vice versa.

Second, our between-subjects design avoids the possibility that respondents may recall being asked the same opinion question *before* being told about the institutional endorsement, thus constraining their post-treatment opinions and/or making the study's

purpose overly transparent (Cook and Campbell 1979). Some previous conclusions about both Congress's and the Court's ability to move opinion are based on a within-subjects design. In Hoekstra's (1995) study, for example, opinions are measured both before and after the experimental manipulations.

Third, and most importantly, our hybrid survey-experimental design advances understanding of institutionally induced opinion change by helping to resolve the conflicting findings generated by laboratory studies involving student samples (Baas and Thomas 1984; Hoekstra 1995; Mondak 1990) and observational and quasi-experimental studies (Franklin and Kosaki 1989; Hoekstra and Segal 1996; Marshall 1989). Using a representative sample of Americans, we increase external validity, yet maintain the internal validity that is the essence of experimental design. The many complex types of heuristic and systematic influence processes that are possible when an institution endorses a given opinion are difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle without the control afforded by an experimental design with a control group.

In our analyses, we examined both whether the institutional cues were effective and what kind of psychological process accounted for the effects. To begin, we examined the predictions associated with purely heuristic influence from endorsements from the Supreme Court as well as Congress. Further, we examined whether more complex, hybrid models of the persuasion process accounted for the influence of institutional endorsements. If purely heuristic processes of persuasion account for institutional opinion leadership, then one might expect a main effect for institutional endorsement, particularly for the endorsement from the highly credible Supreme Court. Even more to the point, one would expect that those who were politically unsophisticated, or those not engaged in processing issue-relevant thoughts to be especially susceptible to institutional endorsements. If opinion leadership is a result of accepting cues from high-credibility sources and little effortful thinking about an issue, then significant interactions would be predicted between institutional endorsements and sophistication and/or issue-relevant thought.

As previous evidence of interactions between heuristic and systematic processes attest, the endorsement of an institution also could be indirectly influential through one of two hybrid processes of influence. First, an endorsement might enhance the persuasiveness of the substantive arguments it offers along with its decision. In other words, apart from the impact on opinions that any given substantive argument might have, the same substantive argument

<sup>8</sup>Self-perceived issue-specific knowledge correlated highly with the objective political knowledge index, so the objective and subjective knowledge measures were combined into a single index, which was then divided at the median to facilitate examinations of the processes of influence among high versus low sophisticates.

<sup>9</sup>Items were scaled such that the opinion variable was recoded from 1 to 4, where "1" represents the most conservative position on the issue (opposing laws requiring affirmative action and favoring laws banning flag burning) and "4" indicates the most liberal position on the issue.



may receive greater attention and have greater credibility when coming from the Supreme Court rather than from Congress. If this occurs, one would expect to find a significant interaction between institutional endorsement and the rationale/argument given with it, such that the endorsement enhances the credibility of the argument and thus leads public opinion in the suggested direction. Second, as suggested by cognitive response theory, institutional endorsements may cause people to ponder the rationales for the decisions, along with or even in the absence of any official explanations or rationales. If the explanations people are prompted to generate support the endorsement, their opinions will be shifted in that direction as a result. In other words, the institutional endorsement sets in motion a persuasive process in which the citizen also participates. If this is the case, we would expect to find that an institutional endorsement increases the proportion of endorsement-consistent issue-relevant thoughts generated by the respondent. Then by virtue of these arguments tilted in the direction of the institutional decision, persuasion occurs.

## Results

To analyze these experimental data, we used an analysis of variance for each institution comparing the control condition respondents to both the Congress and Supreme Court conditions. Each model included three experimental factors (issue, institution, and accompanying substantive argument present versus absent), plus political sophistication and a measure of whether the person engaged in issue-relevant thought. To improve the efficiency of these models, we also included standard demographic and party identification variables as covariates (see Franklin 1991). We begin with analyses of how institutional cues directly affect opinions and then examine them in interactions that allow us to hone in on processes of influence. We then turn to the effects of these manipulations on cognitive responses and their potential to mediate opinion change. We include the full analysis of variance results in the online Appendix B and describe the findings relevant to our theoretical predictions in the text and figures, along with the relevant statistical tests.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>All means illustrated in the tables use *adjusted* cell means resulting from the analysis of variance; that is, they illustrate the impact of a single experimental variable when all other elements in the model are held constant.

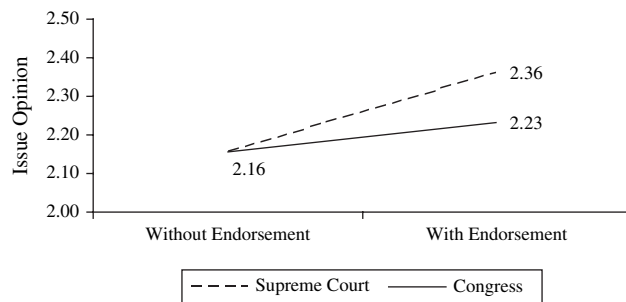
As shown in Figure 1, the main effect for the Supreme Court endorsement relative to the control condition was significant, but the endorsement by Congress had no such significant impact, although its effect is in the predicted direction. Apparently, the Court can indeed use its institutional credibility to move public opinion in the direction of its endorsement. Figure 2 simply demonstrates that the issue arguments we provided were consistently influential in changing opinions in the direction anticipated. The arguments themselves—when and if such arguments accompany news of institutional decisions—may influence opinions via systematic processing of issue-relevant arguments, independent of any institutional endorsement of them.

More to the point, in Figure 3, we examine whether people with low levels of political sophistication were more likely to be influenced by institutional cues, consistent with the heuristic theory of the impact of endorsements. Contrary to these expectations, Figure 3 shows that there was no difference in the impact of the Supreme Court endorsement among low- and high-sophistication respondents. Both those high and low in sophistication responded similarly to the Court endorsement. In contrast, the endorsement of Congress followed the heuristic expectation faithfully, producing a significant deviation from the control condition for those low in sophistication, but none for the more politically sophisticated.

These results suggest that Congress's ability to move opinion is heuristic, perhaps because those low in political sophistication also perceive Congress as more expert than those high in sophistication, whereas the reverse pattern is true for the credibility of the Court. That is, respondents high in political sophistication are more likely than those low in sophistication to see the Court as having great expertise.<sup>11</sup> Overall, these findings in Figures 1, 2, and 3 suggest that both systematic *and* heuristic processes of persuasion can independently contribute to opinion change, assuming the substantive arguments are communicated and persuasive. That is, people are

<sup>11</sup>Indeed, the mean perception of expertise for Congress for low-sophistication control group respondents (who thus received no source cue) was 2.5, and for high sophistication respondents who received no cues, mean expertise was 2.18. This difference falls just short of conventional levels of statistical significance ( $t = 1.57$ ,  $p = 0.12$ ; two-tailed test). The same pattern does not hold for the Court; in fact, it is in the reverse direction (mean = 2.86 for low sophisticates and mean = 2.98 for high sophisticates), and the difference was not significant.

**FIGURE 1 The Impact of Institutional Endorsements on Mass Opinion**



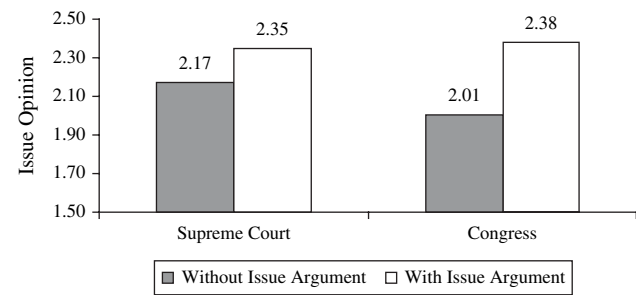
Note: Entries are mean issue opinion scores based on a 1-4 scale. For the Supreme Court,  $N = 490$ ; for Congress,  $N = 508$ . Analysis of variance produced a statistically significant main effect for the Supreme Court ( $F = 8.11, p < 0.01$ ) and a statistically insignificant main effect for Congress ( $F = 0.47, p = 0.49$ ).

influenced simultaneously by both the institutional endorsement as well as by any issue-relevant arguments provided. Heuristic and systematic processing operate side by side, and we see little evidence that engaging in one process makes the other less influential.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from direct effects on issue opinions, we have also suggested that institutional endorsements might bring about opinion change indirectly by producing issue-relevant thoughts, that is, cognitive responses that help individuals explain to themselves why a given decision was produced by an institution. As illustrated in Figure 4, those who generated issue-relevant cognitive responses according to our thought-listing measure were more likely to shift opinions in the predicted direction relative to the control condition, and this pattern was the same for both institutions. A heuristic model would predict that those who were *not* engaged in issue-relevant thinking would be more influenced by institutional endorsements. But, surprisingly, this interaction suggests precisely the opposite result. While the Court was successful in persuading people in the predicted direction regardless of issue-relevant thought, Congress was only able to move the opinions of those who *did* engage in issue-relevant thought and failed to do so among those who did not. What this finding suggests is that even a low-credibility institution such as Congress can produce opinion change *if* it enhances

<sup>12</sup>There is some marginal evidence that the presence of the issue argument attenuates the effects of the Court's endorsement (i.e., an endorsement by issue argument interaction), but this pattern is only marginally significant.

**FIGURE 2 The Impact of Issue Arguments on Opinion**



Note: Bars represent mean issue opinion scores based on a 1-4 scale. For the Supreme Court,  $N = 490$ ; for Congress,  $N = 508$ . Analysis of variance produced a statistically significant main effect for issue argument for both the Supreme Court ( $F = 5.52, p < 0.05$ ) and Congress ( $F = 12.87, p < 0.01$ ).

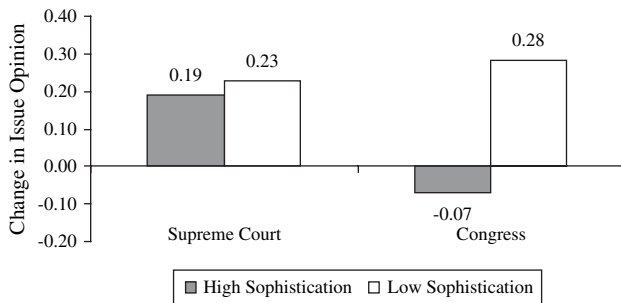
the amount and direction of cognitive responses that people generate internally.

Our final analyses in Table 1 and Figure 5 examines whether the impact of institutional endorsements is, in fact, facilitated by the cues' effects on cognitive responses. In other words, do institutional endorsements work at least in part by causing those who hear about these institutions' positions to think more deeply about the issue and why the institution has decided at it has? If this is the case, then it matters little whether decision rationales are communicated to the public, since the ones they generate may be more persuasive still. In Table 1, we examine whether institutional endorsements are capable of altering the proportion of issue-relevant thoughts that are *consistent* with the direction of each institution's endorsement. In other words, does it cause people to rehearse thoughts consistent with the decision? We tested this hypothesis separately for each institutional endorsement relative to the control condition using as the dependent variable the proportion of endorsement-consistent issue-relevant thoughts.<sup>13</sup>

As shown in Table 1, not surprisingly, the well-educated and those who were given a persuasive argument as part of the experiment were able to generate more issue-relevant thoughts, whether the cue was from Congress or the Court. As demonstrated by the findings for the Supreme Court in the first column of Table 1, the Court is capable of significantly enhancing the amount of endorsement-consistent

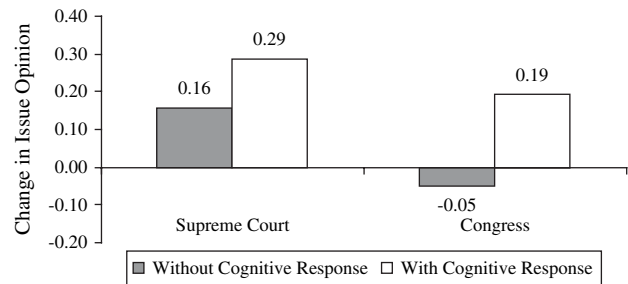
<sup>13</sup>More specifically, the measure is the number of endorsement-consistent thoughts divided by the total number of thoughts generated.

**FIGURE 3 The Ability of the Supreme Court and Congress to Change Opinion, by Sophistication Level**



Note: Each bar represents the difference in the mean of issue opinion for the specified condition relative to the control group condition (no institutional endorsement); positive values represent opinion change in the direction of the institutional endorsement. For the Supreme Court, N = 490; for Congress, N = 508. Analysis of variance produced a statistically insignificant endorsement by sophistication interaction for the Court (F = 0.34, p = 0.56) and a statistically significant interaction for Congress (F = 4.47, p < 0.05).

**FIGURE 4 The Ability of the Supreme Court and Congress to Change Opinion via Issue-Relevant Thought**



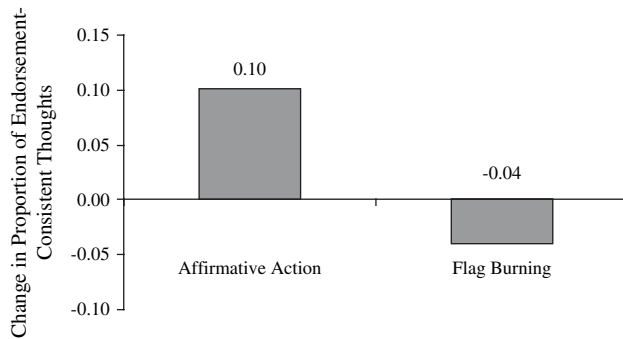
Note: Each bar represents the difference in the mean of issue opinion for the specified condition relative to the control group condition (no institutional endorsement); positive values represent opinion change in the direction of the institutional endorsement. For the Supreme Court, N = 490; for Congress, N = 508. Analysis of variance produced a statistically insignificant endorsement by cognitive response interaction for the Court (F = 1.20, p = 0.27) and a statistically significant interaction for Congress (F = 4.01, p < 0.05).

**TABLE 1 Analysis of Variance – The Impact of Congress and the Supreme Court on the Proportion of Endorsement-Consistent Issue-Relevant Thoughts**

	SUPREME COURT				CONGRESS			
	Sum of Squares	df	F	p	Sum of Squares	df	F	p
<b>MAIN EFFECTS</b>								
Institutional Endorsement	0.64	1	4.99	0.03	0.12	1	1.01	0.32
Issue	0.02	1	0.13	0.72	0.65	1	5.61	0.02
Argument	0.57	1	4.40	0.04	0.32	1	2.78	0.10
Political Sophistication	0.35	1	2.67	0.10	1.63	1	14.00	0.00
<b>2-WAY INTERACTIONS</b>								
Inst. Endorsement*Issue	0.01	1	0.07	0.80	0.36	1	3.12	0.08
Inst. Endorsement*Argument	0.04	1	0.27	0.60	0.21	1	1.78	0.18
Inst. Endorsement*Sophistication	0.00	1	0.00	0.99	0.19	1	1.65	0.20
Issue*Argument	0.01	1	0.11	0.74	0.08	1	0.67	0.41
Issue*Sophistication	0.02	1	0.18	0.67	1.39	1	11.99	0.00
Argument*Sophistication	0.02	1	0.17	0.68	0.18	1	1.51	0.22
<b>COVARIATES</b>								
Education	2.95	1	22.86	0.00	2.18	1	18.78	0.00
Age	0.00	1	0.01	0.91	0.24	1	2.03	0.15
Sex	0.03	1	0.19	0.66	0.18	1	1.54	0.22
Race	0.21	1	1.62	0.20	0.56	1	4.79	0.03
Income	0.04	1	0.30	0.58	0.28	1	2.40	0.12
Republican	0.29	1	2.24	0.13	0.14	1	1.19	0.28
Democrat	0.30	1	2.29	0.13	0.67	1	5.75	0.02
Model	6.92	17	3.16	0.00	12.26	17	6.21	0.00
			N = 490				N = 509	

Note: Results based on analysis of variance with covariates included in model.

**FIGURE 5** The Ability of Congress to Change the Proportion of Endorsement-Consistent Issue-Relevant Thoughts, by Issue



Note: Each bar represents the difference in the mean of the proportion of endorsement-consistent thoughts for the specified condition relative to the control group condition (no institutional endorsement); positive values represent change in the direction of the endorsement.  $N = 509$ . Analysis of variance produced a marginally significant endorsement by issue interaction ( $F = 3.12, p = 0.08$ ).

issue-relevant thought relative to the control group. The Court's institutional endorsement caused people to mentally rehearse more issue-consistent substantive arguments supporting the decision. This finding is consistent with our expectation that a high-credibility source such as the Court is capable of enhancing the extent and direction of issue-relevant thinking in a persuasion context.

For Congress, as shown in column 2 of Table 1, the main effect of institutional endorsement is not significant, but the endorsement by issue interaction shows that a congressional endorsement enhanced the proportion of endorsement-consistent issue-relevant thoughts for affirmative action (the low-commitment issue), though not for flag burning (the high-commitment issue). As shown in Figure 5, at least for affirmative action, even a low-credibility source such as Congress was capable of inducing people to rehearse issue-relevant thoughts in the direction of its advocacy. Substantially more pro-affirmative action thoughts were rehearsed by those who received the Congress cue relative to those in the control condition. However, supportive thoughts relevant to flag burning were not affected by the congressional endorsement.

To summarize our findings, the Court's institutional endorsement triggered multiple processes of persuasion: as a heuristic capable of moving opinion in a passive fashion *and* as an impetus for more

active and mindful issue-relevant thinking in the direction of its endorsement. If the endorsement happened to be accompanied by persuasive substantive arguments and explanations, then its persuasiveness would be still further enhanced. Like the Court, Congress's endorsement also appears to play multiple roles. The congressional endorsement (1) significantly changed opinions specifically among low-information respondents, and (2) enhanced endorsement-consistent issue-relevant thoughts for the low-commitment affirmative action issue, and thus facilitated endorsement-consistent opinion influence for that issue. These effects are more powerful than we expected from a low-credibility source such as Congress.

Of course, some caution should be exercised in generalizing our findings as our study has some limitations that are common to experiments. Most obviously, it is limited to only two controversial issues, two substantive arguments, and two institutions, which cannot claim to represent all potential persuasive contexts in which institutions render decisions. Moreover, these particular issues are much better known and understood by the public than many highly technical pieces of legislation decided by Congress or decisions made by the Court. We demonstrate persuasive influence for both high- and low-commitment issues among the realm of issues for which significant numbers of people are likely to hear about court decisions. However, over the broader range of issues faced by these institutions, these issues would be considered relatively high profile, and thus harder to talk people out of. Issues that are high profile increase the likelihood that people would be exposed to these decisions and their rationales in the real world, but that same notoriety also lessens the likelihood of persuasive influence simply because the issues are already well known and widely debated. Nonetheless, relative to most experiments done in laboratory settings with student populations, our study population is far more generalizable to the real world.

The effects we have documented are statistically significant, but are they large enough to make a difference in the climate of opinion in the United States? On the one hand, a single one-shot stimulus administered by phone is a relatively weak inducement relative to living in a country where that decision outcome constitutes the law of the land. Repeated exposure to these outcomes might conceivably reinforce or increase the size of these short term effects. On the other hand, was the influence enough to make a real difference in mass opinion? In order to address this question through more than simple

speculation, we replicated the same analyses shown above after dichotomizing our opinion measures into simply favor versus oppose. We then used logit regressions with these dichotomous dependent variables in order to determine whether the strength of influence was sufficient to turn those in favor into those who oppose these issues, or whether it was more likely to weaken existing predispositions. For the most part, our findings suggest that the persuasive influence we observed was of the softer variety, that is, moving people from strongly opposing to only somewhat opposing, or from somewhat favoring to strongly favoring. The institutional endorsements generally soften respondents' existing positions in the direction of the institution's decision, but do not often wholly change them from opposition to advocacy. The one exception to this pattern occurs in the most purely heuristic situation, when a high-credibility Supreme Court endorsement is administered without any accompanying issue argument. Under these conditions, the probability of supporting the institution's decision goes from .34 with no endorsement, to .47 with the Supreme Court's endorsement, a significant persuasive influence from opposing to supporting flag burning and affirmative action.<sup>14</sup> Though a further examination is beyond the scope of this study, future research should investigate this issue more extensively.

## Implications for Institutional Opinion Leadership

Can institutions lead public opinion? Our study suggests that the answer to this question is yes, but specifying the conditions under which one should expect influence is more complex, because influence is not simply a matter of "empty-headed" people looking to credible sources for cues about what to think. At this point in the progression of research on institutional persuasion, a more useful question for scholars to ask is: which institutions can influence which segments of the population under what con-

ditions and with what issues using what process of persuasive influence? Research oriented in this fashion should better shed light on the extent to which and conditions under which institutions are capable of moving public opinion.

As expected, the Court is more influential than Congress in using its institutional credibility to move opinion, and it can do so fairly unconditionally, regardless of people's sophistication levels, levels of issue relevant thinking, or the presence of issue-relevant arguments. Thus, the processes by which the Court leads mass opinion are both heuristic and systematic forms of influence. The Court is capable of inducing opinion change not only because it is a credible source, but also because of the persuasiveness of the reasons that accompany its decisions and the stimulation of more mindful issue-relevant thoughts in the direction of its advocacy. The dual capacity of the Court's influence is important in understanding institutional opinion leadership, but our findings were particularly surprising with respect to Congress's capacity to move opinion in ways heretofore not understood by scholars. The congressional endorsement significantly influenced the views of the less sophisticated *and* generated more endorsement-consistent thoughts, which ultimately facilitated its indirect influence on attitudes toward affirmative action. In short, Congress's role as opinion leader may be more potent than many have assumed.

Importantly, our results indicate that the processes of influence involved in opinion leadership are less "empty-headed" than typically assumed. For both the Court and Congress analyses, we uncovered evidence that people were engaged in active and mindful processing of issue-relevant thoughts. From a normative legal reasoning point of view, rationales or logical bases are necessary to justify a legal conclusion. Particularly for the Court, but also for Congress to a degree, our findings imply that while citizens are prone to persuasion by mere institutional endorsements, rationales and arguments are also potent instruments of institutional persuasion.

Contrary to the typical predictions based on the heuristic model, those engaged in issue relevant thinking were *more* persuaded by the congressional endorsement, a finding contradicting our initial expectations. This finding led us to suspect that even a low-credibility institution such as Congress was capable of enhancing issue-relevant thoughts in the direction of its endorsement. We found some evidence for this effect in the case of affirmative action. For a low-commitment issue such as affirmative action, Congress is capable of prompting people to

<sup>14</sup>In the logit model for the Court, the endorsement by issue argument interaction was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ , one-tailed test). To generate the predicted probabilities, we used a postestimation procedure akin to Clarify (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). We could not use Clarify directly because it does not perform analysis on a model with a poststratification weight. Thus, we computed average predictive comparisons (see Gelman and Hill 2007, 101–105), which are appropriate in the context of experimental data.

rehearse endorsement-consistent thoughts. The direction of these thoughts accounts for persuasive influence, and thus, our findings suggest that issue-relevant thinking mediates the impact of Congress's endorsements on opinion change. The Court is also capable of significantly increasing endorsement-consistent thoughts, and its effect carries across both affirmative action and flag burning. These findings support the notion that institutional endorsements can serve multiple roles, both as direct effects on opinions and as effects on the extent of endorsement-consistent thinking.

Overall, our findings show that each institution affects opinion in more nuanced ways than simple heuristic processing models would have one believe. Unfortunately, most previous designs have not been able to distinguish between purely heuristic processes, systematic processes, and hybrid combinations thereof. Our findings warn against continuing to stress the importance of simple heuristic processing while failing to address more complex and substantive processes of persuasion. Most importantly, our study demonstrates that opinion leadership does not necessarily mean persuasion without political substance. The influence of institutional endorsements depends to a great extent on the rationales for those endorsements that are made public. In other words, there is a great deal more political substance in opinion leadership than most scholars have thought. Moreover, the conditions for influence by an opinion leader like Congress have to do with the pool of political arguments—pro and con—in the public sphere at the time, because they provide the sets of arguments that may be rehearsed by individuals in cognitive responses. The kind of opinion leadership we see in our study is neither deterministic nor mindless; it incorporates the give and take of political arguments between elites and the mass public, and it is not independent of the strength of those arguments. Our findings strongly suggest that institutional opinion leadership may prove more mindful and politically substantive than previously thought.

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