

Feel-good Fallacies:
Do Voters Engage in Motivated Political
Reasoning to Regulate Their Emotions?

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Reasoning to Regulate Their Emotions?

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Tvivl, skam og kronisk angst
På resultatjagt uden fangst*

*Selvom meget føltes gråt
Gik det ofte også godt
En god kop kaffe og en god idé
Gåpåmod for at få det til at ske
Optimisme, håb og arbejdsro
Søde kollegaer, tid til at gro*

*Ikke mere Stata-fjol
Tid til øl og parasol
Endelig slut, prut finale
Hjertet vågner fra 5 års dvale
Undervejs gik det ellers itu og splinter
Men ikke længe takket være Eva og Vinter
Vigtigst er dét, at være en god far
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Filip Kiil, September, 2022

Preface

Together with three research papers listed in Table 1, this summary report makes up my PhD dissertation, *Feel-good fallacies: Do voters engage in motivated political reasoning to regulate their emotions?* The summary report presents and motivates the overall research question of the dissertation, lays out the overall theoretical framework, and describes some general methodological considerations that intersect the individual research articles. The summary report also presents the main results of the dissertation, discusses advantages and shortcomings of the approach used in the dissertation, considers the overall implications of the findings, and points out fruitful avenues for future research.

All of the papers presented in Table 1 are solo-authored.

Table 1. Papers contained in dissertation

Paper	
A	Testing the Emotion Regulation Account of Motivated Political Reasoning: The Case of Perceptual Divides over Politically Relevant Facts. <i>Working paper.</i>
B	Pay Attention! The Limited Generalizability of Disconfirmation Bias to Political Reasoning Contexts That Provide Full Discretion Over Processing Effort. <i>Invited for revise and resubmit in Journal of Social and Political Psychology.</i>
C	Looking for Relief: Developing and Testing the Emotion Regulation Explanation of Selective Exposure to Political Information. <i>Invited for revise and resubmit in Political Psychology.</i>

Feel-good fallacies: Do voters engage in motivated political reasoning to regulate their emotions?

To make competent decisions when choosing political representatives, voters must encounter relevant information about society and politics and integrate this into their political belief systems in a meaningful way (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008). Unfortunately, it is widely believed that voters' information acquisition is fundamentally flawed, fraught with biases that favour information supporting their pre-existing attitudes (e.g. Chong, 2013; Peterson & Iyengar, 2020; Stanovich, 2021; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding these biases is the theory of motivated political reasoning (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017; Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Taber & Lodge, 2016). A central idea in this theory is that people are not only motivated to reach political judgements that are accurate (accuracy motivation), but also to reach judgements that are consistent with their pre-existing political attitudes (directional motivation) (Groenendyk, 2013, 2018; Kunda, 1990).

Three core biases are generally thought to be the most important mechanisms through which people pursue directional political reasoning goals (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Taber & Lodge, 2006, 2016). The first, prior attitude effect, refers to people evaluating supportive information as stronger than challenging information (also known as partisan bias) (Ditto et al., 2019; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber et al., 2009). The second, disconfirmation bias, refers to dedicating more processing effort to challenging information than supportive information; engaging in laborious attempts to counter argue challenging information while passively accepting supportive information at face value (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Third, selective exposure bias (sometimes referred to as likeminded selective exposure, congeniality bias, or confirmation bias), refers to seeking out information that supports one's attitudes and avoiding information that challenges them (W. Hart et al., 2009; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber et al., 2009). These biases are generally thought to be crucial for political attitude formation, and directional motivated reasoning is seen by many as the default way people approach and incorporate political information into their belief systems (Mercier & Sperber, 2017; Redlawsk et al., 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2016).

The biases involved in motivated political reasoning have important consequences for citizens' ability to fulfil the functions assigned to them in non-

minimalist definitions of democracy (e.g. Achen & Bartels, 2017; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008; Stanovich, 2021; Strömbäck, 2005). This is so because motivated political reasoning is believed to underlie phenomena such as attitudinal and affective polarization, political misinformation, and conspiratorial beliefs (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Flynn et al., 2017; Iyengar et al., 2019; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2010). In turn, these are thought to cause democratic backsliding and erosion of democratic norms or to undermine democratic accountability by making voters misperceive the performance of incumbents (thus, impeding people's ability to hold elites accountable for their actions) (Kingzette et al., 2021; Krishnarajan, 2022; Little et al., 2020; Orhan, 2021; Robison, 2018; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008).

Despite the immense importance of motivated political reasoning for democracy, no consensus exists as to why it occurs, though there are several competing explanations in the existing literature, including Taber and Lodge's John Q. Public (JQP) model and the Bayesian rationality explanation (e.g. Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017; Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Hill, 2017; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Tappin et al., 2020b). A third explanation – the focus of the present dissertation – claims that motivated political reasoning is an emotion regulation process, which is to say that voters engage in motivated political reasoning to control and regulate what emotions they experience (Westen & Blagov, 2007; Westen et al., 2006). Paraphrasing Westen and colleagues (2006), this implies that motivated political reasoning is a way to maximize positive affective states and minimize negative affective states.

These different explanatory models have very different implications for what kind of phenomenon motivated political reasoning fundamentally is and for how its consequences could (or should) be addressed. In Taber and Lodge's JQP model, motivated reasoning biases are involuntary and automatic, fundamentally driven by affective processes (i.e., by feelings rather than sense), and exceedingly difficult (or impossible) to overcome. This is so because they are hardwired into the fundamental design of human memory (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016). In JQP, a left-wing voter who hears that high redistribution increases unemployment would be sceptical of that claim because her positive feelings toward redistribution would automatically and involuntarily make thoughts that contradict the claim appear in her conscious mind.

In the Bayesian rationality explanation, on the other hand, *bias* may not even be an appropriate term, because prior attitude effect, disconfirmation bias, and selective exposure bias are really the consequences of approaching political information with a strong Bayesian prior that happens to be consistent with one's political attitudes (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Little, 2021;

Stanovich, 2021; Tappin et al., 2020b). Here, a left-wing voter might also be sceptical toward a claim that redistribution increases unemployment, but this skepticism would stem from the fact that what she knows in advance about tax rates and unemployment contradicts the claim, making it seem implausible. To the extent that this explanation is correct, debiasing either becomes irrelevant or, in the case of political misinformation, becomes a simple question of exposing people to corrective information that they deem credible (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Flynn et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

A similarity between JQP and the Bayesian explanation is that the feelings that steer conscious reasoning in JQP represent a summary tally of one's prior experiences with a socio-political concept (e.g. Trump or economic redistribution), and the reasoning process can therefore be viewed as an approximation of Bayesian rationality, though rough and biased (Lodge & Taber, 2013, pp. 50-58; 230-234).

The emotion regulation explanation (the focus of the present dissertation) differs from the other explanations in this respect. Here, the biases involved in motivated political reasoning do not occur because they help people incorporate previous experiences or previous beliefs into the reasoning process (cf. Lodge & Taber, 2013, pp. 230-234), but, rather, because they enable people to obtain desired emotional states. For example, a left-wing voter's scepticism toward a claim that redistribution increases unemployment would be caused by a desire to avoid a discomfort she would experience if she accepted the message. This makes the motivated political reasoning biases clearly epistemically irrational as holding beliefs because one desires to do so is by definition epistemically irrational (Chong, 2013, p. 15; Elster, 1990).

A large psychological literature has found that people differ in terms of the strategies they use to regulate their emotions, and these differences (emotion regulation strategies) have been found to have important consequences for a variety of outcomes, including political attitude formation and political participation (e.g. Alkoby et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2019; Ford & Feinberg, 2020; Ford et al., 2018; Gross, 2015; Halperin et al., 2014; Lueke & Gibson, 2016; Mehta et al., 2020). However, it has not yet been theorized how the specific biases involved in motivated political reasoning (prior attitude effect, disconfirmation bias, and selective exposure) relate to different emotion regulation strategies. I argue that if the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning is correct, we should expect the biases involved in motivated political reasoning to be specific instances of the more general emotion regulation strategies that people use to control and regulate their emotions in a variety of different circumstances. Because of this lack of theorizing, we do not know whether differences in how people control and regulate their emotions

influence the extent to which they engage in different motivated political reasoning biases, which we should expect them to if the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning is correct. Furthermore, the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning has been subject to very limited empirical testing and, rather often, been assumed (though see Casado-Aranda et al., 2020; Westen et al., 2006). This leads to the overarching research question of the dissertation:

To what extent do voters engage in motivated political reasoning to regulate their emotions?

To answer this question, I investigate whether each of the three core biases involved in motivated political reasoning (prior attitude effect, disconfirmation bias, and selective exposure bias) occur to regulate emotions.

I theorize each of these three biases to be caused by three corresponding emotion regulation strategies, namely *cognitive reappraisal* (reinterpreting elements of a situation to control one's emotions), *attentional deployment* (redirecting one's attention to specific elements of a situation to control one's emotions), and *situation selection* (seeking out and avoiding situations to control one's emotions) (Gross, 2015).

Because emotion regulation strategies are alterable and under voluntary control, the emotion regulation explanation means that debiasing motivated political reasoning biases could be possible through altering emotion regulation patterns, e.g. prior attitude effect could be reduced by reducing cognitive reappraisal.

The overall research strategy of the dissertation is to investigate whether individual differences in the use of these emotion regulation strategies correlate with the magnitude of the corresponding political reasoning bias and to investigate whether experimentally manipulating the use of the different emotion regulation strategies influences the magnitude of the corresponding bias.

I investigate this in three separate papers, each of which addresses one of the three motivated reasoning biases. It is important to note that all the articles are written as stand-alone papers. In this summary report, I use them to answer the overarching research question, but while each of the papers helps to answer this question, they have other focuses as well and are not framed in terms of the overarching research question in the actual papers.

In the following section of the summary report, I review three different explanations of the biases I investigate in the dissertation, beginning with Taber and Lodge's JQP model, then the Bayesian updating account, and, finally, the emotion regulation explanation. I then provide a brief review of emotion regulation theory before moving on to the core theoretical argument of the

dissertation, which theorizes the three main biases involved in motivated political reasoning to be caused by the emotion regulation strategies of cognitive reappraisal, attentional deployment, and situation selection. I then briefly review some general methodological considerations, including the overall research strategy of the dissertation, before summarizing the research design and main findings of the three papers. I then discuss the overall implications of the results for different theoretical explanations of motivated political reasoning and for debiasing and point toward fruitful avenues for future research.

Explanations of motivated political reasoning biases in existing literature

Before delving into the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning, I begin by briefly reviewing two alternative explanations of the three biases that the dissertation focuses on. The first one is Taber and Lodge's JQP model (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016), one of the most influential theoretical models of political information processing (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017; Druckman et al., 2018; Lavine & Taber, 2018). I then address an alternative explanation that argues that the biases are consistent with Bayesian rationality (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Hill, 2017), thus questioning whether the term *bias* is even appropriate to describe them. I then proceed to the emotion regulation explanation, before presenting the overarching theoretical argument of the dissertation.

Taber and Lodge's JQP model

Taber and Lodge's JQP model is a highly influential theory that stresses motivated political reasoning as the fundamental lens through which political information processing should be understood (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016). The title of their magnum opus, *the rationalizing voter*, illustrates their view of voters as *rationalizers* rather than as *reasoners* (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016). Taber and Lodge (2013) fundamentally view conscious political thinking as determined by pre-conscious affective impulses that derive from political attitudes stored in online tallies. These tallies summarize one's previous positive and negative experiences with socio-political concepts (e.g. parties, policies, groups) (Lodge & Taber, 2013), and through shaping conscious thinking they indirectly determine what conclusions one ends up with when processing political information (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016).

To exemplify, imagine a person who reads a message about a political concept (i.e., a party, a political candidate, a group, or a specific policy) toward which she has negative feelings – for instance, “non-western immigrants”. Say she reads that non-western immigrants have lower employment rates than the ethnic majority group. Because of the way that human memory works, other concepts that she has negative feelings toward (e.g., criminals) will now be more likely to come to mind than concepts that she associates with positive feelings (e.g. good neighbours) (Burdein et al., 2006; Erisen et al., 2014; Lodge & Taber, 2005). The thoughts that come to mind will in turn influence her

final evaluation of the message in such a way as to make conclusions that are consistent with her pre-existing attitudes more likely, such as accepting the message as being true (Erisen et al., 2014; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006). It is worth noting that negative thoughts will further beget more negative thoughts (e.g., the concept “rapists” is more likely to enter conscious deliberation once “criminals” has come to mind), and for this reason, her initial feelings toward the concept in question will have increasingly large “downstream” effects as conscious deliberation proceeds and create a snowballing effect. This process is known as affective contagion (Erisen et al., 2014; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016)

In JQP, the fact that pre-conscious affective impulses determine our conscious reasoning processes is hardwired into the architecture of human memory (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016). It is thus the fundamental way that our memory systems are structured that leads us to display motivated reasoning biases. Because of this hard-wiring, motivated reasoning biases are essentially inevitable, and debiasing interventions are unlikely to be effective (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016). In their own words, the motivated reasoner described in JQP may be “as rational as we *homo sapiens* can be” (Lodge & Taber, 2013, p. 234).

Bayesian rationality

According to the Bayesian explanation, many of the phenomena usually attributed to motivated political reasoning can just as well be explained by rational Bayesian updating (e.g. Bullock, 2009; Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Little, 2021). Prior attitude effect, for instance, where people evaluate information as stronger if it supports their attitudes than if it challenges them, could be explained by people on average having priors that are consistent with their attitudes (e.g. Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Tappin et al., 2020b). In the previous example, for instance, the person with anti-immigration attitudes could happen to also have a Bayesian prior that non-western immigrants have high crime rates – a prior that might not have been influenced by her aversion toward immigrants. If this were the case, it could be rational for her to be sceptical toward information contradicting this prior, at least compared to someone with a strong prior that non-western immigrants have lower crime rates than, for example, the ethnic majority population.

Following this line of thinking, both prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias can be explained through rational processes. Prior attitude effect arises because Bayesians with different priors should evaluate a signal that strongly contradicts a prior as more likely to be wrong than a signal that falls in line with a strong prior (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Little, 2021; Tappin

et al., 2020b). Disconfirmation bias arises because it may require more cognitive effort to update beliefs in light of a signal that falls far from a strong prior than a signal that simply confirms one's prior or because information that falls far from one's prior violates expectations and, therefore, attracts more attention (Bargh & Thein, 1985; Mercier & Sperber, 2017; Proulx et al., 2017).

Selective exposure can arise because people view prior-congruent information as more credible than prior-incongruent information (following the just described logic concerning prior attitude effect) and because it is rational to prefer sources that provide credible information over sources that provide un-credible information (Fischer et al., 2008; Metzger et al., 2003; Metzger et al., 2020).

Observational equivalence problem

It is a long-known and well-established fact that almost any imaginable outcome of a political reasoning process can be explained with rational Bayesian updating (e.g. Bartels, 2002; Jern et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2020; Little, 2021; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Stanovich, 2021; Taber et al., 2009). In the somewhat polemic words of Taber et al. (2009, p. 138), it can even be fully compatible with Bayes rule to have "...beliefs in a flat world that persist after one doesn't fall off the edge". The fact that it is almost impossible to distinguish empirically between a Bayesian and a biased reasoning process is sometimes referred to as the observational equivalence problem (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Little, 2021).

There is no consensus in the existing literature on how best to address this problem (cf. Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Jern et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2020; Little, 2021; Tappin et al., 2020b). Some scholars argue that it is necessary to rely on neuroimaging because any observed behavioural pattern can be explained with Bayesian updating (Kim et al., 2020). Other scholars argue that the problem can partially be solved through statistical control by measuring the prior belief beforehand and including it as a predictor in a regression framework (Tappin et al., 2020a, 2020b), whereas others are sceptical toward this approach (Little, 2021).

However, several scholars agree that some of the strongest evidence for motivated political reasoning comes from studies that manipulate research participants' motivation to either pursue accuracy or directional goals because a Bayesian model cannot account for why, for instance, priming a person's partisan identity (and, thus, increasing their directional motivation) should increase prior attitude effect (Bolsen et al., 2014; Little, 2021; Tappin et al., 2020b).

Following this line of reasoning, I argue that a promising strategy is to look at moderators that should only be expected to moderate motivated reasoning biases if they are not driven by Bayesian rationality. Such moderators could be variables that should influence the magnitude of motivated reasoning biases if they are driven by efforts to regulate emotions but not if they are rational Bayesian processes. Because a reasoning process cannot be rational if it is guided by one's desires (Chong, 2013, p. 15; Elster, 1990), showing that an experimental prime that alters emotion regulation also alters motivated reasoning biases would provide strong evidence against a rational Bayesian explanation. So would demonstrating that individual differences in emotion regulation predict the magnitude of motivated reasoning biases, although such analyses would necessarily be observational and can therefore be confounded.

Motivated political reasoning as emotion regulation

A third explanation of motivated political reasoning claims that it is an emotion regulation process, where directional reasoning goals are pursued to maximize positive affective states and minimize negative affective states (Thibodeau et al., 2015; Westen et al., 2006). This echoes a large body of research assuming that motivated political reasoning stems from efforts to avoid psychological discomfort, in particular cognitive dissonance (e.g. Baekgaard et al., 2017, p. 1119; Bisgaard, 2019, p. 3; Christensen et al., 2018; Groenendyk, 2013, 2018; Kuklinski et al., 2000, p. 794; Peterson & Iyengar, 2019, p. 135). While there is ample and growing interest in the emotion regulation account of motivated political reasoning (Bianchi et al., 2016; Casado-Aranda et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2016; Munro et al., 2020; Thibodeau et al., 2015; Westen et al., 2006), it has only been subject to few empirical tests. These primarily consist of a limited number of neuroimaging studies showing that motivated political reasoning is associated with activity in brain regions involved in implicit and explicit emotion regulation (Casado-Aranda et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2016; Westen et al., 2006). It therefore largely remains unresolved, I argue, whether motivated political reasoning is indeed driven by efforts to regulate emotions, as is widely assumed.

It also remains undertheorized how differences in terms of how people regulate their emotions relate to the biases involved in motivated political reasoning. A large psychological literature has found that people differ in the strategies they use to regulate their emotions, and these differences (emotion regulation strategies) have been found to have important implications for a variety of outcomes, including political attitude formation and political participation (e.g. Alkoby et al., 2017; Cohen et al., 2019; Ford & Feinberg, 2020;

Ford et al., 2018; Gross, 2015; Halperin et al., 2014; Lueke & Gibson, 2016; Mehta et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it has not yet been theorized how different emotion regulation strategies relate to the biases involved in motivated political reasoning. Before I proceed to providing such theorizing, I will first outline how the psychological literature on emotion regulation defines emotions, emotion regulation, and emotion regulation strategies.

Emotion, emotion regulation, and emotion regulation strategies

The emotion regulation literature largely relies on the modal model of emotion where an emotion has four sequential components (Gross, 2015). The first is the situation at hand within which one finds oneself. The emotion-relevant features of a situation could be a crowd of people looking at one. The second component is one's allocation of attention in the situation. One may, for example, be looking at one person in the crowd in particular, focusing on the entire crowd, on a faint memory, or on a bodily sensation. The third component is one's appraisal of the situation. One may appraise the situation as threatening or as exciting dependent on how one thinks about the situation (e.g. the difference between thinking "they are all just waiting for me to fail", and thinking "this is a chance to practice my skills at public speaking"). The fourth and last component is the experiential, behavioural and neurobiological response that the three previous components give rise to, e.g. that one starts crying, that one's body feels warm, or that one smiles (Gross, 2014, p. 5).

Emotion regulation then refers to "shaping which emotions one has, when one has them, and how one experiences or expresses these emotions" (Gross, 2014, p. 6). It thus refers to influencing one or more of the components that make up an emotion in any of the four sequential steps in the emotion trajectory (situation, attention, appraisal and response). Emotion regulation could thus refer to altering the emotion relevant features of the situation one is in, altering how one directs one's attention in the situation, how one appraises the things in the situation that one pays attention to, or how one responds to one's appraisal of these things (Gross, 2015).

Attempting to upregulate positive emotions and downregulate negative emotions is referred to as hedonic emotion regulation; whereas attempts to downregulate positive emotions and to upregulate negative emotions are referred to as counter-hedonic emotion regulation (Gross, 2015, p. 5). In general, people are mostly motivated to feel more positive and less negative emotion (Gross et al., 2006; Larsen, 2000; Quoidbach et al., 2010), but there are instances where people may engage in counter-hedonic emotion regulation,

for instance not to appear happy at a funeral or to ‘get fired up’ before a game (Gross, 2015). In this project, I rely on the assumption that people are generally motivated to engage in hedonic emotion regulation, and when referring to ‘emotion regulation’ I will be referring to hedonic emotion regulation, unless I mean something else, in which case I will state so explicitly.

The things people do when they want to regulate their emotions are called emotion regulation strategies (Gross, 2015; McRae & Gross, 2020). I will now outline a few central emotion regulation strategies of importance for the dissertation. First, the most studied emotion regulation strategy to date is *cognitive reappraisal* (McRae & Gross, 2020). This refers to modifying one’s appraisal of a situation in order to alter its emotional impact (Cohen et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2018; Gross, 2015, p. 9). In the previous example where a crowd of people are looking at one, cognitive reappraisal could be to actively substitute the thought, “they are all just waiting for me to fail”, with the thought, “this is a chance to practice my skills at public speaking”.

Another emotion regulation strategy is *emotional acceptance*. This refers to noticing and embracing emotional experiences rather than taking steps to alter or avoid them (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 982; Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008, p. 5). In the public speaking example, emotional acceptance implies not substituting the thought “they are all just waiting for me to fail” with something else, but rather to notice the thought and accept it. This strategy is thus fundamentally different from cognitive reappraisal, as in the latter, one tries to alter one’s thoughts, whereas in the former, one tries to alter the way one relates to one’s thoughts (Hayes et al., 2012; Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008).

A third strategy of interest is *attentional deployment*, which refers to “directing one’s attention with the goal of influencing one’s emotional response” (Gross, 2015, p. 8). With this strategy, people distract themselves by redirecting their attention from emotion-eliciting features of a situation to other features of the situation, or away from the situation altogether (to a memory, for example). In the public speaking example, one could actively direct one’s attention toward someone in the audience who smiles, toward one’s slides or toward one’s notes, rather than toward someone who looks disinterested.

A fourth strategy of interest is *situation selection*, which is “taking actions that make it more (or less) likely that one will be in a situation that one expects will give rise to desirable (or undesirable) emotions” (Gross, 2015, pp. 7 - 8). With this strategy, rather than trying to alter the emotional impact of a situation one is in, one tries to avoid ending up in a situation that entails undesired emotions altogether. In the public speaking example, situation selection could be to refuse public speaking engagements altogether, or to only select public speaking engagements where one is certain that the audience will be friendly.

Theoretical gap

A major gap in the literature on motivated political reasoning as emotion regulation is that it has not yet been theorized how the specific biases involved in motivated political reasoning (prior attitude effect, disconfirmation bias and selective exposure) relate to different emotion regulation strategies. I argue that if the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning is correct, we should expect the biases involved in motivated political reasoning to be caused by the specific emotion regulation strategies that people use to control and regulate their emotions in a variety of different circumstances. Because of this lack of theorizing, we do not know whether differences in how people control and regulate their emotions influence the extent to which they engage in different motivated political reasoning biases, which we should expect them to if the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning is correct. In the following section, I provide such theorizing, as I present the core theoretical argument of the dissertation.

Theoretical argument

If the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning is correct, then people engage in motivated political reasoning to control what emotions they experience. This means that prior attitude effect, disconfirmation bias, and selective exposure bias are consequences of specific steps (or strategies) that people take to control what emotions they experience when engaging with political information.

As previously stated, prior attitude effect refers to evaluating challenging information as weaker than supportive information. It thus concerns the way people appraise political information (as strong or weak). I argue that if people display this bias to control what emotions they experience, it must be caused by the emotion regulation strategy of cognitive reappraisal, where one changes one's appraisal of a situation to influence its emotional impact. To exemplify, this would mean that when a left-wing voter reports high belief in factual claims that support a left-wing attitude, and low belief in claims that challenge it, this is caused by the voter trying to change her thinking about a feature of the situation she is in to control her feelings. I thus theorize prior attitude effect to be caused by the emotion regulation strategy of cognitive reappraisal.

Turning to disconfirmation bias, this implies dedicating disproportional processing effort to challenging information, compared to supportive information. If people do this to control what emotions they experience, they are directing their attention toward challenging information in order to downregulate negative emotion (and upregulate positive emotion). I argue that disconfirmation bias must then be caused by the emotion regulation strategy of attentional deployment, where one directs one's attention with the goal of influencing what emotions one experiences. To exemplify, this would mean that when a left-wing voter dedicates a lot of cognitive resources on information that challenges left-wing attitudes, but spends few cognitive resources on information that supports left-wing attitudes, this is caused by her trying to change what she pays attention to, to control what emotions she experiences. I thus theorize disconfirmation bias to be caused by the emotion regulation strategy of attentional deployment.

Moving on to selective exposure bias, this refers to approaching attitudinally congruent information and avoiding attitudinally incongruent information. If people do this to avoid discomfort associated with encountering attitudinally incongruent information, then they are actively trying to avoid situations that they expect will lead them to experience negative emotions. I argue that selective exposure must then be caused by the emotion regulation strategy of situation selection, where people take steps to make it more likely

to end up in situations that will give rise to positive emotion, rather than situations that will give rise to negative emotions. This would mean that when a left-wing voter avoids information that challenges left-wing attitudes, but seeks out information that supports left-wing attitudes, this is caused by her trying to select situations that she expects will give rise to positive emotions rather than negative emotions. I thus theorize selective exposure bias to be caused by the emotion regulation strategy of situation selection.

Individual differences in emotion regulation strategy

Theorizing each of these biases to be instances of the before-mentioned emotion regulation strategies also makes it possible to theorize how the magnitude of each bias should relate to people's general tendency to use the specific emotion regulation strategies in question.

If prior attitude effect is indeed caused by cognitive reappraisal, then we should expect people who very often use cognitive reappraisal to be more likely to display prior attitude effect than individuals who very rarely use cognitive reappraisal to control their emotions, all else equal. Therefore, if it turns out that people who display a strong general tendency to engage in cognitive reappraisal also display a very strong prior attitude effect, this would corroborate the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning. If, on the other hand, it turns out that there is no correlation (or a negative correlation), between engaging in cognitive reappraisal and displaying prior attitude effect, this would weigh against the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning.

Situational factors influencing emotion regulation strategy

Emotion regulation research has found that people's use of emotion regulation strategies varies substantially across different contexts, with important consequences for the emotions people experience in those contexts (Gross, 2015; Maxwell et al., 2019; McRae & Gross, 2020). Theorizing the three motivated reasoning biases to be caused by the before-mentioned emotion regulation strategies also makes it possible to theorize how the magnitude of each bias should relate to situational factors that influence the extent to which the specific emotion regulation strategy is used. To exemplify a cue that could influence the emotion regulation strategy a person uses in a given context, imagine a person who experiences distress from following the news coverage about the war in Ukraine. If someone told that person to "stop watching news about the

war, and watch some TV that makes you happy instead”, that person would be providing a situational cue that could push the person toward using the emotion regulation strategy of situation selection.

I argue that if people display the three motivated reasoning biases to control what emotions they experience, we should expect the magnitude of each of the three motivated reasoning biases to increase if some external factor increases the use of the corresponding emotion regulation strategy. If, for example, selective exposure occurs to control emotions, we should expect an external factor that increases the use of situation selection to also increase the magnitude of selective exposure bias.

Emotional acceptance

The last part of the theoretical argument concerns the emotion regulation strategy of emotional acceptance. As stated earlier, this refers to, “noticing and embracing emotional experiences rather than taking steps to alter or avoid them” (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 982; Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008, p. 5). Because emotional acceptance involves doing the opposite of cognitive reappraisal, i.e. to notice emotion-eliciting thoughts and embrace them instead of actively trying to change them (e.g. Feinberg et al., 2020, p. 30), I theorize it to have the opposite effect of cognitive reappraisal on prior attitudes effect, i.e. to reduce prior attitude effect. If prior attitude effect is truly caused by people trying to avoid discomfort, then it would make sense for people who do not take steps to alter or avoid emotional experiences (but instead notice and embrace them) to display little or no bias. Therefore, I expect people who are high in emotional acceptance to display a very small prior attitude effect, and I expect a situational cue that increases emotional acceptance to decrease prior attitude effect.

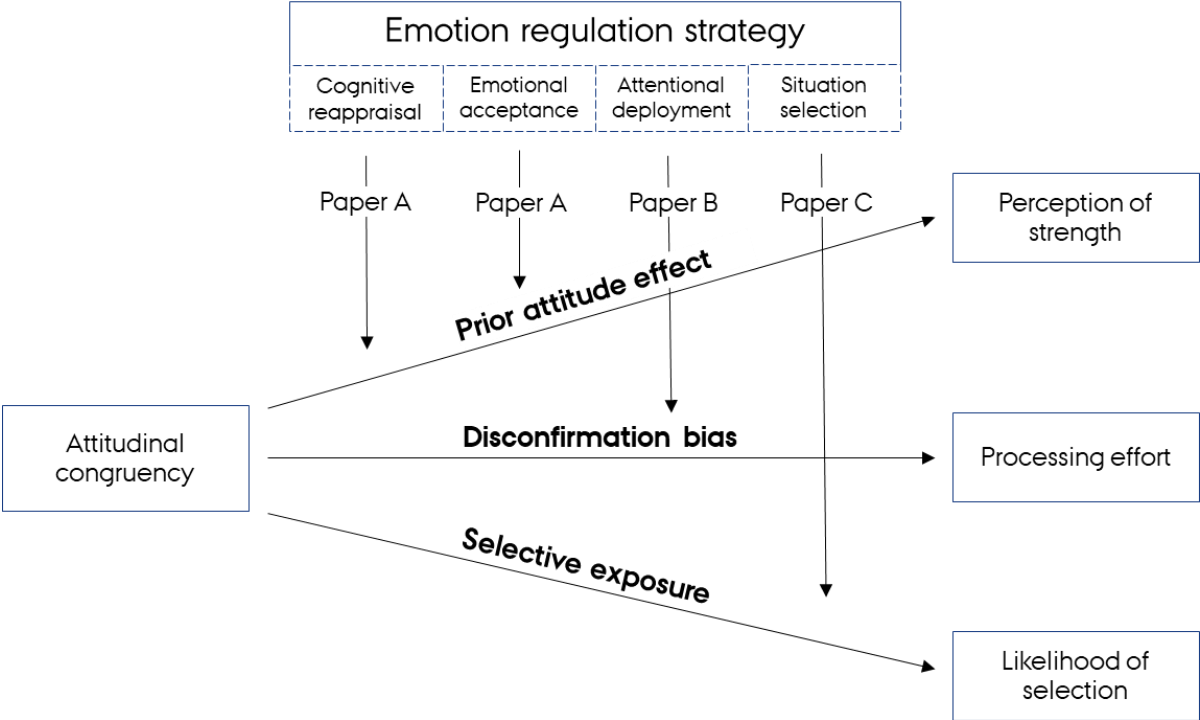
Overview of theoretical argument

Figure 1 summarizes the core theoretical argument of the dissertation. The leftmost variable in the model, attitudinal congruency, refers to whether a piece of information is supportive or challenging to a person’s political attitudes – it is attitudinally congruent if it supports the persons political attitudes and attitudinally incongruent if it challenges them. This influences a person’s perception of the strength of the information through prior attitude effect, where challenging information is seen as weaker than supportive information. Attitudinal congruency also influences processing effort through disconfirmation bias, where challenging information is dedicated more processing effort

than supporting information. Last, attitudinal congruency increases the likelihood of a piece of information being approached by a person, compared to challenging information, through selective exposure bias.

The crux of the theoretical argument is that the use of an emotion regulation strategy that corresponds to a specific motivated reasoning bias should influence the magnitude of that specific bias, such that use of cognitive reappraisal should be positively associated with prior attitude effect, use of attentional deployment should be positively associated with disconfirmation bias, and use of situation selection should be positively associated with selective exposure bias. The association between emotion regulation strategy and the magnitude of motivated political reasoning biases is investigated in a separate paper for each of the three biases (papers A, B and C)

Figure 1. Overview of the theoretical argument of the dissertation



General methodological considerations

In the following, I briefly present the overall research strategy that I use in the three papers. I begin with describing the state of the art, first in terms of investigating motivated political reasoning biases, and second, in terms of investigating emotion regulation and its consequences in the political domain.

Motivated political reasoning

As discussed earlier, there is an ongoing debate in the literature about how to design motivated political reasoning studies to be able to infer whether motivated biases are at work rather than Bayesian updating (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Little, 2021; Tappin et al., 2020b). The two most common research designs used to investigate motivated political reasoning are (1) *outcome switching* studies, which look at differences in how people process information that either supports or challenges their attitudes but are otherwise as similar as possible, and (2) *party cue* studies, where political information is presented as either having an attitudinally congruent source or an attitudinally incongruent source (Tappin et al., 2020b). Although these are the paradigmatic motivated political reasoning study designs and are still frequently used (see e.g. Bayes et al., 2020; Bisgaard, 2019; Peterson & Iyengar, 2020), the general consensus is that these studies are unable to distinguish motivated political reasoning from Bayesian updating (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Tappin et al., 2020b).

Building on recommendations from, for instance, Druckman and McGrath (2019); Little (2021); Tappin et al. (2020b), I try to overcome the observational equivalence problem by investigating the moderating effects of variables that should influence the magnitude of motivated reasoning biases but should not influence Bayesian updating processes. However, unlike most previous research, which has done so by looking at the effects of increasing accuracy or directional motivations (Bayes et al., 2020; Bolsen et al., 2014; Christensen & Moynihan, 2020), I investigate to what extent motivated reasoning biases are contingent on relevant emotion regulation strategies, which I argue that the emotion regulation explanation implies.

Part of the design in papers A, B and C is very similar to classic outcome switching studies, as in all three papers, research participants are presented with different pieces of political information that are designed to be as similar as possible except in terms of which side of a political issue they support. In paper A, I use factual statements related to immigration politics in Denmark, and in papers B and C, I use persuasive arguments related to gun control and

affirmative action in the US, originally featured in Taber and Lodge (2006)'s canonical motivated reasoning study.

This part of the study designs is only quasi-experimental because participants are not randomly assigned to only receiving certain messages (e.g., only pro-gun control messages) – rather, they are presented with both congruent and incongruent messages, and I construct bias estimates by subtracting scores for congruent information from scores for incongruent information.

However, it is important to note that both outcome switching and party cue studies that randomly assign participants to receive only left- or right-leaning content or party cues are also – strictly speaking – *only* quasi-experimental because they rely on an interaction between a randomly assigned variable, party cue (left or right wing), or outcome (pro left or pro right) and participants' attitudes. Since attitudes are not randomly assigned, such experimental designs are potentially confounded by other variables that correlate with political attitudes, such as prior beliefs (e.g. Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Tappin et al., 2020b).

This is the essence of the observational equivalence problem and provides a limitation for the internal validity of motivated political reasoning studies in general, including the studies in this dissertation. As discussed, I try to address this problem by looking at moderation effects of variables that should only influence the effects of political attitudes, not the effect of prior beliefs (cf. Little, 2021; Tappin et al., 2020b). However, even if I find emotion regulation strategy to moderate the statistical association between political attitudes and e.g. evaluations of political messages, this could, in theory, be due to emotion regulation strategy moderating an effect of prior beliefs, not of attitudes, because these two variables are likely to be correlated. While an interaction between emotion regulation strategy and prior beliefs should not be expected from the Bayesian explanation (or from Taber & Lodge's JQP model) and would be difficult to make sense of theoretically, the fact that it is conceivable is a limitation of the empirical approach used in the present dissertation.

Emotion regulation

I now move on to the state of the art in terms of studies on emotion regulation and its consequences. The literature on this topic is immense, and encompasses a wide variety of research designs and methods (cf. e.g. Gross, 2015). Research investigating emotion regulation in political contexts draws on experimental interventions that alter emotion regulation strategies in lab-based contexts (Halperin et al., 2013; Petersen & Mitkidis, 2019), in field experiments (Alkoby et al., 2017; Simonsson, Bazin, et al., 2022) and in survey experiments (e.g. Ford et al., 2018; Hafenbrack et al., 2020; Hafenbrack et al.,

2014; Hafenbrack & Vohs, 2018; Halperin et al., 2014; Simonsson et al., 2021; Woolley & Fishbach, 2021), as well as on observational studies using individual difference measures to predict political outcomes (Bor & Petersen, 2022; Cohen et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2018; Halperin et al., 2014; Mehta et al., 2020).

Following the state of the art in this literature (e.g. Cohen et al., 2019; Feinberg et al., 2020; Hafenbrack et al., 2020; Halperin et al., 2014), I draw on both experimental and observational data. In Papers A and C, I rely on validated experimental manipulations to alter emotion regulation strategy, and on validated survey scales to measure individual differences in emotion regulation strategy. In Paper B, I develop a novel design for manipulating the emotion regulation strategy of attentional deployment.

The primary advantage of using experimental evidence is its high internal validity in terms of identifying causal effects, compared to observational analyses that are always vulnerable to potential omitted variable bias. One of the drawbacks of the experimental evidence is that the experimental manipulations are somewhat artificial, in the sense that people are rarely instructed by someone to use a specific emotion regulation strategy when they approach political information in the real world. The experimental evidence helps us estimate what the world would look like in a counterfactual scenario where people's emotion regulation patterns were different than they are, but it strengthens the credibility of potential causal estimates if this is complemented by observational evidence showing that real-world variation in emotion regulation strategy also systematically predicts the outcome of interest. The individual difference measures capture such real-world variation in use of emotion regulation strategy, and complementing the experimental evidence with observational analyses thus increases the internal and ecological validity of the studies in Papers A and C.

Situational cues influencing emotion regulation strategy: Experimental evidence

Table 2 shows an overview of the experimental manipulations used in the different studies and their effects on the manipulation checks. I will now briefly describe each in turns, before discussing advantages and drawbacks of using survey experiments instead of lab experiments or field experiments.

Table 2. Overview of experimental manipulations

Paper and study	Emotion regulation strategy	Type of manipulation	Manipulation check	Effect
Paper A, study 2	Emotional acceptance	Instruction and brief meditation exercise	Toronto Mindfulness Scale	.08 on a scale from 0-1 ($p < .001$)
Paper B (only 1 study included)	Attentional deployment	Altered participant instructions providing greater discretion to use attentional deployment	1) Response time 2) Number of thoughts	1) 21 and 30 percent longer response time in two experimental conditions ($p < .001$ in both cases) 2) .3 more thoughts in one experimental condition ($p < .001$) and .08 fewer in another ($p = .3$)
Paper C, studies 1 and 2	Situation selection	Brief instruction from Livingstone and Isaacowitz (2015)	Self-reported use of situation selection.	.45 (study 1) and .43 (study 2) on a scale from 0-1 ($p < .001$ in both cases)

In Paper A, I devised an experimental intervention that increased emotional acceptance. Previous research has used short instruction texts to experimentally induce use of emotional acceptance while looking at sad film clips (Troy et al., 2018), while completing a cognitive ability test (Feinberg et al., 2020), or when giving an impromptu speech in front of a camera (Hofmann et al., 2009). Others have used brief audiotapes with instructions and meditation exercises to increase emotional acceptance while looking at emotion eliciting images (Asnaani et al., 2013) and when watching an emotion provoking film (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006). I use a 4.5-minute audiotape, which includes instructions and a brief meditation exercise designed to increase emotional acceptance in a subsequent task where participants evaluate factual political messages. The manipulation had a small but statistically significant effect on the manipulation check (Toronto Mindfulness Scale (Lau et al., 2006))

In Paper C, I follow the previously mentioned studies as well as Ford et al. (2018); Halperin et al. (2014); Livingstone and Isaacowitz (2015); Woolley and Fishbach (2021) in using a short instruction text to manipulate emotion regulation strategy. More specifically, I use a prompt drawn from Livingstone and Isaacowitz (2015), which they found to increase the use of situation selection when choosing between different videos, pictures and slideshows with emotion inducing content. I use this manipulation to induce the use of situation selection during an information seeking task, where people choose between political messages from a supportive or a challenging source (Cragun, 2020; Taber & Lodge, 2006). The manipulation had a strong and statistically significant effect on the manipulation check.

In paper B, I provide a novel design for experimentally altering use of attentional deployment. Rather than provide blunt instructions to use this specific emotion regulation strategy, I alter the study instructions in a task where participants are presented with a series of political arguments that either challenge or support their political attitudes. I alter the instructions so as to provide participants in two experimental conditions greater leeway to use attentional deployment than they have in the control condition, which uses the original instructions from the most prominent existing study on disconfirmation bias in political reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006). The experimental manipulation strongly influenced response time as intended, but it did not influence number of listed thoughts as expected. This anomaly is discussed further in the results section of the summary report and in paper B.

Turning now to the use of survey experiments, the fact that I consistently rely on these, rather than lab or field experiments, has both advantages and drawbacks. First of all, it is important to note that the use of online survey experiments is common in the emotion regulation literature (e.g. De Castella et al., 2018; Feinberg et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2018; Hafenbrack et al., 2020;

Hafenbrack et al., 2014; Hafenbrack & Vohs, 2018; Halperin et al., 2014; Simonsson, Goldberg, et al., 2022; Simonsson et al., 2021; Woolley & Fishbach, 2021). Some of the important advantages of embedding experimental emotion regulation manipulations into online surveys rather than using them in lab studies or field experiments are that with any given resource constraint, a survey experiment will generally enable obtaining a much larger sample size, thus providing more power and a more heterogeneous and representative sample. Many lab experiments on emotion regulation rely on relatively small, WEIRD (cf. Henrich et al., 2010) student samples (e.g. Halperin et al., 2013; Livingstone & Isaacowitz, 2015; Millgram et al., 2019), and many emotion regulation field experiments rely on waitlist-control designs (Alkoby et al., 2017; Simonsson, Bazin, et al., 2022), where participants self-select into the study based on a desire to experience the treatment (e.g. signing up for a mindfulness meditation course). Waitlist-control designs are not placebo controlled, and it is difficult to establish whether any potential treatment effects generalize to populations that, for example, are more sceptical about the effectiveness of the treatment than, e.g., people who choose to sign up for a mindfulness course.

A drawback of the survey experimental approach is that the strength of the experimental manipulation may be smaller than in field or lab experiments, where participants are sometimes willing to participate for a longer time (e.g., an eight-week meditation program). This weighs against the power argument for survey experiments to some extent, because larger effect sizes mean smaller sample size requirements. Furthermore, it is possible that some emotion regulation strategies require so much training to learn properly that a stronger intervention than can be administered in an online setting is required for it to work. In an ideal world, it would have been great to complement the survey experimental studies with evidence from lab- and field-studies, but practical concerns, in particular the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, made such data collections unfeasible.

This reservation notwithstanding, many previous studies have successfully manipulated emotion regulation strategy with similar treatments to the ones used here (e.g. Feinberg et al., 2020; Hafenbrack et al., 2020; Woolley & Fishbach, 2021), and in all three studies, I included manipulation checks, which indicated that the emotion regulation interventions significantly influenced emotion regulation strategy as intended (except on one outcome in Paper B), though the effect size was small in paper A.

Individual differences in emotion regulation strategy: Observational evidence

In Paper A, I also use two validated and very common individual difference measures of cognitive reappraisal (the emotion regulation questionnaire, Gross & John, 2003) and emotional acceptance (the cognitive affective mindfulness scale, Feldman et al., 2007) to predict the magnitude of prior attitude effect. In Paper C, I use different individual difference measures of situation selection (Schutte et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2018) to predict selective exposure bias, and find unequivocal results regardless of the measure employed.

Throughout the dissertation, I thus systematically investigate both the effects of relatively stable individual dispositions in terms of the emotion regulation strategies that people use as well as the effects of situationally contingent factors that influence emotion regulation strategy use in specific contexts.

Data

I rely on survey data from two different sources. In Paper A, I collected three samples of Danish voters that were approximately representative of the Danish voter population in terms of age, gender, education, and income through Survey Sampling International (SSI). In Papers B and C, I recruited US adults through M-Turk. M-Turk samples are non-representative convenience samples, which means that effect size estimates cannot necessarily be generalized to the broader population; nonetheless, several studies indicate that if appropriate steps are taken to ensure high data quality, results found on M-Turk tend to be very similar to results from more representative populations (Chmielewski & Kucker, 2020; Hauser et al., 2018; Huff & Tingley, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2020). With both data sources, I took a variety of steps to increase data quality, including the use of attention checks, re-captchas, and restricting recruitment to M-Turkers who have been vetted in terms of engagement and attention by CloudResearch (Kane & Barabas, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2020; Kung et al., 2018; Oppenheimer et al., 2009).

Paper A uses data from Denmark, whereas papers B and C use data from the United States. There are important institutional differences between the United States and Denmark including the electoral system, party system (e.g. Lijphart, 1994; Lijphart, 2012), welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990), media system (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and the level of public engagement in politics (Petersen & Aarøe, 2013; Aarøe & Petersen, 2014). Of particular importance, the United States has undergone a period of substantial affective polarization (Iyengar, 2022; Iyengar et al., 2012), while

Denmark has not (Gidron et al., 2020). Most studies, however, find that despite the recent US increase, affective polarization levels in Denmark and the United States appear to be of quite similar magnitude, with some measures showing higher polarization in Denmark, other measures showing the opposite (Gidron et al., 2020; Hjorth et al., 2019; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021).

These contextual differences between the US and Denmark could potentially contribute to making motivated political reasoning stronger in the US than in Denmark, or the other way around, though several studies have found motivated political reasoning effects in Denmark that were of comparable magnitude to what has been found in the US (e.g. Bisgaard, 2019; Slothuus, 2017; Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010). This is also the case for the sizeable prior attitude effect I find in paper A, ranging from between 25 and 30 percentage points more positive evaluation of supportive factual information than challenging factual information, which is comparable to what many US studies have found (cf. e.g. Bullock et al., 2015; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Peterson & Iyengar, 2020; Schaffner & Luks, 2018). Nonetheless, using data from these different macro contexts has the drawback that differences between findings in the papers could potentially be due to differences in respondents' nationalities, rather than differences in the validity of the investigated hypotheses. In Paper A, for example, I do not find support for the emotion regulation explanation of prior attitude effect, but in Paper C, I do find support for the emotion regulation explanation of selective exposure. This could be because selective exposure is driven by emotion regulation whereas prior attitude effect is not, but it could also, conceivably, be because motivated reasoning biases are in general caused by emotion regulation in the United States, but not in Denmark.

It is important to note, however, that the theoretical perspectives used in this dissertation are very general theories about how humans process political information (Hill, 2017; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Westen & Blagov, 2007; Westen et al., 2006), and that a variety of studies have found fundamental political psychological processes to work the same way in Danish and US electorates (e.g. Bisgaard, 2019; Petersen & Arceneaux, 2020; Petersen & Aarøe, 2013; Aarøe & Petersen, 2014; Aarøe et al., 2017). I therefore do not find it likely that diverging results between the different papers are driven by differences in respondents' nationalities, but it remains a theoretical possibility.

Open science practices and other steps taken to increase replicability

It is well established that the replicability of published research is frighteningly low and that this replicability crisis plagues psychological science

(Chambers, 2017; Collaboration, 2015; Ioannidis, 2005). Some of the most important steps that have been suggested to increase the replicability and credibility of research are preregistration of analyses prior to collection of data (which has been shown to vastly reduce the proportion of significant findings (Allen & Mehler, 2019)), conducting more replication studies, and ensuring that studies have sufficient power (Chambers, 2017; Ioannidis, 2005; Nosek et al., 2019).

I have attempted to follow all of these principles in the dissertation. I have preregistered all but one of the studies I have conducted, including the Stata do-files used to carry out statistical analyses, and I have marked all non-pre-registered analyses as such. In Paper B, I included a well-powered and preregistered replication of a central part of the most canonical study on motivated political reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In papers A and C, I included well-powered, preregistered follow-up studies to investigate whether the results in the first studies were replicable and robust (they were in Paper C but not in Paper A).

Table 3 provides an overview of the six studies included in the three papers that make up the dissertation.

Table 3. Overview of data collections

Paper	1	1	1	2	3	3
Bias	Prior attitude effect	Prior attitude effect	Prior attitude effect	Disconfirmation bias	Selective exposure bias	Selective exposure bias
Study design	Observational	Experimental and observational	Experimental and observational	Experimental	Experimental and observational	Experimental and observational
Emotion regulation strategies	Emotional acceptance	Cognitive reappraisal	Cognitive reappraisal	Attentional deployment	Situation selection	Situation selection
Emotion regulation operationalization	Cognitive affective mindfulness scale (CAMS-R) (Feldman et al., 2007)	Emotional acceptance	Emotional acceptance	Manipulation of study instructions to allow attentional deployment	Situation selection scale (Schutte et al., 2009)	Situation selection scale
Hypotheses tested	Acceptance \rightarrow perceptual divides	Acceptance \rightarrow perceptual divides	Acceptance \rightarrow perceptual divides	Context \rightarrow disconfirmation bias	Situation selection \rightarrow Selective exposure	Situation selection \rightarrow Selective exposure
Sample size	1292	1314	1618	2116	2464	2400
Pre-registered	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Recruitment platform / company	Dynata	Dynata	Dynata	M-Turk	M-Turk	M-Turk
Country	Denmark	Denmark	Denmark	US	US	US
Result	No statistically significant association	Mixed results	Mixed results	Context influences disconfirmation bias	Significant effect of experimental treatment	Significant effect of experimental treatment
					No association in observational analysis	No association in observational analysis

Overview of results

In the following sections, I present the main findings of the dissertation. I structure this presentation after each of the three core motivated political reasoning biases, i.e. prior attitude effect, disconfirmation bias, and selective exposure bias. Whether each of these three biases occur to regulate emotions provides an important piece of the answer to the overarching research question about the extent to which motivated political reasoning occurs to regulate emotions in general.

Because the dissertation is structured such that each of the three papers addresses one of the three motivated reasoning biases, the following sections largely recapitulate the main findings of the three papers in the dissertation in turn. For each bias, I first describe the operational expectations from the emotion regulation explanation of that bias in the specific context in which the theory is tested. I then proceed to discussing the extent to which these expectations find support in the empirical evidence, and what this means for the emotion regulation explanation of that particular bias.

Prior attitude effect

Empirical expectations

As discussed previously, I argue that the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning implies that prior attitude effect is caused by the emotion regulation strategy of cognitive reappraisal. I further argue that because emotional acceptance is an alternative to cognitive reappraisal (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008), emotional acceptance should have the exact opposite effect on prior attitude effect, i.e. it should reduce prior attitude effect.

In Paper A, I investigate these expectations through looking at perceptual divides, which is the difference between a voter's belief in factual claims that are supportive of their political attitudes and factual claims that challenge their political attitudes. As prior attitude effect refers to weak evaluations of information that challenges attitudes and strong evaluations of information that supports attitudes, people should display perceptual divides if prior attitude effect takes place, because perceptual divides involve weak evaluations of challenging information (evaluating challenging factual claims as false) and strong evaluations of supportive information (evaluating supportive factual claims as correct).

The hypothesis that cognitive reappraisal increases prior attitude effect thus implies that cognitive reappraisal should increase perceptual divides. This leads to the empirical expectation that people who score high in individual differences in cognitive reappraisal will also display high levels of perceptual divides (all else equal).

The hypothesis that emotional acceptance reduces prior attitude effect implies that emotional acceptance should decrease perceptual divides. This leads to the empirical expectation that people who score high in individual differences in emotional acceptance should display smaller perceptual divides than others (all else equal), and that an experimental manipulation that increases emotional acceptance should reduce perceptual divides.

Results

I test these expectations in Paper A, in three survey studies conducted in Denmark with approximately representative samples of the Danish voter population. To measure perceptual divides, I use factual claims that support either a left-wing or a right-wing position on a salient political issue, drawn from public debates on the issue in Denmark. I focus on immigration politics, which has long been one of the most central issues in Danish politics (Hansen, 2021).

It is important to note that in all three studies, participants display a clear prior attitude effect, such that they report higher belief in factual claims about immigration politics that support their attitudes than in factual claims that challenge their attitudes. In other words, left-wing voters generally believe factual claims that support a left-wing position, but are generally sceptical toward factual claims that support a right-wing position, whereas the opposite is the case for right-wing voters.

Turning to the association between the two emotion regulation strategies in question and the magnitude of prior attitude effect, neither emotional acceptance nor cognitive reappraisal display a consistent pattern of association with perceptual divides.

Starting with emotional acceptance, in Study 1 I find that, contrary to expectations, individual differences in use of this emotion regulation strategy show no statistically significant association with perceptual divides. In Study 2, I do find individual differences in emotional acceptance to be significantly positively associated with belief in challenging facts. However, I also included an experimental manipulation of emotional acceptance in Study 2, and while the manipulation checks show that this manipulation significantly increased participants' use of emotional acceptance while evaluating the factual claims, it had no discernible effect on belief in challenging facts. In the third and final study, I did not find a significant association between individual differences in

emotional acceptance and perceptual divides, regardless of whether the factual claims were attributed to a partisan source or a high-credibility expert source. The results in Study 1 thus replicated, whereas the results in Study 2 did not. These findings contradict the emotion regulation explanation of prior attitude effect.

Turning to cognitive reappraisal, in contrast with expectations, individual differences in use of this emotion regulation strategy did not have a significant association with belief in challenging facts in Study 2. In Study 3, also in contrast with the theoretical expectation, individual differences in cognitive reappraisal were significantly negatively correlated with perceptual divides, such that participants scoring high in cognitive reappraisal displayed lower perceptual divides than others, all else equal. This result directly contradicts the expectation from the emotion regulation explanation of prior attitude effect, according to which prior attitude effect should be positively associated with individual differences in cognitive reappraisal.

All in all, then, the results concerning prior attitude effect did not support the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning. Only in one out of three studies did I find an effect that was consistent with the theoretical expectation, but this result did not replicate in a subsequent follow-up study. It thus does not seem to be the case that prior attitude effect is caused by the emotion regulation strategy of cognitive reappraisal, nor that prior attitude effect is attenuated by use of emotional acceptance. Both of these findings contradict the emotion regulation explanation of prior attitude effect, and suggest that prior attitude effect does not occur to regulate emotions. The emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning does therefore not appear to have validity with regard to prior attitude effect.

It is important to note that I did not investigate any other theoretical explanations of prior attitude effect, such as the Bayesian explanation or Taber & Lodge's JQP model. However, the results in Paper A are consistent with both of these explanatory models, as the magnitude of prior attitude effect should be completely unrelated to emotion regulation strategy according to both of these explanations. It therefore remains possible that prior attitude effect is driven by affective contagion or by Bayesian updating (cf. Little, 2021; Lodge & Taber, 2013).

Disconfirmation bias

Empirical expectations

In disconfirmation bias, people dedicate more processing effort to challenging information than to supportive information in an attempt to actively counter-argue and denigrate challenging information while passively accepting supportive information.

Several previous studies have found a disconfirmation bias in political reasoning (e.g. Redlawsk, 2001; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006). However, I argue that these studies have done so under conditions where research participants were strongly discouraged from engaging in very shallow (i.e. low-effort) information processing. In the most seminal study on disconfirmation bias to date (Taber & Lodge, 2006), for example, participants were told to rate the strength of challenging and supporting arguments as objectively as possible, to set their feelings on the issue aside, and that they would be asked to explain the issues to other study participants later on. These study instructions, I argue, discourage research participants from engaging very little with the political information they are confronted with. In many real-world contexts where people encounter political information (e.g. when they read the news on their phone), people have complete discretion over their processing effort, i.e. they are free to engage in as effortful or effortless processing as they desire. No one is telling them to rate the strength of the information they read or to be as objective as possible, let alone that they will be asked to explain what they read to someone later on. It is therefore, I argue, easier for them to engage in very shallow, low-effort processing of political information they encounter, than it was in Taber & Lodge's canonical 2006 study.

I therefore argue that it remains unclear from the existing literature whether disconfirmation bias generalizes to contexts where people have full discretion over the processing effort they dedicate to political information they encounter, which I argue they do have in many real-world situations, e.g. when reading the news on their phone or when watching TV.

I further argue, that from an emotion regulation perspective, disconfirmation bias occurs to downregulate negative feelings that could arise from thinking about the challenging political information as being true. However, if people have full discretion over their processing effort, a more effective way to avoid thinking about the challenging information as being true might be to simply ignore it by dedicating very little processing effort to it, and by directing one's attention elsewhere. This would be an instance of using the emotion regulation strategy of attentional deployment, i.e. "directing one's attention with the goal of influencing one's emotional response" (Gross, 2015).

By drawing on emotion regulation theory, I therefore theorize that when people have full discretion over their processing effort, they will display the *opposite* of a disconfirmation bias, in the sense that they will engage in deeper processing of supportive information than of challenging information.

To test this expectation, in Paper B, I devised a survey-experiment where I replicated the part of Taber and Lodge (2006)'s canonical study, which concerned disconfirmation bias, but made some important alterations to the design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. In one of the conditions, participants read and rated the same arguments as participants in Taber & Lodge's study, and received the same instructions as Taber & Lodge used (I refer to this as the 'accountability condition'). In two other conditions, however, participants received slightly different instructions that were designed to provide them with greater discretion over their processing effort. In one condition, participants still rated the strength of the arguments, but they were not told to be as objective as possible, nor that they would be asked to explain the debate later on (the 'evaluate' condition). In the third condition, they were simply asked to read the arguments as they would if they read them at home (the 'read' condition). I measured participants' processing effort through the same two operationalizations as Taber & Lodge (2006), namely response time and number of listed thoughts in a thought-listing task.

The operational expectation was that participants would display a disconfirmation bias when discouraged from engaging in low-effort information processing, such that participants would spend longer time and report more thoughts when engaging with challenging arguments than when engaging with supportive arguments. The operational expectation was the opposite in the condition where participants were simply told to read the arguments as if they read them at home and thus had full discretion over their processing effort.

Results

The results in Paper B provide some support for the expectation that participants would display a disconfirmation bias when they were discouraged from engaging in low-effort information processing, as their response time was significantly longer for challenging arguments in the accountability condition, which used the same instructions as Taber & Lodge (2006). This effect was very small, about 5 percent longer time spent on challenging than supporting arguments. In contrast with expectations, however, participants did not report more thoughts for challenging arguments in this condition.

In the other conditions, where participants were provided more discretion over their processing effort, participants did not display a disconfirmation bias, as they did not spend significantly more time on challenging than supportive arguments. In contrast with the expectations from the emotion regulation explanation, however, they did not display the opposite of a disconfirmation bias either, i.e. they did not and spend more time on supportive arguments than on challenging ones. For the thought-listing task, participants reported slightly more thoughts (about 3 percent) for challenging arguments than for supportive arguments in the read condition, but not in the evaluate condition, or, as mentioned before, in the accountability condition.

All in all then, I find some support for a small disconfirmation bias when participants are discouraged from engaging in low-effort information processing, i.e. under the same conditions as previous studies, which have demonstrated a disconfirmation bias. However, I do not find support for a disconfirmation bias under conditions where participants have higher discretion over their processing effort, and are not discouraged to engage in shallow information processing. This indicates that disconfirmation bias may not generalize to real world contexts where people have full discretion over their processing effort, e.g. when they watch TV or read the news on their phone.

However, I also do not find evidence that people dedicate more processing effort to supportive information than to challenging information. This runs counter to the emotion regulation explanation, and indicates that people do not dedicate processing effort in a biased way in order to regulate what emotions they experience, when they encounter challenging and supportive political information. It thus does not seem to be the case that disconfirmation bias is caused by the emotion regulation strategy of attentional deployment, which indicates that the emotion regulation explanation does not have validity for this aspect of motivated political reasoning either.

Lastly, it is important to note, that Taber & Lodge (2006, 2009) argued that disconfirmation bias tends to cause attitude polarization in the face of balanced content i.e. information that both supports and challenges one's attitudes. This is so because disconfirmation implies that people spend a lot of time counterarguing challenging information, leading them to question the challenging information, and bringing to mind different considerations that are consistent with their pre-existing attitudes, and to passively accept the supportive information, which bolsters their attitudes. In none of the three experimental conditions in paper B, however, was there any indication of attitude polarization. If anything, there was a very slight indication of extremely weak depolarization.

Selective exposure

Empirical expectations

Selective exposure is the tendency to seek out supportive information and avoid challenging information. The hypothesis from the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning is that selective exposure bias is caused by use of the emotion regulation strategy of situation selection. If this is the case, then individual differences in situation selection should predict selective exposure, and external factors that increase situation selection should increase selective exposure.

To test these expectations, in paper C, I carried out two large-n preregistered survey-experiments, of which the second was a direct replication of the first. Following previous research, I used an information-seeking task to measure selective exposure to political information, where people were presented with a series of arguments from two adversarial sources on gun-control, and were asked to read 6 of the 12 available arguments. The more arguments participants selected that supported their attitudes, the larger the degree of selective exposure.

I used an experimental design where participants who were randomly assigned to an emotion regulation condition, received a manipulation designed to increase the emotion regulation strategy of situation selection.

To test an alternative explanation of informational utility (where selective exposure occurs because people view supportive information as more credible than challenging information, and because they prefer credible information), the experimental design also included an experimental manipulation that was designed to increase search for credible information.

Results

In both studies in paper C, the results showed that the emotion regulation manipulation significantly and substantially increased selective exposure. Participants in the emotion regulation condition displayed about 60 percent higher selective exposure than those in the control group. These results support the emotion regulation explanation of selective exposure, and suggest that people do in fact seek out supportive political information and avoid challenging political information to control what emotions they experience.

As a side note, the credibility manipulation did not increase selective exposure in either of the two studies, indicating that people do not engage in selective exposure, because they deem supportive information as more credible than challenging information.

I complemented the experimental analyses with a series of observational analyses, not all of which supported the emotion regulation explanation. First, in the beginning of the survey, participants read several arguments from the two adversarial sources, and rated their experienced cognitive dissonance and their perception of the credibility of the arguments. Consistent with both the emotion regulation explanation and the informational utility explanation, participants rated supportive arguments as eliciting much less cognitive dissonance, and as being much more credible than challenging information. Furthermore, participants' scores on experienced cognitive dissonance and perceived credibility were strong predictors of subsequent selective exposure to the two sources when controlling for a series of relevant covariates. Lastly, I measured individual differences in situation selection as an emotion regulation strategy, and found that this score did not predict selective exposure to political information.

Thus whereas all the observational analyses supported the informational utility explanation, only two out of three tests supported the emotion regulation explanation. It is surprising that individual differences in situation selection did not predict selective exposure, when the experimental analysis showed clear support for the emotion regulation explanation. One potential explanation could be that the observational analyses are influenced by omitted variables bias or post-treatment bias, which always remains a threat in observational analyses, though I included a long list of relevant covariates (party identification, political sophistication, attitude strength, big five personality traits, age, education, race, sex, and income).

On balance, I interpret the results as providing support for the emotion regulation explanation of selective exposure, suggesting that selective exposure bias is caused by the emotion regulation strategy of situation selection. The findings suggests that while people find challenging information to be both more uncomfortable and untrustworthy than supportive information, it is primarily its discomforting quality that leads people to avoid it, and to seek out supportive information instead.

Overall picture

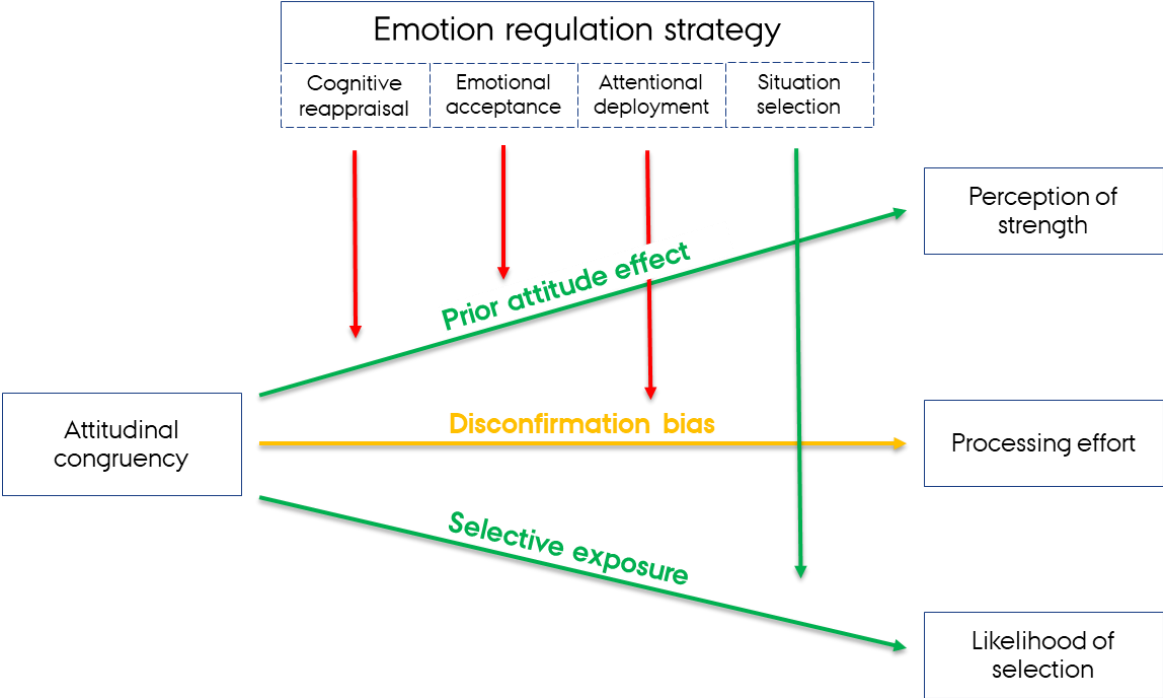
To recapitulate, I did not find support for the emotion regulation explanation of prior attitude effect or disconfirmation bias. This indicates that these biases are not caused by emotion regulation. I did, however, find substantial experimental evidence that selective exposure is caused by emotion regulation with the caveat that individual differences in situation selection did not predict selective exposure. In sum, these findings imply that the validity of the emotion regulation explanation of motivated political reasoning is limited to selective

exposure bias, and does not extend to prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias. In other words, the results imply that people seek out supporting information and avoid challenging information to control the emotions they experience, but they do not seem to evaluate challenging information as being weak, or to engage in disproportionately effortful attempts to disconfirm challenging information in order to control their emotions. The overall results of the dissertation thus indicate that the different biases involved in motivated political reasoning have different causes, as selective exposure seems to be caused by emotion regulation, but prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias seem to be driven by something else. If this is true, then the information selection stage of motivated political reasoning is fundamentally different from the information processing stage, as the biases involved in these different stages then have different underlying psychological causes.

The results of the dissertation also suggest that disconfirmation bias is more rare than much of the existing literature implies (Redlawsk, 2001; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006). In fact, the results indicate that disconfirmation bias does not generalize to contexts where people have full discretion over the amount of attention they pay to political information they encounter, which, presumably, is quite often (e.g. when reading the news on their phones, when listening to a podcast, or when watching TV). Furthermore, when disconfirmation bias does occur, it appears to be much less consequential for attitude polarization than previous research has found (Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006), and it does not seem to be the case, in general, that people's attitudes polarize after exposure to two-sided, balanced information.

The overall findings of the dissertation are summarized in Figure 2, which shows that whereas prior attitude effect and selective exposure bias found consistent and unequivocal support, the evidence for disconfirmation bias was much more mixed (its arrow is therefore yellow instead of green). The red arrows represent hypothesized moderation effects from cognitive reappraisal and emotional acceptance on prior attitude effect, and from attentional deployment on disconfirmation bias, which did not find empirical support, suggesting that these two biases are not caused by emotion regulation. The arrow symbolising a moderation effect from situation selection on selective exposure is green to indicate that this moderation effect did find empirical support, suggesting that selective exposure is indeed caused by emotion regulation.

Figure 2. Overview of findings in the dissertation



Note: Green arrows indicate causal paths that predominantly found support in the dissertation, whereas red arrows indicate hypothesized effects that did not find support. The yellow arrow indicates that this effect (disconfirmation bias) received mixed support.

Discussion

Limited area of validity of the emotion regulation explanation

An eclectic interpretation of the overall findings of the dissertation could be that 1) prior attitude effect is either driven by Bayesian updating or by the architecture of human memory (as JQP argues), 2) disconfirmation bias is relatively rare and inconsequential, and either driven by Bayesian updating or by the architecture of memory when it does occur, and 3) selective exposure is caused by the emotion regulation strategy of situation selection. Returning to the overarching research question of the dissertation, namely the extent to which motivated political reasoning is caused by emotion regulation, the overall picture would then be that emotion regulation causes motivated reasoning in the information selection stage, but not in the information processing stage, of political information acquisition.

If true, this is an important finding that has several significant implications. There are, however, some methodological reservations related to the results, which I will discuss in the following, including some potential concerns about the measurement validity of the emotion regulation survey scales and the experimental treatments employed in the dissertation. I will then proceed to discussing the implications of the dissertation's findings for the three theoretical explanations outlined in the beginning of the summary report, before turning to a discussion of the broader implications for voter rationality and for the role of affect in political information processing.

Before diving into these topics, however, I will briefly discuss how the results can be reconciled with previous research that has found motivated political reasoning to correlate with heightened activation in brain regions associated with emotion regulation (e.g. Casado-Aranda et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2016; Westen et al., 2006).

Squaring the results with neuroimaging studies

Westen et al. (2006) found exposure to challenging political information to correlate with heightened activity in brain regions associated with implicit emotion regulation, and Kaplan et al. (2016) found resistance to belief change in the face of challenging political information to predict heightened activity in an area associated with explicit emotion regulation. If prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias are not caused by emotion regulation, this raises the

question of why brain regions involved in emotion regulation display increased activity when people process challenging political information.

One possibility is that people experience discomfort when they are presented with attitudinally challenging information, and that they take steps to regulate this discomfort, but that this regulation does not occur through motivated political reasoning. For example, people could experience discomfort when exposed to challenging political information (e.g. left-wing voters who read that immigration hurts the economy), which could cause them to engage in emotion regulation, without this triggering motivated political reasoning. They could, for example, accept the challenging message, but still engage in cognitive reappraisal to regulate emotions by thinking, ‘OK, that may be so, but I value helping people in need over helping the economy’. They could also deny the challenging message because their prior beliefs make it seem implausible (or because their online tallies make thoughts come to mind that make the message seem implausible), and at the same time engage in cognitive reappraisal to regulate their emotions by thinking, e.g., ‘Even if it is true, that is not what matters’, without this emotion regulation effort having any influence on their assessment of the message.

It is also possible that activity in emotion regulation-related brain areas is correlated with exposure to attitudinally challenging information because emotion regulation can simply come in the guise of accommodating challenging information. One of the strategies Festinger (1962) pointed out for reducing cognitive dissonance was to change the behaviour or the attitude that causes dissonance. In other words, a left-wing voter who reads that immigration hurts the economy may experience discomfort, and engage in cognitive reappraisal by thinking, ‘Well, I’m not really that big a fan of immigration after all’, and this emotion regulation could thus cause her to accommodate her attitude on immigration to the information, rather than causing her to evaluate the information as weak. Emotion regulation would then still play a part in political attitude formation, but it would not be the cause of motivated political reasoning.

Both of these explanations can account for brain regions associated with emotion regulation being activated when people are presented with challenging information without motivated political reasoning being caused by emotion regulation.

Methodological reservations

There are several limitations of the methodological approach used in the dissertation. Some of these relate to the measurement strategy and the strength

of the experimental treatments, which I will discuss further in the two following sections.

Another reservation worth revisiting briefly relates to the use of data from two different countries in different papers. The fact that paper A uses data from Denmark, whereas papers B and C use data from the United States could conceivably account for the divergence in results between papers A and C, as the fact that paper A did not find support for the emotion regulation explanation, whereas paper C did, could in principle be due to the emotion regulation explanation being true in the US but not in Denmark. As discussed at length in a previous section, I do not find this to be a likely for several reasons, in particular because the theoretical explanation that was tested concerns a very foundational aspect of how humans process political information, which should not differ between countries.

Measurement validity of individual difference scales

I do not find a consistent association between individual differences in use of emotion regulation strategy and magnitude of the corresponding motivated reasoning bias in any of the papers. It is therefore worth discussing briefly whether this lack of association could be caused by problems with the measurement validity of the individual difference measures. One concern I have encountered when presenting my work to colleagues is that research participants may not have introspective access to the emotion regulation strategies they employ. In other words, are people really aware of what emotion regulation strategies they use?

I do not think it can be ruled out that people's introspective access to their use of emotion regulation strategies is limited or even quite low, but it is important to emphasize that the survey scales I use have all been validated, and been shown to have predictive validity for a variety of theoretically related concepts, including depression, well-being, rumination, relationship quality, cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, and big five personality traits (Feldman et al., 2007; Gross, 2015; Gross & John, 2003; McRae & Gross, 2020; Schutte et al., 2009). Furthermore, the emotion regulation literature distinguishes between implicit and explicit emotion regulation, with explicit emotion regulation being processes and goals that one is consciously aware of, and implicit emotion regulation being automatic and unconscious goals and processes (Braunstein et al., 2017; Koole et al., 2015). The distinction is not dichotomous, but continuous, as some emotion regulation goals and processes may be more conscious than others (Braunstein et al., 2017). The emotion regulation strategies investigated in the papers in this dissertation involve both implicit and explicit processes that are closely connected and affect each other

(Braunstein et al., 2017; Koole et al., 2015). Previous research has found emotion regulation interventions to influence – and individual difference measures to predict – activity in brain regions associated with *both* implicit *and* explicit emotion regulation (e.g. Creswell, 2017; Desbordes et al., 2012; Drabant et al., 2009; Guendelman et al., 2017), and neuroimaging studies have found processing of challenging information to correlate with activity in brain regions involved in both implicit and explicit emotion regulation (Casado-Aranda et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2016; Westen et al., 2006). So even if the emotion regulation processes in question are largely implicit, I think it is unlikely that the survey scales I use would not be able to tap into some of their variance at least. Nonetheless, this remains a relatively new research field, and it will be interesting to see what future research will tell us about the predictive validity of emotion regulation strategy measures in the political domain.

Measurement validity of experimental treatments

A related concern relates to the measurement validity of the experimental manipulation employed in Paper A. The concern here could be whether the experimental manipulation (the emotional acceptance meditation) was strong enough to substantiate a change in respondents' use of emotion regulation strategy. In other words, are survey respondents really able to use emotional acceptance when reading political information, without substantial prior training?

First of all, as discussed at length previously, several studies have successfully used meditation exercises and short instruction texts to manipulate emotion regulation in online surveys, including emotional acceptance (Feinberg et al., 2020; Hafenbrack et al., 2020; Hafenbrack et al., 2014; Hafenbrack & Vohs, 2018). Second, manipulation checks in Paper A showed that participants reported significantly higher levels of emotional acceptance in the treatment condition than in the control condition. Nonetheless, it remains possible that a much stronger intervention, e.g. an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program (cf. Kabat-Zinn, 2003), would have an effect, though several recent studies using longer, more comprehensive mindfulness-based interventions have also found null effects on outcomes associated with motivated political reasoning, such as political tolerance and affective polarization (Petersen & Mitkidis, 2019; Simonsson et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it would be valuable to conduct field studies in the future to be able to rule out or confirm whether a stronger intervention could potentially have curbed prior attitude effect and to further investigate whether and how real-world emotion regulation interventions could potentially influence selective exposure.

Theoretical perspectives

Implications for the emotion regulation explanation

As discussed previously, the fact that the emotion regulation explanation only finds support in relation to selective exposure could mean that this explanation only has validity in the selection stage of political information acquisition.

Interestingly, the lack of moderation from the individual difference measures of emotion regulation strategy is consistent with a recent claim by Stanovich (2021) that converging evidence shows that there are no individual dispositions that predict motivated reasoning biases in general across different domains (i.e. not only in relation to political issues). According to Stanovich (2021), this separates these biases from virtually all other cognitive biases, most of which are lower amongst people with high intelligence and with dispositions toward open-minded thinking and critical reflection. The only consistent individual-level moderators of motivated reasoning biases are the strength and extremity of the specific attitude in question, (which are not general dispositions, since they vary from issue to issue), and, in some instances, political sophistication (Stanovich, 2021, pp. 55-73), which does not however, predict the magnitude of motivated reasoning outside the political domain. The fact that I find no consistent association between the individual difference measures of emotion regulation strategy and the magnitude of corresponding motivated reasoning biases squares perfectly with Stanovich (2021) contention.

If this turns out to be true, then decreasing people's general disposition to use situation selection to regulate emotions should not reduce their tendency to engage in selective exposure to political information. Reducing selective exposure through reducing situation selection would then require more targeted interventions that only influence situation selection in specific contexts where political information selection is taking place.

The fact that the results in this dissertation imply that the role of emotion regulation in motivated political reasoning is limited squares with other recent studies that have investigated the effects of emotion regulation on other aspects of political behaviour. Of particular relevance in this context is the effects of mindfulness interventions (that are closely associated with emotional acceptance) on concepts that are closely associated with motivated political reasoning. For instance, mindfulness interventions have been found to have no influence on political tolerance (Petersen & Mitkidis, 2019), intergroup empathy bias, economic system justification, or affective polarization (Simonsson, Bazin, et al., 2022; Simonsson, Goldberg, et al., 2022; Simonsson et al., 2021). One study (Simonsson, Bazin, et al., 2022) found a small effect of an eight-

week mindfulness meditation course on affective polarization, but this effect was as small as the pre-intervention difference between the control and treatment groups to which participants were randomly assigned, and participants in the control and treatment groups displayed identical levels of post-intervention affective polarization.

On the other hand, a recent study by Woolley and Fishbach (2021) found that priming people to reappraise discomfort-inducing situations as opportunities for increasing personal growth can reduce avoidance of upsetting information about gun violence, and can increase people's self-reported motivation to read information that challenges their political views.

While it does not seem to be the case that cognitive reappraisal causes prior attitude effect, it remains possible that it can be used to reduce selective exposure, by reducing the discomfort associated with reading challenging political information. As discussed earlier, it is possible that people can use cognitive reappraisal to regulate the emotional impact of processing a challenging political message, without this causing bias in their evaluations of the strength or credibility of the message. If cognitive reappraisal can reduce the negative emotional impact of challenging information, it may provide an important tool for reducing selective exposure to political information, by reducing the discomfort that seems to fuel selective exposure. Further investigation of whether this is the case would be an interesting avenue for future research.

Implications for JQP

While none of the research articles in the present dissertation were designed to directly test Taber & Lodge's JQP model, it is still possible to point out some implications for the theory.

First of all, the fact that prior attitude is neither consistently moderated by individual differences in emotion regulation strategy nor by situational factors that influence emotion regulation strategy is consistent with the theory. This therefore corroborates JQP. It would be difficult to explain from the point of view of JQP if prior attitude effect was strongly moderated by an emotional acceptance meditation, for example, because JQP stresses that motivated reasoning biases are hardwired into the architecture of human memory (an architecture that cannot be altered).

The results concerning disconfirmation bias, however, contradict much of Taber & Lodge's work. Directional motivated reasoning is the default mode with which people approach political information in JQP, and it is thus inconsistent with the model that disconfirmation bias does not seem to occur in many situations (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Attitude polarization is a central prediction from JQP, and its absence provides evidence against the model, as

does the fact that neither attitude strength nor political sophistication moderates the strength of disconfirmation bias (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

The results concerning selective exposure are also challenging to JQP. While it is again consistent with the model that individual differences in emotion regulation strategy have no moderating influence on the bias, it is curious from the perspective of JQP that the strength of selective exposure bias depends on situational cues that influence emotion regulation strategies.

Thus, while the studies in the dissertation were not intended as direct tests of Taber & Lodge's theory, the results do raise several important questions for the JQP model that are not answered easily.

With the meagre support for the emotion regulation explanation of prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias in the present dissertation, a fruitful avenue for future research could be to revisit the remaining influential motivated reasoning explanation, namely the JQP model. Despite the theory's prominence (and brilliance), Taber & Lodge themselves acknowledged that it has many shortcomings and gaps, and they explicitly invited replication attempts of their studies (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016). In Paper B, some of Taber & Lodge (2006)'s findings successfully replicated, but several others did not. It would therefore be valuable to further investigate the replicability of the other foundational studies that Taber & Lodge's theory is based on as they themselves encouraged.

The most important driver of motivated political reasoning in JQP is *affective contagion* (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2016), but this process has only been tested in one research article to date (Erisen et al., 2014), which used small-n convenience samples and has been subject to methodological criticisms (Gelman, 2014). Investigating the replicability of this study would be a great way to begin testing the core theoretical assumptions in JQP.

Implications for the Bayesian updating explanation

As with JQP, the fact that emotion regulation strategy had no consistent moderating effect on prior attitude effect is in line with the Bayesian updating explanation, and therefore corroborates that account of prior attitude effect. It would have been hard to explain why emotion regulation strategy influenced how Bayesian updaters use their prior beliefs to evaluate new information if there had been such a moderation effect.

The findings concerning disconfirmation bias also square quite well with Bayesian updating. It would have been puzzling from the Bayesian perspective if participants dedicated more processing effort to supportive information

than to challenging information when provided full discretion over their processing effort, as the emotion regulation account predicted, but this did not turn out to be the case. The results in Paper B therefore also corroborate the Bayesian updating explanation.

The results concerning selective exposure, however, are harder to square with the Bayesian account. First, it is hard to explain why a situational cue that influences emotion regulation strategy should influence Bayesians' use of prior beliefs to select political information. The fact that a situational cue that increases the search for credible information did not increase selective exposure would also seem to contradict the Bayesian updating explanation at first glance. One could make the argument, however, that a perfectly rational Bayesian updater could already be maximizing the search for credible information in the control condition, without a cue to search for credible information. It is then puzzling, however, that people in the control condition did not report being entirely motivated to select as much credible information as possible, and that the credibility instruction had a substantial and significant impact on the manipulation check.

The results in the dissertation therefore corroborate the Bayesian updating explanation for both prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias, but challenge its validity for explaining selective exposure.

Implications for voter rationality and the role of affect in political reasoning

All in all, no one explanatory model can account for all the results in the dissertation, but each model can account for some of the results. In the following, I discuss what this means for voter rationality and for the role of affect in political reasoning in general.

Even if prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias are not caused by emotion regulation, this does not necessarily mean that those processes are entirely unbiased. It does, however, mean that they are not irrational in terms of Chong (2013, p. 15) and Elster (1990) definition, according to which they must not lead to beliefs that are held simply because one desires to hold them; but as discussed before, prior attitude effect and disconfirmation bias could still be caused by the affective processes described in JQP, which are generally thought of as causing bias and irrationality (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006, 2016). However, as Taber and Lodge themselves point out, the implications of JQP are difficult to disentangle from those of rational Bayesian updating, and the fact that the online tally exudes a strong influence on reasoning can be seen as a rough way of approximating Bayesian rationality when

required to integrate a very large amount of information (e.g. all previous information about a given socio-political group) into the decision stream in a very short amount of time (Lodge & Taber, 2013, pp. 230-234).

But although affective contagion and related processes can theoretically be thought to serve a heuristic function of leading to approximately Bayesian rational information processing, Taber & Lodge (2006, 2009, 2013) found empirically that these processes caused strong attitude polarization when people were exposed to two-sided, balanced information, and they found people, especially the politically sophisticated and those with strong attitudes, to engage in much more effortful scrutiny of challenging information than of supportive information. I think that much of the perceived irrationality of the stereotypical voter described in JQP may stem from these tendencies, which appear, if not clearly irrational, then at least somewhat unreasonable. The results in the present dissertation, however, do not support the existence of a strong disconfirmation bias, not even amongst the most sophisticated or those with the strongest prior attitudes, nor do they support the attitude polarization finding.

If one sets aside attitude polarization and a strong disconfirmation bias, the political reasoner in JQP starts to seem much less biased and irrational. Even though the findings in this dissertation do not rule out a strong effect of emotions on the information processing stage of political information acquisition, they indicate that the role of these emotions is less to lead reasoning astray than it is to help it along in a complex world where we are equipped with limited processing capacity.

I therefore argue that the overall findings of the dissertation suggest that the information processing stage of political information acquisition is either characterized by rational Bayesian updating, or by an affect-driven heuristic approximation thereof.

If this is the case, it can help make sense of new powerful experimental evidence which shows that voters can actually be quite accommodating to challenging persuasive arguments made in political campaigns, to exposure to challenging partisan news, to door-to-door canvassing (when done effectively), and to factual corrections (Broockman & Kalla, 2020, 2022; Guess & Coppock, 2020; Jørgensen & Osmundsen, 2020; Kalla & Broockman, 2020; Kalla et al., 2022; Wood & Porter, 2016). This suggests that exposure can lead to persuasion and correction of misinformation, if done consistently and with strong, convincing arguments and facts. The challenge seems to lie in getting a large amount of strong persuasive information out to the right people.

However, even if the results are interpreted as indicating that the processing part of political information acquisition is relatively unbiased (or at least consistent with some kind of bounded rationality), the fact that emotion regulation seems to strongly influence the information selection stage has the

potential to lead the belief systems of mass publics astray in its own right. Imagine, for instance, a left-wing voter, who processes all political information she encounters in accordance with Bayes' rule, but who selects political information sources based on what she expects will feel nice, which leads her to largely select likeminded sources. She might then encounter a disproportionately large amount of information that supports her pre-existing attitudes, which could lead her to accumulate more and more confidence in a prior that is biased by her initial position, even though she evaluates every novel piece of information she encounters as a perfect Bayesian learner.

Luckily, if selective exposure is indeed caused by emotion regulation, as the results suggest, then it is potentially alterable through interventions that target emotion regulation.

Concluding thoughts on debiasing

There is currently great scholarly interest in how electorates can be affectively depolarised and debiased in terms of political misinformation and partisan perceptions of facts (e.g. Finkel et al., 2020; Nyhan, 2020). One of the implications of the conclusions in this dissertation is that efforts to debias electorates in terms of reducing perceptual divides, misinformation, and polarization should probably focus on increasing exposure to adversarial viewpoints.

This is so for two reasons. First, while previous influential research has claimed that exposure to balanced and corrective information will often lead to polarization and backlash effects (P. S. Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006), the results in this dissertation indicate that we should not expect this to be the case in general, and thus add to a growing body of evidence that draws similar conclusions (Groenendyk & Krupnikov, 2020; Guess & Coppock, 2020; Jørgensen & Osmundsen, 2020; Wood & Porter, 2016). Second, the results suggest that increasing people's willingness to expose themselves to adversarial viewpoints and corrective information may be feasible, because selective exposure seems to be sensitive to emotion regulation interventions, of which there are already many (Berking & Schwarz, 2014; Fruzzetti & Levensky, 2000; Hayes et al., 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; McRae & Gross, 2020; Wells, 2011; Woolley & Fishbach, 2021). It therefore seems plausible (and worthwhile) for future research to develop and test emotion regulation-based interventions that can increase people's tendency to seek out challenging information and adversarial viewpoints (see Woolley & Fishbach, 2021).

It is tempting to think that for civic education to prevent people from entrenching themselves in highly one-sided, biased belief systems (e.g., becom-

ing conspiracy theorists), it should stress the importance of sticking to credible information. However, the results in this dissertation indicate that this strategy would likely not be successful, because people's assessments of the credibility of political information are strongly correlated with their political attitudes (e.g. Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Metzger et al., 2020). Because the results indicate that the primary reason why people avoid exposure to adversarial viewpoints is to avoid psychological discomfort, they suggest that civic education should rather stress the necessity of enduring negative feelings when selecting political information for getting a balanced worldview.

Recent research shows that group norms can play an important role in how people relate to their ideologies and their political beliefs (Groenendyk et al., 2021). Together with the results of the present dissertation, this may suggest that one way to increase people's general willingness to listen to political adversaries, and thus to potentially reduce affective polarization and political misinformation, would be to reinforce a norm about the value of seeing discomfort associated with listening to political adversaries as a way to become smarter and to obtain a more nuanced and accurate worldview.

Dansk resumé

For at borgere i demokratiske samfund kan udføre deres rolle som vælgere kompetent, er de nødt til at tilegne sig viden om politik og samfundsforhold, som de kan bruge til at danne holdninger og vælge politiske repræsentanter på et oplyst grundlag. En stor mængde forskning har dog fundet, at vælgeres tilegnelse af information om politik og samfundsforhold er gennemsyret af en række bias, som får dem til at tilgodese information, der støtter deres eksisterende politiske holdninger på bekostning af information, der udfordrer dem.

Vælgere vurderer således information, der støtter deres holdninger, som værende af højere kvalitet end information, der udfordrer dem (forudgående holdningsbias), de foretager omfattende mentale krumspring for at modstå og modargumentere information, der udfordrer deres holdninger, mens de uden synderlige overvejelser tager information, der støtter deres holdninger for gode varer (afkræftelsesbias), og de undgår systematisk informationskilder, der udfordrer deres holdninger, mens de aktivt opsøger informationskilder, der støtter deres holdninger (selektiv eksponeringsbias). Forskere bruger paraplybegrebet *motiveret ræsonneren* om disse bias og hævder, at de fører til holdningsmæssig og følelsesmæssig polarisering, udbredelse af misinformation og tro på uunderbyggede konspirationsteorier, og at de underminerer vælgeres evne til at holde politiske eliter ansvarlige for deres adfærd.

På trods af disse bias' vigtighed for hvordan vores demokrati fungerer, er der ingen konsensus blandt forskere om, hvorfor de finder sted. Én af forklaringerne i den eksisterende forskningslitteratur hævder, at folk udviser disse bias, fordi det giver dem mulighed for at undgå ubehagelige følelser, som ofte opstår, når man må acceptere informationer, der udfordrer ens politiske holdninger. Denne forklaring kan kaldes *følelsesreguleringsforklaringen*, idet den hævder, at de førnævnte bias forårsages af forsøg på at kontrollere (regulere) følelsesmæssige tilstande. I denne afhandling undersøger jeg, i hvilken udstrækning de forskellige bias involveret i motiveret politisk ræsonneren er forårsaget af følelsesregulering.

Følelsesreguleringsforklaringen er imidlertid ikke tilstrækkelig teoretisk udviklet, da det ikke er blevet teoretiseret, hvordan forskelle, i hvordan folk kontrollerer deres følelser (følelsesreguleringsstrategier), hænger sammen med de forskellige bias i motiveret ræsonneren. Mit teoretiske argument er, at hvis følelsesreguleringsforklaringen er korrekt, så er forudgående holdningsbias forårsaget af følelsesreguleringsstrategien *kognitiv omfortolkning*, afkræftelsesbias forårsaget af *opmærksomhedsudsendelse* og selektivt eksponeringsbias forårsaget af *situationsudvælgelse*. Hvis dette er korrekt, skulle vi forvente, at folk, der ofte bruger en af disse tre følelsesreguleringsstrategier,

også er særligt tilbøjelige til at udvise det tilsvarende bias. For eksempel bør folk, der ofte bruger kognitiv omfortolkning til at regulere deres følelser, være særligt tilbøjelige til at udvise forudgående holdningsbias, hvis følelsesreguleringsforklaringen er korrekt.

Afhandlingens datagrundlag er 11.204 unikke spørgeskemabesvarelser fordelt på i alt seks originale survey-undersøgelser indsamlet i Danmark og USA. I disse har jeg blandt andet undersøgt, i hvilken grad danske og amerikanske vælgere følelsesreguleringsstrategier samvarierer med styrken af de tre førnævnte bias. Jeg har også undersøgt, hvorvidt styrken af disse bias kan forøges ved at få forsøgsdeltagerne til at bruge bestemte følelsesreguleringsstrategier, mens de udvælger, læser og vurderer politisk information.

Overordnet set finder jeg, at kun selektiv eksponeringsbias ser ud til at være forårsaget af følelsesregulering. Forudgående holdningsbias viser ingen tegn på at være forårsaget af følelsesregulering, ej heller afkræftelsesbias, som jeg desuden finder, er mindre udbredt, svagere, og mindre tilbøjelig til at føre til polarisering, end hvad visse tidligere studier har fundet.

Jeg foreslår, at disse resultater kan skyldes, at følelsesreguleringsforklaringen kun har gyldighed i forhold til informationsudvælgelsesdelen af motiveret ræsonneren, men ikke gør sig gældende for de bias, der knytter sig til mental behandling af politisk information (forudgående holdningsbias og afkræftelsesbias). I så fald opsøger vælgere selektivt information, der støtter deres politiske holdninger for at kontrollere hvilke følelser de oplever, men deres vurdering og bearbejdning af den information, de rent faktisk møder, styres ikke af ønsker om at kontrollere følelsesmæssige tilstande.

Resultaterne for forudgående holdningsbias og afkræftelsesbias er konsistente med såkaldt Bayesiansk opdatering, hvor information, der går imod ens forudgående viden tildeles lavere troværdighed end information, der falder i tråd med den. I det omfang de førnævnte bias er udtryk for denne proces, er betegnelsen *bias* noget misvisende, da Bayesiansk opdatering er den mest rationelle måde at integrere ny information med en eksisterende vidensmængde. Resultaterne er imidlertid også konsistente med en anden model (JQP modellen), hvor folks umiddelbare følelser over for forskellige politiske og sociale begreber (fx partier, politikere og politikere) styrer hvilke bevidste tanker, der træder frem i deres bevidsthed, når de vurderer information omkring de pågældende begreber.

Blandt implikationerne af afhandlingens fund er, at normer eller praksisser, der fremmer brug af bestemte følelsesreguleringsstrategier i forbindelse med politisk informationstilgængelighed (fx udbredelse af meditationspraksisser, eller normer for hvordan man bør forholde sig til ubehag ved at få sine holdninger udfordret), næppe vil gøre folk mere tilbøjelige til at tro på udfordrende politisk information, når de møder den. Til gengæld antyder resultaterne, at

sådanne normer og praksisser potentielt kan gøre folk mere tilbøjelige til at opsøge udfordrende politiske og samfundsmæssige informationer til at starte med. Hvorvidt dette konkret er tilfældet, vil være værdifuldt at undersøge for fremtidig forskning.

English summary

In order for citizens in democratic societies to perform their role as voters competently, they need to acquire knowledge about politics and social conditions, which they can use to form opinions and elect political representatives on an informed basis. However, a large body of research has found that voters' acquisition of information about politics and society is imbued with a number of biases that lead them to favor information that supports their existing political views at the expense of information that challenges them.

Thus, voters judge information that supports their attitudes as having higher quality than information that challenges them (prior attitude effect), they make extensive mental leaps to resist and counter-argue information that challenges their attitudes, while uncritically accepting information that supports them (disconfirmation bias), and they systematically avoid sources of information that challenge their attitudes, while they actively seek out sources of information that support their attitudes (selective exposure bias). Scholars use the umbrella term motivated political reasoning about these biases, arguing that they lead to attitudinal and affective polarization, the spread of misinformation and belief in unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, and that they undermine voters' ability to hold political elites accountable for their behavior.

Despite the importance of these biases for the functioning of democracy, there is no consensus among researchers as to why they occur. One of the explanations in the existing research literature claims that people exhibit these biases because it allows them to avoid unpleasant feelings that often arise when having to accept information that challenges one's political views. This explanation can be called the emotion regulation explanation, as it claims that the aforementioned biases are caused by attempts to control (regulate) emotional states. In this dissertation I examine to what extent the various biases involved in motivated political reasoning are caused by emotion regulation.

However, the emotion regulation explanation is not sufficiently theoretically developed, as it has not been theorized how differences in how people control their emotions (emotion regulation strategies) are related to the different biases in motivated reasoning. My theoretical argument is that if the emotion regulation explanation is correct, then prior attitude bias is caused by the emotion regulation strategy of *cognitive reappraisal*, disconfirmation bias is caused by *attentional deployment*, and selective exposure bias is caused by *situation selection*. If this is correct, we should expect that people who frequently use one of these three emotion regulation strategies are also particularly likely to exhibit the corresponding bias. For example, if the emotion regulation explanation is correct, people who frequently use cognitive reappraisal

to regulate their emotions should be particularly prone to exhibit prior attitude effect.

The dissertation uses data from 11.204 unique questionnaire responses distributed among a total of six original surveys collected in Denmark and the United States. In these, I have investigated, among other things, the extent to which the emotion regulation strategies of Danish and American voters covary with the strength of the three aforementioned biases. I have also investigated whether the strength of these biases can be increased by having subjects use certain emotion regulation strategies while selecting, reading and evaluating political information.

Overall, I find that only selective exposure bias appears to be caused by emotion regulation. Prior attitude effect shows no evidence of being caused by emotion regulation, nor does disconfirmation bias, which I also find to be less prevalent, weaker, and less likely to lead to polarization than some previous studies have found.

I suggest that this pattern of results may stem from the emotion regulation explanation only being valid in relation to the information selection part of motivated reasoning, but not being applicable to the biases associated with mental processing of political information (prior attitude bias and disconfirmation bias). In that case, voters selectively seek out information that supports their political views in order to control what emotions they experience, but their evaluation and processing of the information they actually encounter is not guided by desires to control emotional states.

The results for prior attitude bias and disconfirmation bias are consistent with so-called Bayesian updating, where information that goes against one's prior knowledge is assigned lower credibility than information that falls in line with it. To the extent that the aforementioned biases are expressions of this process, the term bias is somewhat misleading, as Bayesian updating is the most rational way to integrate new information with an existing body of knowledge. However, the results are also consistent with another model (the JQP model), where people's immediate feelings towards various political and social concepts (e.g. parties, policies and politicians) control which conscious thoughts emerge in their conscious mind when they evaluate information about the relevant concepts.

Among the implications of the dissertation's findings is that norms or practices that promote the use of certain emotion regulation strategies in connection with political information acquisition (e.g. the spread of meditation practices, or norms for how one should relate to the discomfort of having one's attitudes challenged) are unlikely to make people more likely to believe challenging political information when they encounter it. On the other hand, the

findings do suggest that such norms and practices may potentially make people more likely to seek out challenging political and societal information to begin with. Whether this is indeed the case will be valuable to investigate further for future research.

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