

It's Time to Vote: The Effect of Matching Message Orientation and Temporal Frame on Political Persuasion

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What political candidates say during their campaign and when they say it are critical to their success. In three experiments, we show that abstract, "why"-laden appeals are more persuasive than concrete, "how"-laden appeals when voters' decision is temporally distant; the reverse is true when the decision is imminent, and these results are strongest among those who are politically uninformed. These effects seem to be driven by a match between temporal distance and the abstractness of the message that leads to perceptions of fluency, and the ensuing "feels right" experience yields enhanced evaluations of the focal stimulus.

With the increased penetration of cable television, talk radio, and Web logs (popularly referred to as blogs), the coverage of political topics and campaigns appears to be ubiquitous and incessant. This expansion of media outlets, with the accompanying increase in media coverage, is having a predictable effect on political expenditures as well. For instance, the Federal Election Commission reports that the 1996 presidential campaign pitting Clinton against Dole cost \$449 million, the 2000 campaign featuring Bush and Gore cost \$649.5 million, and the 2004 contest between Bush and Kerry cost over \$1 billion (<http://www.fec.gov/press/press2005/20050203pressum/presbigpic.pdf>). Most of these campaign expenditures are incurred on marketing ac-

tivities such as advertising and "get out the vote" efforts. These marketing activities are designed to persuade undecided voters and ensure the turnout of those voters who are favorably inclined toward the candidate.

The general topic of voter persuasion and voting behavior has historically attracted academic attention in several disciplines, including journalism (Katz 1973), political science (Krosnick and Brannon 1993), economics (specifically, public choice [Lockerbie 1991]), and, more recently, psychology (Bizer and Petty 2005; Jost and Sidanius 2004; Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg 2003). However, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000; Klein and Ahluwalia 2005), the field of marketing and consumer behavior has largely been silent on political persuasion. This gap in our literature needs to be corrected for three fairly obvious reasons. First, based on the sheer volume of money spent on political campaigns, the marketing of political candidates is an important economic activity. Second, the field of consumer behavior has a unique intellectual basis from which to address the issue of political choice. Third, studying consumers' choice of political candidate is arguably at least as important as studying which brand of carbonated soft drink they prefer or purchase. Therefore, in the research reported in this article, we examine the efficacy of different persuasive messages over the course of a political campaign.

From a theoretical perspective, the topic of voting behavior offers a unique platform from which to study message framing and temporal distance, in the sense that there is a distinct and predictable temporal rhythm to political persuasion, culminating in a choice decision that engages all eligible citizens at roughly the same time. Unlike in the case

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of most consumer products, candidates begin to vie for the voter's attention, monetary contributions, and time (to volunteer for campaign activities) several years prior to the actual choice, and do so predictably every 2 or 4 years. For instance, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (Republican) and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) had formed exploratory committees for their presidential campaigns by the end of November 2006, all but declaring their intention to run. Candidates have roughly 2 years in which to communicate with and influence campaign contributors, volunteers, and voters. The nominee from each major party has about 6 months or less to mobilize support for the general election. What these candidates say will be critical to their success, since they will address multiple segments, ask different things of each segment, and do so over a finite period of time. Partisans (who are relatively brand loyal) are solicited for their money, time, and effort, while swing voters (who are not as brand loyal) are solicited for electoral support on election day. Although partisans are likely to be politically more informed (expert) than swing voters (Campbell et al. 1960), swing voters are more likely to determine the eventual outcome of most general elections (Holbrook 1996). Therefore, the nature of political communication targeted at relatively uninformed voters over the course of a lengthy campaign is an important issue for which there is no readily apparent theoretically justifiable prescription.

We employ construal-level theory to examine the issue of messaging strategy as a function of temporal distance from election day (Lieberman, Sagristano, and Trope 2002; Trope and Liberman 2003). We draw on the finding that people represent future events differently in terms of abstractness or concreteness, depending on the temporal proximity of the event, and propose that messages that are congruent with temporally driven mental representations will be more persuasive than incongruent messages. Specifically, messages that emphasize high-level, goal-oriented, abstract themes will be more persuasive when voting is temporally distant, while messages that emphasize concrete, low-level, action-oriented issues will be more persuasive when voting is temporally proximal. In other words, a match or mismatch between temporal distance and the construal level of a message will lead to differentially favorable attitudes since messages that emphasize elements on which people naturally focus ought to be more persuasive (Aaker and Lee 2006; Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004). Further, because the degree of expertise is likely to be relatively low among swing voters (Campbell et al. 1960), we examine how voters who differ in their knowledge of politics may respond differently to messages that match the temporal frame.

Our findings are of interest beyond the political context that we examine. The implication that messages regarding consumption in the distant future should be framed in an abstract fashion is of significant value in the more general arena of persuasive communication and advertising effectiveness. To theoreticians interested in the temporal aspects of decision making as well as practitioners who market products, services, and candidates to consumers and to voters,

the interaction between information type and the temporal distance to choice should be important in many consumption contexts, such as deciding which college to attend, which automobile to purchase when one graduates from college, or where to live when one retires.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. First, we provide a discussion of the relevant literature, from which we derive predictions. We then report four studies conducted to examine our predictions, and we conclude with a discussion of our findings and the implications of our research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Construing Information

People construe or represent persuasive information, such as a call to action (e.g., politicians urging voters to vote in their favor, car dealers urging consumers to purchase from their dealership), in different ways. In particular, some people think of activities in high-level or abstract terms (e.g., driving is a means of transportation), while others think of activities in low-level or concrete terms (e.g., driving is the mechanical process of inserting a key into the ignition, turning the key, engaging the gear, stepping on the gas pedal, steering, and so on). One approach to distinguish between abstract and concrete representations of messages draws upon action identification theory (Vallacher and Wegner 1985; Wegner et al. 1984), according to which any action can be represented in memory at an abstract, high level that specifies why one acts, or at a concrete, low level that specifies how one acts. When discussing differences in the construal of events, Vallacher and Wegner (1989) observed that "at one extreme is the low-level agent, someone who operates on the world primarily at the level of details. This person tends to approach an action with its mechanistic components in mind. At the other extreme is the high-level agent, someone who routinely views his or her action in terms of causal effects, social meanings, and self-descriptive implications" (661). Empirical evidence supports this distinction (Freitas, Salovey, and Liberman 2001; Fujita et al. 2006; Kim and John 2008). Individuals usually have chronic tendencies toward different levels of construal, such that some individuals may focus on abstract elements of the world while others focus on the concrete. For example, eating breakfast could be construed as "getting nutrition for the day," representing an abstract mind-set or high-level construal, or it could be construed as "pouring milk on cereal," representing a concrete mind-set or low-level construal. High-level construals tend to highlight the superordinate goal of why actions should be taken, while low-level construals tend to highlight subordinate steps of how a goal could be accomplished (Lieberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2000). In this context, Kardes, Cronley, and Kim (2006) note that "the abstractness of the mental representation increases with *temporal*, spatial, or sensory distance" (135, emphasis added).

According to construal-level theory, the temporal distance from a future event may influence whether that event is

represented in an abstract or concrete manner in people's minds (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2003). For instance, when participants were asked to categorize items relevant to a trip expected to take place in the distant future, as opposed to the near future, the items were grouped into relatively broad categories (Liberman et al. 2002), suggesting that people rely on simpler and more inclusive mental representations for distant-future events. Consequently, the importance of the superordinate "why" aspect increases with the time horizon, whereas the importance of the subordinate "how" aspect decreases with the time horizon (Liberman and Trope 1998; Sagristano, Trope, and Liberman 2002). Further, temporal distance can also change how future events are represented in memory: distant-future events tend to be represented in abstract, superordinate terms that are more sensitive to the desirability of the end goal, while temporally proximal events tend to be represented in specific and detailed terms that are more sensitive to the feasibility of achieving that goal (Trope and Liberman 2000, 2003). Since political persuasion efforts have a natural temporal rhythm, we begin our inquiry by examining the role of differences in the temporal frame on persuasion. These differences in the temporal framing of choices might have an impact on the mental representation of the message, which in turn may lead to differences in evaluative judgments, a link that we explore next.

Linking Message Orientation and Temporal Frame

When referring to a consumption event in the distant future, a message that emphasizes abstract elements of the event matches the manner in which consumers mentally represent that event. Similarly, when referring to a consumption event in the near future, a message that emphasizes concrete elements of the event matches the manner in which consumers mentally represent that event. Conversely, when referring to a consumption event in the distant (near) future, a message that emphasizes concrete (abstract) elements of the consumption event does not match the manner in which consumers mentally represent that event. We posit that the match or mismatch between the consumers' temporal representation of the event and the orientation of the message (abstract or concrete) likely influences their evaluations of the message, as we discuss next.

Consequences of a Match between Message Orientation and Temporal Representation. When people encounter information that is consistent with their mental representational state (e.g., they encounter abstract information when they are contemplating a consumption event in the distant future), they are likely to experience a feeling of fluency or ease of comprehension, which leads to a sense of "feeling right" (or feeling correct) about the consumption event (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). This feeling right yields enhanced evaluations because people misattribute their feeling-right experience to a higher quality of the focal event, be it a persuasive message or a consumption experience. This result has been observed in various con-

texts, including the value of consumption objects such as mugs (Higgins et al. 2003) and the importance of healthy eating behavior (Cesario et al. 2004).

For instance, consider Lee and Aaker's (2004) research. They presented participants with a message that emphasized the promotion benefits of being energized or with the prevention benefits of avoiding clogged arteries. The message was presented in either a gain frame that emphasized the attainment of the benefit (e.g., "Get energized") or a loss frame that emphasized the potential nonattainment of the benefit (e.g., "Don't miss out on getting energized"). They showed that participants experienced greater processing fluency when the message frame (gain vs. loss) was compatible with their regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) and that this experience of fluency mediated the effect of regulatory fit on persuasion.

Similarly, Thompson and Hamilton (2006) asked their participants to process comparative or noncomparative advertisements using either analytical or imagery-based processing and found that comparative advertisements were more effective when participants used analytical processing, whereas noncomparative advertisements were more effective when participants used imagery-based processing. That is, when an ad format was consistent with the observer's processing mode, information processing was facilitated, and this made the message more persuasive; consequently, brand evaluations and purchase intentions were also enhanced. Thus, it appears that, in general, perceived message persuasiveness is enhanced when the message fits the observer's mental representational state (Schwarz and Clore 1983), and one candidate explanation available in the literature for this fit-driven enhancement in persuasion is that fit generates a "feels right" experience. An alternative perspective is that fit might influence the scrutiny and weighting of information (Petty and Wegener 1998). According to this view, when thinking about the distant versus near future, one might scrutinize abstract versus concrete information to a greater degree. We examine more closely the mediating role of fluency in study 3A below and consider the mechanism of differential elaboration and weighting later in our discussion.

Consequences of a Mismatch between Message Orientation and Temporal Representation. When people encounter information that is inconsistent with their mental representational state (e.g., they encounter abstract information when they are contemplating consumption in the immediate future), the information is less fluent; furthermore, people may be less likely to attend to or scrutinize this information because it is inconsistent with existing information in memory (Petty and Wegener 1998). For instance, a traveler preparing to leave for a vacation to Cancun the following morning is more likely to process information about speedy check-in for international flights (a low-level, concrete piece of information that is related to the feasibility of the vacation), as opposed to information about the quality of sunsets on the east coast of Mexico (a high-level, abstract piece of information that is related to the desirability of the

vacation). When processing information that does not match their mental representation, people are less likely to experience fluency and thus may provide a less positive evaluation of the event.

In summary, much research has demonstrated that the compatibility between message type (or argument frame) and the manner in which individuals naturally process information yields processing fluency, which in turn generates a positive experience and thus influences the persuasiveness of the message. Based on this premise, we argue that the fit between mental representation modes and message types ought to influence evaluations. In the context of a political campaign, the content of the message ought to fit the temporal distance to election day for the message to be persuasive. That is, constructing a message with an abstract or high-level versus concrete or low-level appeal can influence its persuasiveness, depending on when the message recipient is required to act.

Foundational Prediction

Combining the constructs of temporal distance (distant vs. proximal events) and abstract (why-laden) versus concrete (how-laden) reasons for actions allows for the development of a specific prediction that links the nature of the message, the temporal proximity of the decision, and the persuasiveness of the message. We propose that the fit between the temporal frame and the message type will increase the persuasiveness of the message through experienced fluency. In the context of political persuasion, we expect that individual voters will manifest differential degrees of responsiveness, depending on whether they receive high-level or low-level messages and how distant they are from the date of the election. Relative to low-level construals emphasizing the “how” aspects of an action, high-level construals emphasizing the “why” aspects of an action will be more persuasive when the election is temporally distant. Formally, we hypothesize:

- H1:** People will evaluate a candidate whose message is construed at a high versus low level more favorably when the election is temporally distant, whereas people will evaluate a candidate whose message is construed at a low versus high level more favorably when the election is temporally imminent.

We now turn to a description of our empirical efforts to assess support for this core prediction as well as derivative predictions that follow.

STUDY 1

We employed a 2 (message orientation: high-level [why], low-level [how]) \times 2 (temporal distance: near future vs. distant future) between-subjects design to test our foundational prediction.

Method

Stimulus. Participants were provided a statement from a fictional candidate with an androgynous name (Pat Darvell) who indicated that s/he was running for the U.S. Senate. The candidate’s statement included information on when s/he would be launching the campaign (next week vs. 6 months from now) to accomplish the temporal distance manipulation. The timing of the launch of the campaign was reiterated in the text of the statement.

To manipulate message orientation, we drew on prior research (Trope and Liberman 2003; Vallacher and Wegner 1985) and varied the headline as well as the content of the message. The high-level message featured the headline “A Refocus on WHY We Do Things,” and the body of the message used language to indicate the “right reasons and ideals” and the importance of candidates who were “values-oriented.” The low-level message featured the headline “A Refocus on HOW We Do Things,” and the body of the message used language that stressed the importance of candidates who were “action-oriented” and focused on “proper implementation.”

A pretest ($n = 23$) revealed that the manipulation of message level yielded no difference in liking of either the statement or the candidate (F values < 1). However, the high-level message was perceived to emphasize values and ultimate goals more so than the low-level message ($M = 4.58$ vs. 3.00 ; $F(1, 21) = 12.13$, $p < .01$) and was deemed less action- and process-oriented than the low-level message ($M = 3.42$ vs. 5.00 ; $F(1, 21) = 6.24$, $p < .05$). Further, the results of the pretest indicated that the arguments presented in the statements were perceived to be of moderate strength ($M = 3.34$ on a 7-point scale). This is a desirable feature of the stimulus, as the provision of extreme arguments could have led to floor or ceiling effects.

Participants and Procedures. Ninety-two undergraduates enrolled in marketing courses participated in the study in exchange for a chance to win gift certificates to an upscale department store in a fair lottery. Participants were informed that they would read a statement from a candidate running for U.S. Senate in their state for the 2006 midterm election and that the name of the candidate had been disguised so as not to bias the results. Participants then responded to a series of multi-item measures of respondents’ attitudes toward the candidate (1 = bad, unfavorable, and 7 = good, favorable) as well as assessments of the candidate’s statement (1 = ineffective, poorly written, unimportant, and 7 = effective, well written, important). Participants also provided information on their political affiliation (who they voted for in the last U.S. Senate election and the last presidential election, and their party affiliation). None of these indicators of party affiliation had an impact on the dependent variable, either as a main effect or as an interaction in combination with other factors, and are therefore not discussed further.

After providing their evaluations, participants then completed several demographic questions and manipulation-

check measures. In particular, they were asked to indicate their perception of the action orientation and process emphasis of the message (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) to assess the adequacy of the message-orientation manipulation, as well as the degree of immediacy of the candidate's request for support (1 = in the near future, 7 = in the distant future) to assess the temporal distance manipulation. Then they were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

Results

Manipulation Checks. First, to assess whether the participants perceived the messages as intended, we averaged the two message-orientation perception items (perception of the degree to which the message was action-oriented and emphasized process). As expected, a 2 (construal level) \times 2 (temporal distance) ANOVA showed that the low-level message was viewed as significantly more action- and process-oriented relative to the high-level message ($M = 4.82$ vs. 3.41 ; $F(1, 88) = 31.84, p < .001$). No other effects were observed. Similarly, the distant-future condition was perceived to be less immediate and as occurring in the far future relative to the near-future condition ($M = 4.85$ vs. 3.33 ; $F(1, 88) = 53.04, p < .001$). No other effects were observed. Thus, the manipulation of the two independent variables was deemed to be successful.

Attitude toward the Candidate. Participants' evaluations of the candidate and the statement on five items were averaged, since the variables loaded on the same factor in an exploratory factor analysis (eigenvalue = 2.935, 59% of the variance explained, loadings ranging from .64 to .90) and were reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$). Data were analyzed using a 2 (construal level) \times 2 (temporal distance) between-subjects ANOVA. We predicted that people expecting the campaign to begin in the distant future would form more favorable evaluations toward the candidate making an appeal that emphasized high-level content rather than low-level content, and people expecting the campaign to begin in the near future would form more favorable evaluations toward a candidate making an appeal that emphasized low-level content rather than high-level content. Consistent with this hypothesis, we observed a two-way interaction reflecting differences in evaluations depending on whether the message level was compatible with the temporal distance ($F(1, 88) = 7.94, p < .01$). Planned contrasts using one-tailed tests revealed that participants who read a message indicating that the election campaign would begin in 6 months had more favorable attitudes toward the candidate when the message featured high-level elements that emphasized "ideals," "ultimate goals," and a "values-orientation" relative to when the message featured low-level elements that emphasized how the candidate would govern ($M = 4.32$ vs. 3.65 ; $t(88) = 2.45, p < .05$). Conversely, a message featuring low-level elements yielded more favorable attitudes relative to a message featuring high-level elements when the election campaign was expected to begin in a week ($M = 4.30$ vs. 3.88 ; $t(88) = 1.66, p < .05$).

Discussion

Consistent with other types of fit effects reported in the literature (e.g., Higgins et al. 2003; Thompson and Hamilton 2006), the findings from study 1 suggest that a fit between temporal distance and message orientation influences how people perceive the target object, as predicted in hypothesis 1. That is, the fit between temporal frame and message orientation heightens the perceived persuasiveness of the message, thus resulting in more favorable evaluations. More specifically, when an event is temporally distant, high-level abstract messages are likely to be more persuasive than low-level, concrete messages. In contrast, when the event is temporally proximal, low-level, concrete messages are more persuasive than high-level, abstract ones. These results provide empirical support for our basic conceptual premise regarding the effects of construal fit on political persuasion.

Our finding is premised on the notion that there is a perception of fluency associated with the match between the message frame and the perceiver's temporal construal, and the perceived fluency and associated feels-right experience is misattributed to the focal target. Prior research has shown that the misattribution error disappears when participants are alerted to the source of the potential misattribution or when they are motivated to process information. For example, Schwarz and Clore (1983) demonstrated that informing respondents about the potential role of the weather on their judgments of their mood eliminated the biasing effect of weather on mood. Further, Srull (1987) showed that the magnitude of mood-coloring effects was much greater for novice than for expert participants. Apparently, experts consult their feelings less in general when forming a judgment about a target, suggesting that they would be relatively immune to fluency-driven feels-right experiences. Therefore, we now turn to an examination of the role of expertise.

STUDY 2

As noted earlier, independent voters are of substantial pragmatic significance. Reports in the popular press (Edsall and Grimaldi 2004) suggest that, in Bush versus Kerry, last-minute campaign expenditures targeted toward such voters were determinative. Some observers have noted that such independent or swing voters differ from committed voters on many dimensions, including the degree to which they are informed about general and specific issues (Rao 2007). This distinction has an analog in the consumer-behavior literature, according to which differences in consumer expertise have important implications for attitudes, judgments, and behavior (Alba and Hutchinson 1987).

The literature on consumer expertise indicates that novices and experts rely on different types of information when making evaluations. For instance, Fedorikhin and Cole (2004) demonstrated that people who had no prior impressions (i.e., they were novices) evaluated a target more favorably when they were in a positive versus a negative mood. Our view is that when making evaluations, novice consumers tend to rely on their feelings to a greater extent

because their knowledge base is rather limited; hence, they are more likely to rely on “mood-as-information” (Fedorkhin and Cole 2004) or the “How do I feel about it?” heuristic. This tendency renders them more likely to rely on the feeling-right experience that arises from the fit effect that we observe in study 1. In contrast, experts rely on their feelings less, in part because, by virtue of their expertise, they have substantial amounts of domain-relevant information upon which they can rely and are also more able to assess the diagnosticity of information they encounter. Because there are other sources of information upon which they can rely to make their evaluations, they are less likely to rely on and be persuaded by fit-induced (feels right) information. Thus, we expect that the construal-fit effect on persuasion is more likely to be observed among political novices than among experts. Specifically, we predict that novices will evaluate a candidate whose message is construed at a level that matches the temporal proximity of the election (i.e., messages construed at a high level when the election is temporally distant and messages construed at a low level when the election is temporally near) more favorably. However, this pattern will be attenuated among experts. That is, the effect predicted in hypothesis 1 will be more pronounced for novices than for experts. Formally, this three-way interaction is captured in our next hypothesis:

- H2:** Relative to those who are highly informed, people who are less informed will evaluate a candidate whose message is construed at a high versus low level more favorably when the election is temporally distant and will evaluate a candidate whose message is construed at a low versus high level more favorably when the election is temporally imminent.

To examine whether expertise moderates the fit effect between message level and temporal frame, we used a 2 (message level: high-level, low-level) \times 2 (temporal distance: near future vs. distant future) \times 2 (expertise: high, low) between-subjects design in this study.

Method

Stimuli Development. Unlike in study 1, in which temporal distance was manipulated by varying the expected launch date of the candidate’s campaign, temporal distance in this study was operationalized as the length of time available to the participant to make a voting decision. Specifically, respondents were asked to imagine that they would be away from home during the week of the general election to be held in November of that year and had therefore requested and received a mail-in absentee ballot. Temporal distance variation was operationalized by informing the respondents that they needed to mail in their absentee ballots in the next week (the near-future condition) or in a few

months (the distant-future condition). That is, temporal distance was linked to the time to cast a vote.

To measure participants’ political knowledge level, a political quiz comprising six questions about factual matters pertaining to politics and political science was administered at the end of the survey to provide an objective gauge of their knowledge (Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Rao and Monroe 1988). A median split on the scores on the political quiz was employed to classify respondents as novices (those scoring two or fewer correct answers) and experts (those scoring more than two correct answers).

Participants and Procedures. One hundred and six undergraduates enrolled in marketing courses participated in the study. In return for their participation, respondents’ names were entered into a fair lottery for gift certificates to an upscale department store. After reading a statement from a candidate running for U.S. Senate (Pat Derville), the respondents provided their evaluations of the statement and the candidate. They also responded to manipulation-check and demographic questions similar to the ones administered in study 1. Finally, they responded to the political knowledge quiz and were thanked and dismissed.

Results

Manipulation Checks. Consistent with the previous studies, participants in the low-level message condition found the message to be focused on low-level construals to a greater degree than participants in the high-level condition ($M = 4.28$ vs. 3.70 ; $F(1, 98) = 5.40$, $p < .05$). The temporal distance manipulation was also successful. Participants in the distant-future condition considered the voting decision to be “less immediate” and as occurring in the “far future” relative to those in the near-future condition ($M = 4.70$ vs. 3.51 ; $F(1, 98) = 33.54$, $p < .001$).

Attitude toward the Candidate. As in study 1, attitude toward the candidate was measured based on participants’ evaluations of the candidate as well as their evaluations of the candidate’s message on 7-point scales (bad/good, unwilling/willing to vote in favor, ineffective/effective statement, and poorly written/well written statement). The five items loaded on the same factor in an exploratory factor analysis (eigenvalue = 2.728, 68% variance, loadings ranging from .67 to .88, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$). This measure was entered into a 2 (message level) \times 2 (temporal distance) \times 2 (expertise: high, low) ANOVA.

According to hypothesis 2, the two-way interaction observed in study 1 should be particularly strong among in-expert respondents. That is, messages focusing on high-level features are more persuasive when the election is temporally far, while messages focusing on low-level features are more persuasive when the election is imminent, particularly for less knowledgeable voters. Consistent with this prediction, the ANOVA yielded a significant three-way interaction ($F(1, 98) = 4.54$, $p < .05$). (In a separate analysis, we treated expertise as a continuous variable, but that procedure yielded

a three-way interaction that did not achieve significance at conventional levels [$\beta = -.68, p < .07$].) Separate analyses showed that the two-way interaction between message level and temporal distance was significant, albeit marginally, among novices ($F(1, 98) = 3.90, p < .06$). This two-way interaction was not statistically significant among experts ($F(1, 98) = 1.09, p > .20$).

Planned contrasts, which are more informative and therefore more appropriate than omnibus F -tests for interaction terms (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1985), indicate that, among novices, the high-level message induced more favorable attitudes toward the candidate than the low-level message when the election was in the distant future ($M = 4.63$ vs. 3.63 ; $t(98) = 2.45, p < .05$). The corresponding comparison for the near-future frame showed that the low-level message was more persuasive than the high-level message, although the effect was not statistically significant ($M = 4.02$ vs. 3.80 ; $t(98) = .48, p > .30$). These results are displayed in figure 1.

Discussion

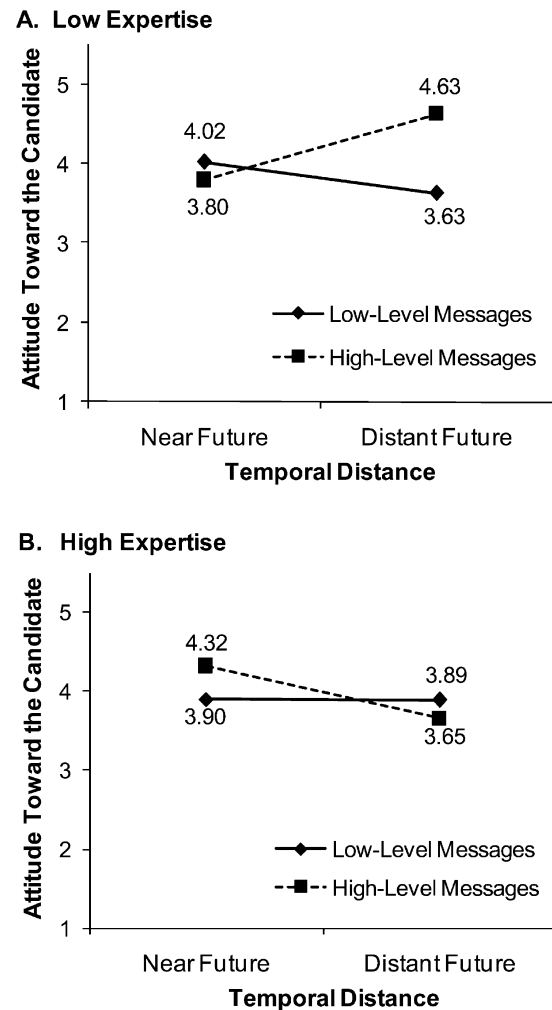
The results of study 2 generally corroborate our expectations regarding the interactive effect of temporal distance and message level on persuasion, particularly among novices. Consistent with the past literature on when fit- and fluency-induced positive feelings might not occur (e.g., under conditions of high expertise, as argued by Fedorikhin and Cole [2004]), we demonstrate that our effects tend to occur for novices and not for experts. These findings are theoretically defensible and practically significant. Experts are less likely to be influenced by feels-right types of experiences than by the content of the message, presumably because experts are more confident in their assessment of the information; they may also have other, more diagnostic pieces of information that can be used in evaluation. From a practical standpoint, clearly, novice voters are the ones to target with messages that induce the feels-right-based evaluative processes.

Recall that in our view, the enhancements in attitude are based on experienced fluency due to fit. In our next set of studies, we test this premise by directly examining the role of fluency in participants' evaluations. We first assess the mediating role of perceived fluency on the predicted interaction (study 3A) and then manipulate the fluency of the message to determine whether the fit effect is moderated by fluency (study 3B) such that the fit effect is more robust under the high- versus low-fluency condition.

STUDY 3

Our contention is that, when there is a consistency or fit between the information to be processed and the mental representational state of the individual, evaluations tend to be enhanced (e.g., Higgins et al. 2003; Labroo and Lee 2006). We argue that this enhancement in evaluations is due to a feeling of fluency or ease of comprehension due to fit. That is, because messages that are consistent with an in-

FIGURE 1
STUDY 2: ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CANDIDATE AS A FUNCTION OF MESSAGE ORIENTATION, TEMPORAL DISTANCE, AND EXPERTISE



dividual's mental representation are easier to process than messages that are not, the resulting experience of fluency is misattributed to the focal stimulus such that the focal stimulus receives an enhanced positive evaluation. In study 3A, we investigate whether the construal-fit effects observed in study 1 result from people's perceived fluency of the message by directly measuring processing fluency and examining its mediating role in evaluations. In study 3B, we manipulate fluency to assess whether the fit effect between construal level and temporal distance disappears when experienced fluency is low.

Study 3A

Participants and Procedures. Eighty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in marketing classes at a large

Canadian university participated in the study in order to fulfill a course requirement. Similar to study 1, a 2 (message orientation: high-level [why], low-level [how]) \times 2 (temporal distance: near future vs. distant future) between-subjects design was employed.

The manipulations of message orientation and temporal distance were similar to those employed in study 1. However, to accommodate the Canadian context, the candidate was described to be running for the House of Commons. After reading the statement that described the candidate's views and when the federal election was to be held, participants responded to a series of multi-item measures of their evaluations toward the statement and the candidate (unfavorable/favorable, unlikely/likely to vote in favor, low/high intentions to vote for, ineffective/effective, and unimportant/important). Then, based on measures used in prior literature (Higgins et al. 2003; Labroo and Lee 2006), we asked respondents to indicate how they processed the message from the candidate on a three-item, 7-point scale (1 = felt wrong, most ordinary, not convincing; 7 = felt right, very attention grabbing, very convincing). After responding to manipulation-check questions similar to the ones administered in study 1, participants completed several demographic questions and were thanked and dismissed.

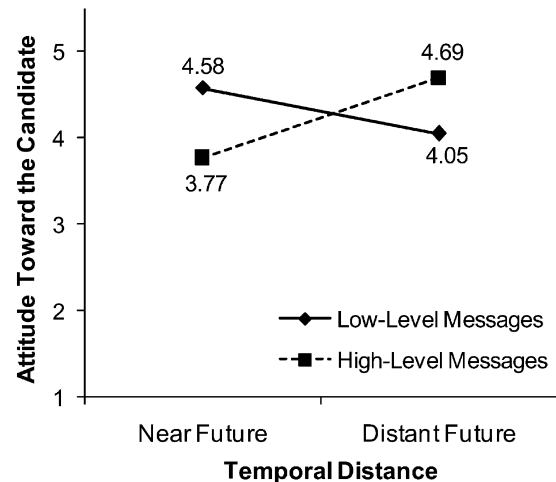
Results

Manipulation Checks. A manipulation check was performed to assess whether participants perceived the messages as intended. A 2 \times 2 ANOVA revealed a significant difference in perceptions of message level ($F(1, 84) = 16.65, p < .001$); participants in the low-level message condition found the message to be focused on low-level construals to a greater degree than participants in the high-level construal condition ($M = 4.77$ vs. 3.22). Similarly, participants in the distant-future condition considered the voting decision to be associated "with longer time" and as happening in the "far future" relative to those in the near-future condition ($M = 4.98$ vs. 3.61; $F(1, 84) = 29.33, p < .001$). Thus, the manipulations were deemed to have been successful.

Attitude toward the Candidate. As in study 1, a 2 (message orientation) \times 2 (temporal distance) ANOVA was conducted on participants' attitude toward the candidate, measured by averaging the five items mentioned earlier. These five items loaded on the same factor in an exploratory factor analysis (eigenvalue = 3.21, 64% of the variance explained, loadings ranging from .74 to .85, Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). Consistent with our fit hypothesis and replicating the findings from study 1, we observed a two-way interaction between message orientation and temporal distance ($F(1, 84) = 12.36, p < .001$). Planned contrasts revealed that participants who read a message indicating that the election would occur in the distant future formed more favorable opinions when the message featured high-level elements that emphasized "why" attributes, relative to when the message featured low-level elements that emphasized

FIGURE 2

STUDY 3A: ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CANDIDATE AS A FUNCTION OF MESSAGE ORIENTATION AND TEMPORAL DISTANCE



"how" attributes ($M = 4.69$ vs. 4.05; $t(84) = 2.09, p < .05$; see fig. 2). Conversely, when the election was imminent, the candidate's statement that used low- versus high-level phrases was perceived more favorably ($M = 4.58$ vs. 3.78; $t(81) = 2.63, p < .01$).

Mediating Role of Processing Fluency. We averaged the three items that measured people's feeling of experienced fluency while reading the message to form a processing fluency index ($\alpha = .74$). A 2 (message orientation) \times 2 (temporal distance) ANOVA on this processing fluency index displayed a marginally significant interaction effect ($F(1, 84) = 3.33, p = .07$). Respondents felt right and perceived the message as more attention grabbing and convincing when a high- versus low-level message was employed for a distant-future temporal frame ($M = 4.24$ vs. 3.74; $p < .11$) or when a low- versus high-level message was employed for a near-future temporal frame ($M = 4.04$ vs. 3.56; $p < .09$). In general, while the statistical significance of the results is weak, this pattern is consistent with the premise that the fit between message orientation and temporal distance had an impact on perceptions of fluency.

To examine whether perceptions of fluency mediated the interactive effect of temporal distance and message orientation on attitude toward the candidate, we performed the mediation analysis recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). The regression coefficient associated with the interaction of temporal distance and message orientation in a model incorporating main and interaction terms as predictors of participants' attitude toward the candidate yielded a significant effect of the interaction term ($\beta = 1.44, p < .001$). The second regression analysis of temporal distance, message orientation, and their interaction on the hypothesized mediator, the processing fluency index, yielded a marginally significant effect of the interaction term ($\beta = .99, p < .07$).

Finally, when the processing fluency index was employed as a covariate in the original regression model, it was a significant predictor ($\beta = .58, p < .001$), but the coefficient associated with the interaction term declined in magnitude, although it remained significant ($\beta = .87, p < .01$). The result of the Sobel test confirmed that the reduction in the effect of the interaction was significant ($z = 3.33, p < .001$). This pattern of results suggests that processing fluency partially mediated the influence of the message orientation multiplied by the temporal distance interaction on attitude toward the candidate.

To further assess whether fluency mediates the interaction between temporal distance and message orientation on evaluation of the candidate, we manipulated the processing fluency of the message in the next study. The argument is that if the hypothesized interaction is indeed driven by fluency, then the fit effect should be significantly reduced when the message is difficult to process.

Study 3B

Participants and Procedures. We employed a 2 (message orientation: high-level [why], low-level [how]) \times 2 (temporal distance: near future vs. distant future) \times 2 (fluency: high, low) between-subjects design. To generalize beyond message evaluation, we employed behavioral intention measures (intentions to volunteer and to solicit monetary campaign contributions) as the dependent variable in this study. One hundred and one undergraduates enrolled in marketing courses participated in the study in exchange for course credit.

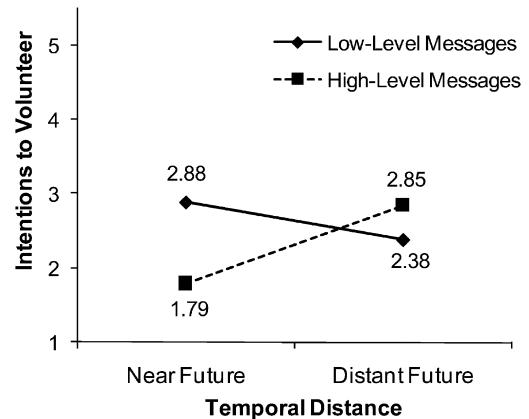
The participants were informed that they would read a statement from a candidate (Pat Darvell) running for U.S. Senate and that the candidate would soon be launching a campaign to expand the base of supporters. Participants also read that “supporters can contribute by donating money and volunteering.” The message’s construal-level manipulation was accomplished in the same way as in study 1. To manipulate fluency, we employed a method similar to that used by Novemsky et al. (2007). Participants in the high-fluency condition were presented with the statement printed with a standard, clear typeface, while participants in the low-fluency condition were asked to read a statement with a slightly blurred typeface. The result of a pretest ($n = 73$) confirmed the efficacy of this manipulation. More specifically, participants who read the statement printed in a clear typeface found the statement to be easier to process than those who read the statement printed in a blurry typeface ($M_{\text{clear}} = 5.36$ and $M_{\text{blurry}} = 4.39; p < .05$).

After reading the statement that described the candidate’s views and included a request for campaign participation, participants reported their intentions to help the candidate using two 7-point scales (anchored at 1 = not at all and 7 = very willing). The scale items were “To what extent would you be willing to be involved as a volunteer in the campaign?” and “To what extent would you be willing to ask your friends and family members to donate money to

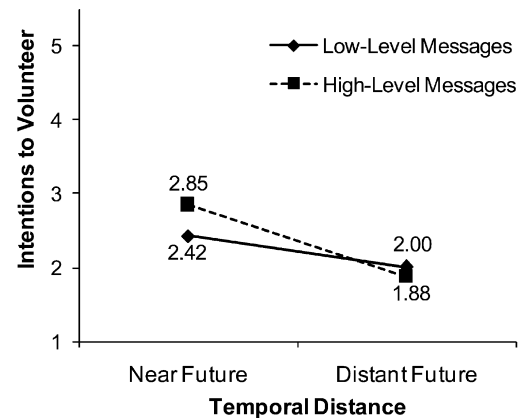
FIGURE 3

STUDY 3B: INTENTIONS TO VOLUNTEER AS A FUNCTION OF MESSAGE ORIENTATION, TEMPORAL DISTANCE, AND FLUENCY

A. High Fluency (Clear Typeface)



B. Low Fluency (Blurry Typeface)



this candidate’s cause?” Finally, the participants completed several demographic questions and were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

Results

A 2 (message orientation) \times 2 (temporal distance) \times 2 (fluency) ANOVA was conducted on participants’ intentions to help the candidate, measured by averaging the two items mentioned earlier ($r = .65, p < .001$). A significant three-way interaction effect was observed ($F(1, 93) = 4.48, p < .05$). To assess support for the focused prediction regarding the effect of fluency, the two-way interaction between message orientation and temporal distance was examined separately for high- and low-fluency respondents (fig. 3). The effect was significant in the standard typeface condition ($F(1, 93) = 4.93, p < .05$) but not in the blurry typeface condition ($F < 1$). Specifically, among respondents presented

with the standard clear-typeface statement, the 2×2 ANOVA showed that participants who had read about the election occurring in the near future generated greater volunteerism when the message featured low-level elements that emphasized “how” attributes, relative to when the message featured high-level elements that emphasized “why” attributes ($M = 2.88$ vs. 1.79 ; $t(93) = 2.19$, $p < .05$). Conversely, when the election was temporally distant, the candidate’s statement that used high- versus low-level phrases was more successful in generating greater volunteerism, although the effect was not statistically significant ($M = 2.85$ vs. 2.38 ; $t(93) = .94$, $p > .17$).

Discussion

In this set of studies, we replicated the two-way interaction observed in study 1. More important, we found convergent evidence for our hypothesized mechanism that fit messages are easier to process and that perceived fluency leads to more favorable attitudes toward the focal stimulus. Fluency as a construct was measured using self-reports in study 3A and manipulated by varying the visual clarity of the message in study 3B.

The results of study 3B also serve to rule out the rival explanation that differences in weight accorded to different types of information might account for our findings. According to this explanation, people may place more weight on high-level messages for judgments concerning a temporally distant versus proximal event and on low-level messages for judgments concerning a temporally proximal versus distant event. However, such an explanation would predict a similar pattern of results regardless of font clarity, with perhaps a main effect of fluency; a fit effect ought to occur even in the blurry typeface condition if differential weighting is the underlying mechanism. But, as indicated by the results from the current study, the construal-fit effect occurred only in the standard-typeface condition, when the experience of processing fluency was intact. When the statement was presented in a difficult-to-read font, the absence of experienced fluency even in the matched conditions was reflected in the null effect between temporal distance and message orientation.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the context of political persuasion, a marketplace that is interesting for economic as well as substantive reasons (Fazio, Williams, and Powell 2000), we predicted and observed in four studies that a fit between the observer’s mental representational state induced by the temporal frame and the level of abstraction (“why” themes) or concreteness (“how to” issues) of the candidate’s message has an impact on attitude toward the candidate. Respondents’ evaluations of the candidate and the message were sensitive to this fit. In addition, and perhaps more important, the fit effect was observed primarily among inexpert respondents, who are more likely to correspond to swing voters. As has been suggested in the popular press, swing voters are often de-

terminative in electoral contests because informed voters who are likely to be committed to a candidate are less likely to switch away from their preferred candidates. Moreover, as the campaign season becomes longer, the temporal aspect of political persuasion is a topic worthy of careful empirical scrutiny. Consequently, our finding that the temporal distance to an election is an important factor to consider when crafting message content targeted to a critical voting bloc has important practical implications for political candidates and their campaign managers.

Theoretical Contributions

The argument that the fit between a temporal distance induced mental representational state and message orientation enhances persuasion is a new insight. The fit between temporal distance and message orientation is a novel perspective on the notion of “fit,” and the impact of the fit between these two constructs on persuasion has not been demonstrated thus far. The observed mediating role of fluency and the feels-right experience make a theoretical contribution to the fit literature. In particular, our results in study 3B showing that the fit effect disappeared when processing fluency is undermined render the differential weighting of information account less viable than our fluency-based account.

A second subtlety pertains to the notion of temporal distance induced mental representation. Specifically, like sensory, hypothetical, social, and spatial distance (Fujita et al. 2006; Kardes et al. 2006; Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007), temporal distance allows the observer to develop a panoramic view, while temporal proximity allows the observer to focus on details. As Kardes et al. (2006) note, “Psychological distance is the primary determinant of construal level,” and, therefore, temporal construal is one manner in which psychological distance induced mental representation can vary (135).

Third, that construal-fit effects are contingent on expertise is noteworthy. This construct delineates the boundary conditions for the fit effect on persuasion. In particular, a lack of expertise prompts people to attribute their positive fit experience to the target under evaluation. This perspective is conceptually consistent with the accessibility-diagnostics framework (Feldman and Lynch 1988), in that the positive experience of construal fit ought to be deemed more diagnostic for people who have insufficient expertise in the domain or for those who are not motivated to process information (Wang and Lee 2006). Further, as one reviewer noted, unlike in most consumer behavior contexts in which the responses of expert consumers is of interest, in this setting, it is the response of inexpert (swing) voters that is of interest.

Finally, consistent with an observation by Trope (2004), the societal implications of construal-level theory are substantial, but little research has been done to test and apply this theory with socially meaningful stimuli. Therefore, applying construal-level theory to the context of political choice is an appropriate and desirable excursion for the field

of consumer behavior that is in keeping with Perloff's (2002) call for an elaboration of the conditions under which campaign messages are most likely to influence voters.

Managerial Contributions

Political persuasion is a hybrid of political and marketplace activities (McGann 1984). As we have reiterated on several occasions in this article, the amount of money involved in political campaigns and the amount of time and resources invested in persuading voters make the political arena an important and interesting marketplace. In the recent 2006 midterm elections, one (successful) candidate for U.S. Senate employed abstract rhetoric such as "I believe in standing up for people without fear or favor" and "real leadership" early on in the campaign. However, a few weeks prior to the election, the candidate's rhetoric became more specific, with public statements such as "I want to be a senator who gets things done for people. Isn't that the way it should be?" and the release of a detailed federal budget deficit reduction plan. The candidate went on to win by a healthy (two-digit) margin in a state in which all other major races were determined by single-digit margins. Seemingly, this candidate intuitively employed the theory we have proposed and tested.

While we have emphasized the political context, clearly our theorizing and results are potentially applicable to other consumption contexts in which persuasive messages are designed to influence consumption decisions in the near or distant future. Much prior research that involves looking forward into future consumption decisions has emphasized intertemporal choice (Loewenstein and Prelec 1993) and consumer impatience (Chen, Ng, and Rao 2005). Our theory could buttress the findings from those approaches, with implications for how people may be persuaded when contemplating the purchase of vacations in the future, the purchase of consumer durables, and the like. To the extent that marketers are able to identify consumers whose planning horizon is short rather than long, they will likely be able to tailor persuasive messages that employ the appropriate level of concreteness or abstraction.

More generally, our research is of potential significance to the broader topic of advertising effectiveness. As one reviewer noted, our focus on the nature of the message (abstract vs. concrete) and its fit with the temporal frame is a novel insight regarding persuasive advertising.

Limitations and Future Research

Among the limitations of our research are the choice of student subjects (although they were all of voting age) and the sterility of our stimuli. Yet, that we were able to observe results despite these concerns suggests that the theory is robust. Alternative approaches, such as a longitudinal study of a voter panel, were considered but discarded, largely because the political environment has recently been quite active and the assurance of internal validity would have been

compromised with the use of real candidates, voter panels, and the like.

Our findings are limited to attitudinal and behavioral intention measures. Further, our stimuli provided moderate arguments that were neither excessively weak nor strong, to prevent floor and ceiling effects. However, in future research, it will be worth examining whether argument strength moderates the observed fit effects, based on Petty and Wegener's (1998) observation that matching enhances attitudes for strong arguments.

There are several other interesting avenues for future research. For instance, negative campaigning (e.g., Bizer and Petty 2005; Klein and Ahluwalia 2005), which tends to increase as an election approaches, is one potential area for further investigation. Since low-level construals are closely related with negative frames (Eyal et al. 2004), an examination of whether and when low-level construals should employ negative versus positive messages is a question worthy of empirical scrutiny. Second, if a candidate employs abstract themes early on in the campaign and thus engenders favorable voter attitudes, will it be essential to switch to more concrete themes as election day approaches, as was done in the senatorial campaign alluded to above? Or could it be that because persuasion has already been achieved by the original abstract messaging, switching to concrete themes may be unnecessary and perhaps undesirable because the two sets of messages might now be perceived to be inconsistent?

CONCLUSION

To summarize, we marry construal-level theory, message orientation, and audience characteristics to generate predictions about persuasion. This confluence of theoretical issues is of considerable significance to consumer researchers interested in understanding how differentially informed consumers may respond to messages that differ in terms of abstraction and the temporal distance to consumption. While our emphasis is on political persuasion as an area of importance from both economic and civic standpoints, clearly there are other possible arenas in which this confluence of factors can play a role in persuasion and choice.

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