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Security Policy and the Word: Applications from Research on Social Judgment and Decision Making

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Title: Security Policy and the Word: Applications from Research on Social Judgment and Decision Making

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Abstract. This article describes the basic findings of and some phenomenological concerns with social judgment and decision-making research applied to developing support for security policies.

Social judgment research has long reinforced the notion that--in general-- humans are more aversive to loss than they are desirous of comparable gain. Applied to the international security of a nation-state, the notion suggests that it is much more effective to generate political support by phrasing a policy option in terms of the negatives that will allegedly occur if the option is not followed, not the positives that will occur if the option is followed. Policymakers and their political helpers should, then, take appropriate note in jousting within the arena of public opinion about national ballistic missile defense systems, humanitarian interventions in faraway lands, fighter aircraft, and so on. As a hypothetical example, without a missile defense, the probability of thousands of United States (US) citizens dying in a North Korean nuclear attack will increase ten-fold. Or without humanitarian intervention in the nation-states of Southern Africa, the probability of millions of US citizens dying from out-of-control pandemics will increase five-fold. Or without fielding hundreds of F-22 tactical fighters, the probability of many US military forces dying through the loss of air superiority in battle will approach certainty.

However, generating and maintaining support for policy options in the so-called real, political world may well involve a more complex or at least different concatenation of social psychological processes than those identified through common research studies via the experimental laboratory, polling formats on the future, and retrospective archival analyses of real-world cases. Part of this complexity and difference stem from research disparities with natural political phenomena and often comprise the degree of participant involvement and perception of degree of policy impact on valued attitudes and behaviors.

A more important source of complexity and difference stems from the disparity between the researcher's abstractions of loss and gain and the research subject's corresponding phenomenologies. Quite simply, individuals may differ in how they cognitively, motivationally, and emotionally process consequential statements. For some, a statement about the positive consequences of supporting a policy option becomes one about the negative consequences of not supporting that option in a virtually effortless manner. The converse applies as well. This positive becoming the negative, the negative the positive--loss as gain and gain as loss--may occur once, several, or many times, in sequential, distributed, asynchronous, and/or parallel fashions, to varying degrees of consciousness and impact on external behaviors. As well, different policy options may differ further as to the ease with which each can be perceived and processed as generating positive consequences through implementation or negative consequences through rejection. Finally, the historical and socio-cultural contexts of specific security issues, also may sully the waters of a clear case for human risk aversion and/or approach towards gain.

Political psychologists and other social scientists need to continue to delineate the parameters linking research on social judgment and decision-making with support for security and other political policies. In doing so, they should be careful to avoid the risky model of the rational, logical human and to embrace gains from one that also encompasses incomplete self-knowledge, the irrational, and the illogical. (See Jervis, R. (1992). Political implications of loss aversion. *Political Psychology*, 13, 187-204; Kleinhesselink,

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