

Maintaining partisan identity through political communication

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What kept me up at night

- Quantitative communication research focuses on “effects”
- “Effects” almost always = look for changes
- Other research indicates significant *stability* in key attitudes and behaviors (e.g., partisanship, media use)
- If everything is stable, where are the media effects?

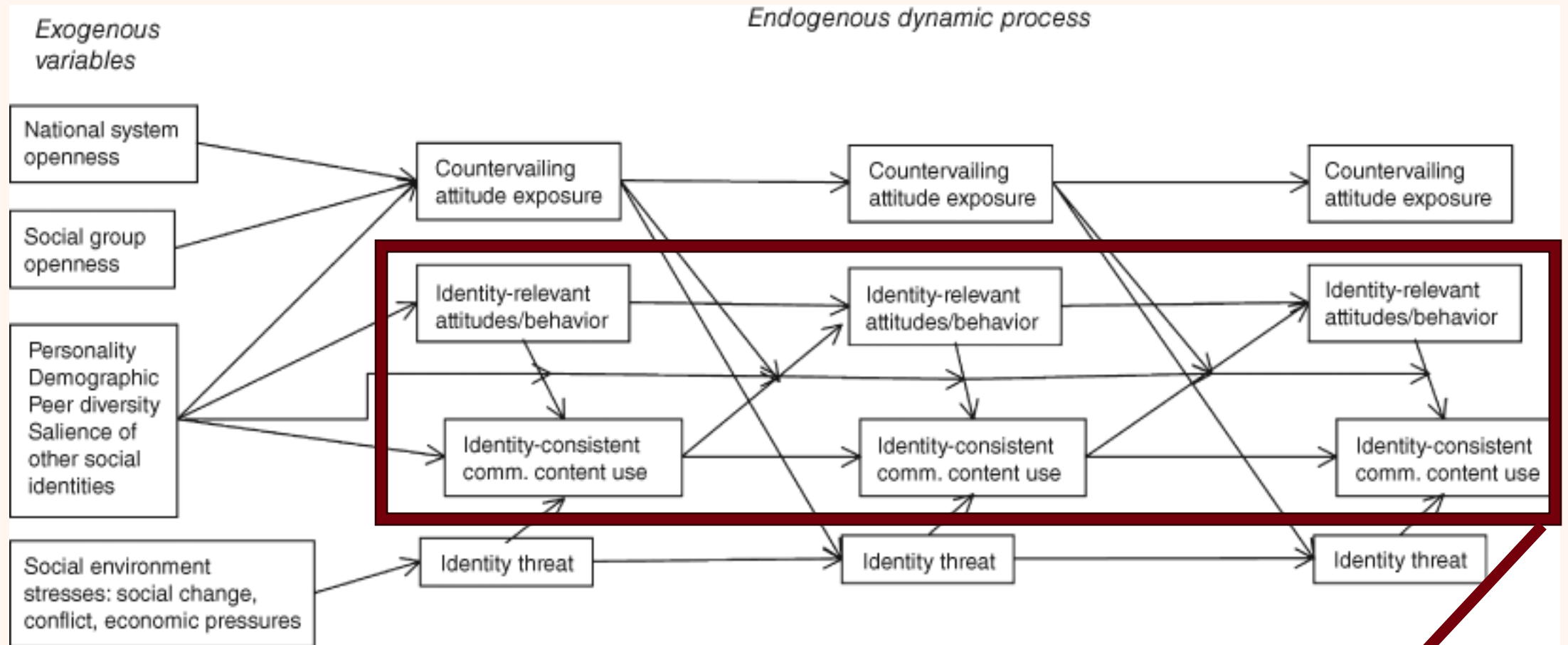
In politics...

- Partisanship is stable over the lifespan in the US and some other democracies
 - (but changes are a big deal when they happen)
- Political media audiences are fragmented, high supply of partisan media
- What if media don't (just) change views, but *maintain* them?

Reinforcing Spirals Model

- Model proposing relations between communication, attitudes, and other social factors over time
- Hook: selective exposure and media effects at the same time are possible
 - Can lead to increasingly extreme communication and attitudes due to mutual reinforcement
- More often, other factors limit positive feedback loops

Reinforcing Spirals Model



From Slater (2015)

Reinforcing part

Where have I heard this before...

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Stability as an Outcome in Communication Research

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Since the earliest days of communication research, key findings have often involved the claim that attitudes or behaviors become stable because of communication. Research tends to focus on changes in attitudes or behaviors, however, which can cause confusion when changes are not observed. A lack of theorizing about stability leaves scientists unable to distinguish between null results and attitude stabilization that occurs because of communication. Furthermore, research tends to use the term reinforcement in a way that sometimes means stability, but in others means attitude change. This article argues that stability can be an effect of communication and provides an overview of the research designs needed to perform research of this kind. It concludes by showing how an existing theory, the reinforcing spirals model, can be used to make predictions about how communication leads to stability.

Keywords: stability, communication theory, reinforcement, longitudinal design, media

Decay in the RSM

- Perhaps strong attitudes/identities simply need maintenance
- Identity threat isn't always apparent
- Can an identity stay strong if rarely enacted via behavior (communication)?
- Proposition: for strong identity, communication needed to counterbalance decay

This study

- Intensive longitudinal survey
 - N = 268 participants, T = 22 time points (once daily for 22 days)
- Measuring
 - Partisan political communication (see Long, 2024); both media and interpersonal
 - strength of partisan identity
- Major questions:
 - Does pro-identity comm. increase stability?
 - Does pro-identity comm. persuade?
 - Is there decay for the strongly identified?

Modeling

- To test hypotheses on stability, need purpose-built statistical models
- Full details for another day/paper
- Basically, start with standard multilevel within-between panel model
 - Useful for predicting usual media effects
- Then, companion multilevel model with residuals as the dependent variable
- Estimated simultaneously using Bayesian modeling software (also possible with MCMC-estimated SEMs via Mplus)

Results overview

In-party
comm.



Identity
strength

Non-in-
party comm.



Identity
strength

In-party
comm.



Identity
stability

Non-in-
party comm.

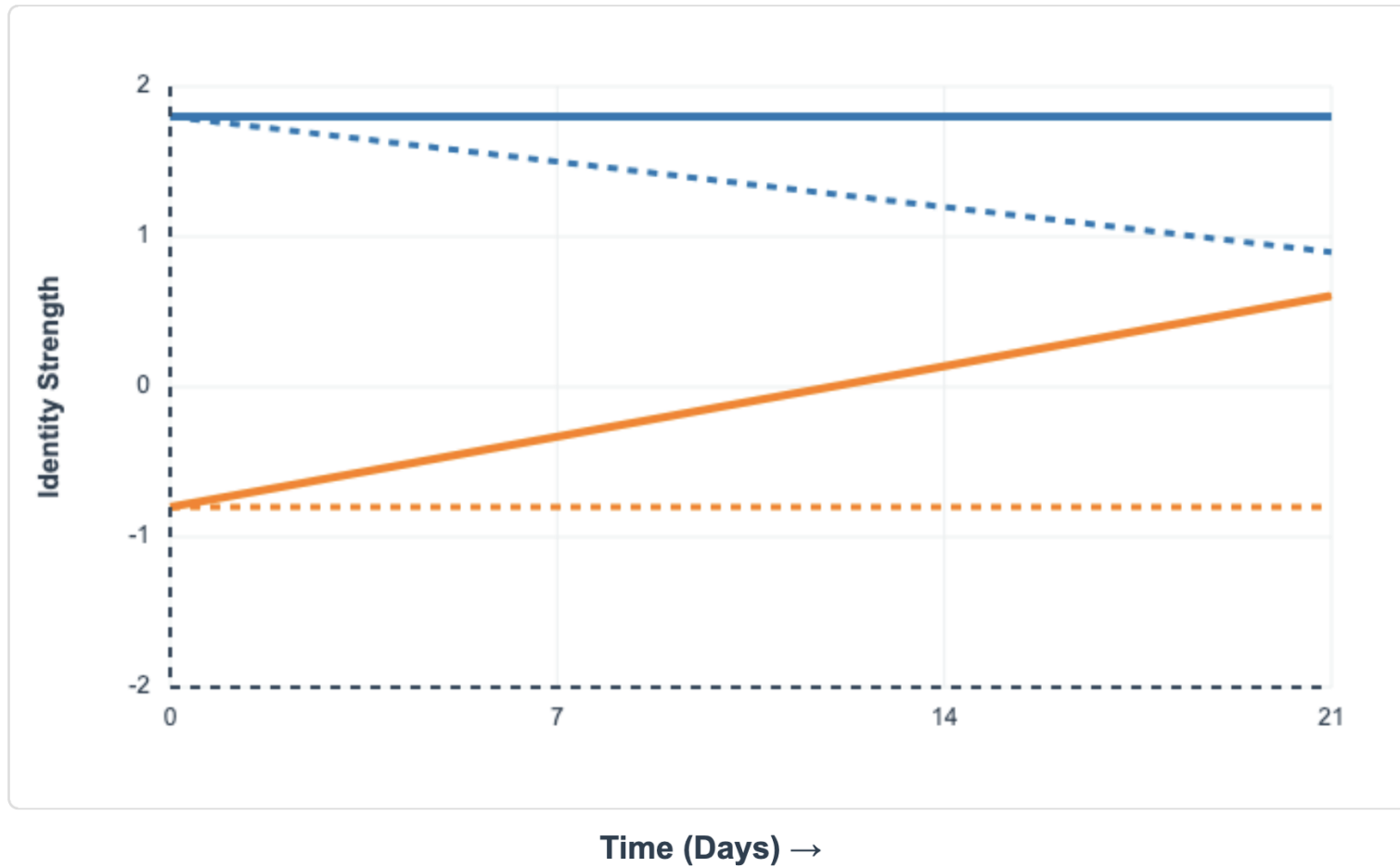


Identity
stability

Results — decay

- On average, no trajectory of identity strength over course of study *net of communication*
- BUT, negative trajectory for strongest identifiers
- Therefore...
 - Strong partisans need partisan media to cancel out downward trend (**decay**)
 - Without partisan media effects, strong partisans weaken over time
 - Weak partisans don't have this quality
 - **Evidence of decay effect**
- Note: (probably) no ceiling/floor effects with partisanship measure

Conceptual demonstration of decay



- **Strong Identifiers: With In-Party Communication (Stable)**
- - - **Strong Identifiers: Without Communication (Natural Decay)**
- **Weak Identifiers: With In-Party Communication (Growth)**
- - - **Weak Identifiers: Without Communication (Flat)**

Overview

- Standard media effect for in-party communication
- Also, in-party communication promotes stability
- “Unfriendly” communication promotes **instability**
- Due to decay, strong identifiers need reinforcement from in-party communication to stay level
 - Decay affects only the strongly identified