Introduction

Implicit attitudes are automatic evaluations of objects: political candidates and parties, racial and ethnic groups, national symbols and consumer products, and so on. These responses are spontaneously triggered hard to control and can operate subconsciously. Implicit attitudes stand in contradistinction to their explicit variety: self-reported attitudes that people actively direct, control, and are conscious of. Public-opinion scholars have overwhelmingly centered on explicit attitudes, painting a portrait of mass opinion formation as slow, deliberative, and often dispassionate. But psychological research since the late 1970s has agglomerated into the view that much of people’s thinking is fast, automatic, and affectively charged—in a word, implicit. Heaped onto all this is the critical insight that implicit attitudes precede, and many times structure, their explicit counterparts. The implications for the study of public opinion are manifold. This article brings some order to all this by familiarizing readers with the conceptualization, measurement, and analysis of implicit attitudes in American public opinion.

General Overviews

First trickling in the late 1970s, then surging in the 1990s, several tributaries of research on implicit attitudes have sprung forth. These have cascaded into a deep and wide sea of accumulated discoveries about the implicit attitudes we all possess. Some researchers have channeled many of these results into works that broadly analyze the conceptualization, measurement, and application of implicit attitudes to social and political questions (Bargh 2007; Wittenbrink and Schwarz 2007; Petty, et al. 2009; Banaji and Heiphetz 2010; Gawronski and Payne 2010; Banaji and Greenwald 2013; Ksiazkiewicz and Hedrick 2013; Pérez 2013; Gawronski, et al. 2015), all of which are informative overviews of implicit attitudes along these lines.


A highly accessible book on implicit attitudes and the Implicit-Association Test (IAT), written for a popular audience by two psychologists who pioneered the study of this phenomenon.


A concise look at the conceptualization of “attitudes” and its evolution since the late 20th century, especially with respect to their implicit manifestations.


Implicit attitudes are distinguished by high degrees of automaticity. This volume examines automatic psychological processes in
domains such as person perception, evaluation, and stereotyping.


A crisp review article emphasizing the promise of implicit-attitude measures for studying political preferences and political information processing.


An impressive collection of cutting-edge reviews on key findings, theories, and applications of implicit attitudes, all identifying unanswered questions and pointing to future research directions.


An introductory article capping a collection of short essays on implicit attitudes and political science, it lays bare some implications of the former for the latter.


The first political-science review to examine the conceptualization of implicit attitudes, the mechanics of implicit-attitude measures, and theoretical implications for implicit political attitudes.


Engages major issues concerning implicit attitudes, including implicit-explicit attitude relations and alternate measures of implicit attitudes such as the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP).


Implicit attitudes demand non-self-reported measures. This book explores the mechanics, strengths, and limitations of several implicit attitude measures, such as the Implicit-Association Test (IAT).

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**Conceptualizations of Implicit Attitudes**

The study of implicit attitudes has made waves in nearly every part of psychology. These ripples are now reaching the shores of political science, where researchers are deploying implicit attitudes to study manifold aspects of public opinion. However, if political scientists are to continue moving forward from these initial beachheads, they will need to be on the same page about what implicit attitudes are (see Greenwald and Banaji 1995, Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006, and Fazio 2007, all cited under What Are Implicit Attitudes?), what makes them implicit (see Bargh 1994; Bargh, et al. 1996; Correll, et al. 2002; Payne, et al. 2002; Kim 2003; and Conrey, et al. 2005, all cited under What Makes Implicit Attitudes Implicit?), and where they originate from, in the first place (see Olson and Fazio 2001, Olson and Fazio 2002, and Rydell and McConnell 2006, all cited under Where Do Implicit Attitudes Come From?). These studies
What Are Implicit Attitudes?

Implicit attitudes are deemed to be starkly different from their self-reported counterparts, in large part because the former are said to be automatically activated. But there is more to implicit attitudes than just their automaticity (Greenwald and Banaji 1995, Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006, Fazio 2007). The articles in this subsection speak to the main signature traits that implicit attitudes display.

Treats implicit attitudes as object evaluations that are automatically activated in light of fitting stimuli. Views implicit attitudes as prior to and further “upstream” from explicit attitudes.

Views implicit attitudes as associative evaluations that are deeply affective and automatically activated. Suggests that implicit attitudes are “independent of the assignment of truth values.”

A classic conceptualization of implicit attitudes as traces of past experience, unavailable to introspection, that influence feelings, thoughts, or actions toward relevant objects.

What Makes Implicit Attitudes Implicit?

A hallmark of implicit attitudes is their basis in automaticity; that is, mental processes that are unintentional, uncontrollable, efficient, and below awareness (Bargh 1994; Bargh, et al. 1996; Correll, et al. 2002; Payne, et al. 2002; Kim 2003; Conrey, et al. 2005). The research cited in this subsection brings to light these automatic processes and their implications for implicit attitudes.

A masterfully concise discussion and explanation of automaticity, its components, and its operation in human cognition.

A seminal piece on the lack of awareness in implicit processes. It shows, inter alia, that subliminal priming of an elderly stereotype causes student subjects to unwittingly walk more slowly down a hall.

Psychology 89.4 (2005): 469–487.
Proposes a model disentangling automatic from controlled processes involved in the performance of implicit-attitude measures.

Shows the efficiency underlying implicit responses through the relatively effortless way in which racial stereotypes influence the decision to shoot or not to shoot black or white targets in a video game.

Underlines the uncontrollability of implicit attitudes by demonstrating that subjects completing Implicit-Association Tests (IATs) find it exceedingly difficult to alter their responses on the test, even if asked to by researchers.

Illustrates the unintentional aspect of automaticity, by establishing that black primes cause individuals to misidentify objects as weapons, even when explicitly encouraged to avoid this influence.

Where Do Implicit Attitudes Come From?
The origin of implicit attitudes is one of the least understood questions, but also one of the more exciting areas of research on this topic. One major thread of research theorizes that implicit attitudes reflect the slow accrual of information regarding an attitude object, via the mechanism of classical conditioning (Olson and Fazio 2001; Olson and Fazio 2002; Rydell and McConnell 2006; Dunham, et al. 2013; Gawronski, et al. 2014). The articles in this subsection provide a firm sense of this general framework’s beginnings, as well as the leading edge of research taking this theoretical view.

Contra the view of implicit attitudes as arising from slow information accrual, this study detects them in samples of very young children.

Finds, in part, that evaluative-conditioning (EC) effects on implicit-attitude measures are hard to control, but EC effects on self-reported measures can be manipulated to a degree.

Establishes the role of classical conditioning in the development of individual implicit attitudes.

Reveals that the learning and expression of classically conditioned attitudes can occur without a person’s awareness of either one.


Uses a “systems of reasoning” approach to pinpoint the origins of implicit attitudes in associative reasoning, characterized by slow, repeated pairings of attitude objects and evaluative information.

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**Classic Articles on Measuring Implicit Attitudes and Related Responses**

Across the vast and expanding landscape of implicit attitudes research, a handful of studies jut out for their ability to set new research agendas. These articles have done so by introducing measures of implicit attitudes—or by applying these measures to new social problems (Fazio, et al. 1995; Greenwald, et al. 1998; Payne 2001; Greenwald, et al. 2003; Devos and Banaji 2005; Payne, et al. 2005; Sriram and Greenwald 2009).


Adapts the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure associations between American identity and racial groups, further demonstrating the IAT’s versatility in measuring other responses besides attitudes.


Introduces the bona fide pipeline, a computerized task priming people (subliminally) with racially varied face photos, then asking them to judge subsequent words as good or bad. It yields facilitation scores reflecting the degree to which the race of people in photos (black) matches the valence of adjectives (bad).


Presents the IAT, which times people’s sorting of stimuli on a computer while using matched and mismatched schemes. It yields millisecond scores reflecting strength of associations between objects (e.g., black) and valence (e.g., bad).


Lays out a scoring procedure and D-score metric designed to enhance the relationship between IAT scores and relevant outcomes, which many IAT users often employ.

Puts forth a measure of implicit associations among blacks, whites, weapons, and tools, revealing that people are quicker to associate blacks with weapons than with tools.


Submits the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP) as an implicit measure. AMP primes people with stimuli (racially varied photos) then asks them to judge unrelated stimuli (Chinese pictographs). AMP scores reflect the degree to which affect toward primes is misattributed to unrelated stimuli.

Project Implicit.

A nonprofit demonstration website revolving around the IAT. It seeks to educate the public about implicit biases and to provide a platform for online data collection.


Introduces a shorter version of the IAT and provides validating evidence for this procedure.

Relationships between Implicit and Explicit Attitudes

One of the often-replicated patterns in implicit-attitude research is the varied correlation between implicit and explicit attitudes, which ranges from anemic to robust (Nosek, et al. 2002; Nosek 2005; Nosek 2007; Greenwald and Nosek 2009). This variability in the correspondence between implicit attitudes and their self-reported counterparts has both puzzled and intrigued researchers, leading to a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives as to what these empirical patterns imply (Gawronski and Strack 2004; Nosek and Smyth 2007; Payne, et al. 2008; Ranganath, et al. 2008). The articles in this section detail some of these many viewpoints.


Offers a theoretically driven account of the varied association between implicit and explicit attitudes, by centering on the role that cognitive consistency plays.


Focuses on the oft-observed divergence between explicit and implicit attitude reports and its implications for, inter alia, dual-process models of attitudes and the unawareness of implicit attitudes.

A data-intensive consideration of sundry moderators of the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes, revealing that under clear conditions, the link between the two is enhanced.


Discusses the varied association between implicit and explicit attitudes and why it emerges conceptually, theoretically, and methodologically.


Reveals that implicit and explicit attitudes toward political figures are robustly correlated, which contrasts with the often-weak correlation observed between implicit and explicit attitudes.


Uses factor analysis to demonstrate that, net of method artifact, self-reports and parallel implicit measures yield two related (but distinct) latent variables: explicit and implicit attitudes.


Attitude measures vary by how they actually tap their intended constructs. This paper shows how these structural differences can affect the association between implicit and explicit attitude reports.


Uses factor analysis to show that, empirically, classifying attitudes by whether they are (un)controllable is more useful than classifying them by whether they are measured (in)directly.

**Neurological Insights into Implicit Attitudes**

Some of the most exciting developments related to implicit attitudes have emerged from studies examining their neurological substrates (Phelps, et al. 2000; Cunningham, et al. 2003; Lieberman, et al. 2003; Stanley, et al. 2008). This research has exposed the roots of implicit attitudes in identifiable parts of the brain that imply clear responses or action tendencies. The role of fear in expression of implicit racial attitudes has especially garnered the attention of neuroscientists interested in implicit-attitude measures (Cunningham, et al. 2004a; Cunningham, et al. 2004b; Amodio, et al. 2006; Kubota, et al. 2012; Schreiber and Iacoboni 2012). More generally, neuroscientific research has unearthed important insights with implications for how we understand the operation of implicit attitudes.


Produces evidence for the neural circuits engaged in people’s regulation of racial bias, depending on whether the impetus for such control is internal or external to the individual.


Utilizes functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to throw light on the neural substrates of the automatic and controlled components of individual evaluations.


Provides additional evidence that amygdala activation is greater when subjects are primed with black faces than with white faces.


Further illuminates the neural circuits involved in implicit and explicit evaluation via fMRI.


An overview of the latest insights regarding brain structure and implicit racial biases, especially the latter’s activation and control.


Argues for and illustrates the relevance of neuroscience for deepening understandings of political cognition, especially its automatic and subconscious components.


Establishes that performance on the Implicit-Association Test (IAT) is correlated with activity in the amygdala, a brain structure playing a role in emotional learning and evaluation.


Uses brain-imaging technology to explore the neurological circuits involved in thinking about race and social norms.


Reviews research on the neural components of implicit evaluation, while sketching a tripartite model of automatic activation and control.
Controversies regarding Implicit Attitudes

When something unorthodox is done in science, controversy is likely to follow. Fledgling research on implicit attitudes was one of those times. Against a thick wall of self-reports, some scholars proposed new and indirect ways to measure people’s attitudes, none of which asked people anything. Several questions arose, but two have persisted in some quarters. First, Are Implicit Attitudes Really Attitudes? Second, Are Implicit Attitudes Subconscious? The articles in these subsections either raise these questions or provide data and argumentation against them.

Are Implicit Attitudes Really Attitudes?

Measures of implicit attitude gauge people’s evaluations indirectly, often by performing a sorting task or comparable exercise on a computer. Researchers then draw inferences about people’s attitudes on the basis of response times or related data. Not a word is ever spoken by individuals completing these implicit measures. Are they really capturing attitudes, then? One answer is “no”: that what these indirect measures really capture is knowledge or awareness of information in one’s culture, but not one’s personally endorsed attitude proper (Karpinski and Hilton 2001, Arkes and Tetlock 2004, Olson and Fazio 2004). Some of the following articles rehearse this alternative explanation, while others provide counterarguments and evidence to the contrary (Ashburn-Nardo, et al. 2003; Nosek and Hansen 2008; Greenwald, et al. 2009; Uhlmann, et al. 2012).

Contends that implicit attitudes, in the specific form of prejudice, are not attitudes at all, but rather reflections of people’s cultural knowledge (e.g., “I know that society holds blacks in low regard”).

Building on work suggesting that blacks hold mildly prowhite implicit attitudes, it shows that individual differences in these attitudes meaningfully predict blacks’ personal choices in an intergroup task.

Reports a trove of evidence that individual differences in Implicit Association Test (IAT) scores reliably predict a host of individual attitudes and behaviors, thus suggesting that implicit attitudes are people’s own evaluations.

Early criticism of the IAT as capturing not personally endorsed attitudes but, rather, information gleaned from one’s environment.


Mounts an alternative theoretical framework supported by empirical evidence, explaining why implicit attitudes are attitudes and not just cultural residue.


Provides evidence that the IAT partly captures extrapersonal associations—that is, information one knows about but does not necessarily endorse.


Reviews accumulated work to show that implicit attitudes are, indeed, personal attitudes rather than reflections of cultural knowledge about relevant objects.

Are Implicit Attitudes Subconscious?

The very adjective “implicit” in implicit attitudes connotes a personal lack of awareness about these evaluations. Not surprisingly, then, many scholars have attributed a lack of consciousness to implicit attitudes, sometimes with little or weak evidence in favor of this assertion. The literature has now evolved into a state where the unconsciousness of implicit attitudes is treated as a theoretical and empirical matter, rather than a given (Gawronski, et al. 2006; Gawronski, et al. 2007; Hahn and Gawronski 2014). The three articles in this subsection provide some reason for pause about whether people are always unaware that they hold implicit attitudes.


Suggests that claims about “unawareness” of implicit attitudes should be empirically tested, not just asserted. Distinguishes among the content, impact, and source awareness of implicit attitudes.


Reviewing published work on implicit attitudes, the authors briefly reaffirm and extend the notion that individuals might be at least partially aware of their implicit attitudes.


Briefly extends the conceptual argument that individuals might have some awareness of their implicit attitudes.

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**Implicit Political Attitudes**

The intellectual roots of implicit attitudes, it should be clear by now, are firmly in social psychology. Unsurprisingly, then, most theorizing...
about and applications of implicit attitudes have occurred in that discipline. But these roots are rapidly branching out into many related fields, very much including political science. There, many scholars have dedicated themselves to culling new insights about when, how, and among whom implicit attitudes pack a political punch. This scholarship can be usefully classified into five general areas; namely, Automaticity and Motivated Political Reasoning, Candidate Judgment and Choice, Moral Psychology, Political Identity and Information Processing, and Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics.

Automaticity and Motivated Political Reasoning

A major offshoot of research on implicit political attitudes involves their spontaneous activation and what downstream consequences this has for the nature of political judgment and choice (Lodge and Taber 2005; Burdein, et al. 2006; Taber and Lodge 2006; Hawkins and Nosek 2012; Erisen, et al. 2014; Taber and Lodge 2016). These studies illuminate one of these effects—motivated reasoning—and some of the cognitive mechanisms through which it operates, such as hot cognition, affect transfer, and affective contagion.


Lays out an implicit experimental approach as a way to measure those considerations—beliefs, identities, values, etc.—that shape citizens’ political thinking outside conscious awareness.


Reports experiments supporting affective contagion: the notion that split-second, subconscious feelings triggered at the outset of information processing bias subsequent evaluations.


Administers Republican/Democrat Implicit Association Tests (IATs) to reveal that implicit partisanship influences the political judgments that self-reported independents make.


Provides empirical support for a “hot cognition” hypothesis—namely, that all sociopolitical concepts are affectively charged, and that this affect is automatically triggered on mere exposure to concepts.


Draws, in part, on insights regarding automatic affective responses to show how these propel the partisan goals undergirding motivated political reasoning.
Reviews evidence on the impacts of unconscious influences on more-deliberative aspects of political judgments, highlighting hot cognition, affect transfer, affect contagion, and motivated bias as mechanisms.

Candidate Judgment and Choice


Demonstrates that implicit candidate preferences, measured one month before an actual election among self-reported undecided voters, reliably predicted actual vote choices on election day.

Further extends the finding that implicit attitudes predict changes in future choices among individuals who self-report being "undecided."

Reanalyzes the data used in Pasek, et al. 2009 and extends its analyses to provide evidence that implicit antiblack attitudes measured by the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP) are politically inconsequential.

Utilizes a subliminal-priming task to establish a conditional effect of implicit racial attitudes on candidate choice.

In one of a series of experiments, uses a subliminal-priming task to show that unconscious exposure to candidate names reliably boosts candidate support.

Using national survey data, yields some evidence that implicit antiblack attitudes, gauged by the AMP, were reliably associated with US presidential vote choice in 2008, net of other predictors.


Reveals that implicit antiblack attitudes, gauged via the AMP, were significantly correlated with US presidential vote choice in 2008, both directly and indirectly (via explicit antiblack attitudes).

Moral Psychology

Another expanding limb of implicit-attitudes research with growing import for the study of politics centers on the nature of moral reasoning, arguing that such thinking is automatic, fast, and intuitive, with our more-deliberative thoughts serving to justify or rationalize our moral impulses (Haidt 2001; Haidt and Graham 2007; Graham, et al. 2009).


Provides empirical evidence, some of it drawn from implicit measures, for moral-foundations theory.


Proposes that moral judgment is driven by quick, automatic evaluations—intuitions—rather than slow, deliberative thought.


Introduces the idea that political liberals and conservatives automatically draw on varied cognitive foundations for moral judgments.

Political Identity and Information Processing

Some research on implicit political attitudes has reached into the realms of political identity and information processing, establishing that who “we” are (e.g., partisans, Americans, religious believers) can deeply structure political evaluations (Albertson 2011, Knoll 2013, Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Some of the more exciting work on this front is conceptual, urging scholars to further think through the theoretical possibilities that emerge from entertaining implicit forms of key determinants of information processing, including partisanship (Theodoridis 2013) and political knowledge (Ksiazkiewicz 2013).
Utilizes a paper-and-pencil IAT to show that religious appeals shape implicit political attitudes among currently or previously identifying Christians.

Utilizes a Democrat/Republican “brief” IAT to demonstrate, in part, that implicit partisan affect is strong, prevalent, deeply rooted, and automatic.

Develops an American- and Latino-culture IAT to gauge implicit nativist attitudes. Shows that these predict immigration policy preferences, even among those failing to self-report nativist attitudes.

Argues for a conceptualization of political knowledge as manifesting itself in explicit and implicit versions, with the latter amenable to measurement via indirect measures such as the IAT.

Lays out a conceptualization and measurement strategy for implicit political identification.

**Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics**

A flourishing branch of research on implicit political attitudes documents their prevalence and impact in evaluative realms involving race, ethnicity, and gender (Pérez 2010; Winter 2010; Ditonto, et al. 2013; Malhotra, et al. 2013; Orey, et al. 2013; Lyle 2014; Mo 2015; Kinder and Ryan 2015; Banks and Hicks 2016; Pérez 2016), touching on substantive topics that include immigration policy preferences, racial-policy opinions, gender biases, and voter ID laws.

**Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics**

Uses the IAT to establish that eliciting fear among whites, rather than anger or relaxation, amplifies the effect of implicit racism on their support for voter ID laws.

Based on the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES), this study shows implicit antiblack attitudes gauged by the AMP are unrelated to racial-policy opinions and judgments of President Obama, net of explicit prejudice and other factors.

Uses a black/white brief IAT in a major national survey to show that, compared to self-reported racial resentment, implicit prejudice is largely unassociated with race-laden political outcomes.


Uses a white/black IAT to examine, in part, how cues from political elites influence implicit support for a racial status quo.


Designs a European American / Indian American IAT showing that implicit anti–Indian American attitudes boost immigration preferences, including opposition to visas for skilled immigrants.


Develops a new gender-leadership IAT to demonstrate, in part, that implicit antifemale attitudes erode individuals' propensity to vote for female candidates.


Reports evidence on the performance of several implicit-attitude measures, including the IAT, in samples of African Americans, thus further highlighting their validity and promise.


Uses lab and national survey data to validate an original Latino/white IAT, showing that individual differences on this measure systematically predict preferences for illegal and legal immigration.


Develops a dual-process view of explicit/implicit political cognition and uses lab and survey experiments to pinpoint the political effects of implicit attitudes on individual citizens.


 Implements a lexical decision task (LDT) to show that Americans implicitly associate Democrats with femininity and Republicans with masculinity, a pattern also emerging at the explicit level.
Dual-Process Models of Implicit-Explicit Cognition

Before the explosion of implicit-attitudes research, studies of individual opinions revolved exclusively on self-reported, or explicit, attitudes. However, the avalanche of implicit-attitudes scholarship still raining down on us in the early 21st century has prompted many psychologists, and some political scientists, to identify and explain the circumstances under which explicit and implicit attitudes influence individual thinking (Lodge and Taber 2013, Fazio and Olson 2014, Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2014, McConnell and Rydell 2014, Strack and Deutsch 2014). The works in this section lay bare, in painstaking detail, some of the leading dual-process models of explicit-implicit cognition in social and political domains.


An updated view of the MODE model, one of the earliest dual-process models explaining the interplay between spontaneous and controlled processes in producing attitudes and behavior. Individual motivation and opportunity are key components of this model.


An overview of the associative-propositional evaluation (APE) model, its principles, and its procedures. APE’s focus is on the connection between implicit (associative) and explicit (propositional) attitudes. In APE, implicit attitudes are “gut reactions” that are (in)validated by propositional thinking.


Assembles and validates John Q. Public (JQP), a model explaining implicit-explicit attitudes in political cognition. JQP treats implicit attitudes as prior to, and thus a structuring influence on, explicit attitudes. JQP also views explicit attitudes as rationalizations of implicit attitudes.


Sketches, in detail, the systems-of-evaluation model: another dual-process model geared toward explaining the often-Janus-faced nature of implicit-explicit attitudes.


Outlines the mechanics of the reflective-impulsive model (RIM), which seeks to explain how impulsive (automatic) processes influence the more reflective (controlled) aspects of people’s thinking and evaluations.