

Inoculation Theory, Social Media and The Creation of Political Mindlessness.

Kevin Tolbert  
COM 3400  
Wayne State University

Because of the pervasive nature of social media, our country is suffering from the ill effects of the overuse of inoculation theory in political campaigns. The main concept of Inoculation Theory is that a person can be inoculated against arguments that are attempting to move or sway their beliefs. This process is achieved by presenting weak arguments in advance to the person in order to allow them to build up the practice of defending their argument for preparation for future stronger attacks. Pertinacious politicians have created legislatures and executive branches that are locked in party battles that are doing nothing to solve the debates that rage incessantly and create division in America. In the face of obvious facts about issues or politicians, strong supporters rarely waver and become more entrenched. Inoculation theory is at the root of this problem and its use of it threatens the democracy in American politics.

Social media is pervasive and a tool that is being used to offer weak arguments on political issues and politicians. Because of the constant bombardment of weak arguments, strong supporters become more entrenched and ignore the veracity of any argument against their candidate or issue. Social media is serving as an inoculation method for campaign advertising and is creating a great political divide in our Country. American politics have the highest amount of partisanship on a multitude of issues as we have had since before the civil war. Inoculation Theory is responsible for this and research needs to be done to create a countermeasure to this theory. We need to allow for civility, decorum, harmony, and the wheels of democracy to move again in our country.

The main concept of Inoculation Theory is that a person can be inoculated against arguments that are attempting to move or sway their beliefs. This process is achieved by

presenting weak arguments in advance to the person in order to allow them to build up the practice of defending their argument for preparation for future stronger attacks. Pertinacious politicians have created legislatures and executive branches that are locked in party battles that are doing nothing to solve the debates that rage incessantly and create division in America. A study conducted by the Pew Research center in 2017 found that “widening differences between Republicans and Democrats on a range of measures the Center has been asking about since 1994.” Political gridlock in our federal and state legislatures is at an all-time high. Even in the face of obvious facts about issues or politicians, strong supporters rarely waver and become more entrenched. Inoculation theory is at the root of this problem and its use of it threatens the democracy in American politics.

Many large and small companies, especially those who are frequently faced with stiff competition for their business, use inoculation theory. With great consistency, industry leaders must successfully ward off their competition to protect market share. Incumbent politicians and campaigns also successfully use this messaging as well. This strategy began to rise in the 1990s and has been the primary method of communication in political campaigns as a result of the increasing amount of attack ads combined with the lack of campaign oversight. In order for an incumbent politician to maintain their elected position, they must successfully defend their ideas, actions, and personality against attacks from their opponents. “We hypothesized that political campaign messages can be designed to inoculate supporters of candidates against subsequent attack messages of opposing candidates.” (Pfau, 1988)

Social media rose to play a large part of how politicians are elected with great significance in the 2016 presidential election. The federal government levied extremely large fines to Facebook for allowing Russian interference, but savvy politicians used inoculation theory to prevent their strong supporters from succumbing to arguments against their candidate. This occurred with multiple articles and posts being shared that presented weak arguments to inoculate their supporters in the long run.

Because of this overuse of inoculation theory, this country is suffering from political mindlessness. Voters are frequently unable to effectively see any side of the issue except their own point of view because of the successful implementation of inoculation theory. Their minds are locked into an unwillingness to allow any other point of view to be considered. This is dangerous to a democratic form of government. Political issues are resolved best with a give and take, but when successfully inoculated there is no will by the politicians or the public to view it that way.

Inoculation Theory was developed by social psychologist William McGuire in 1961. The theory of inoculation is similar to the process used in the scientific community for medical immunizations. In the medical community, patients are introduced to a very weak strain of a virus or disease in order to trigger the body to send antibodies to successfully ward off and kill the weak strain. McGuire says the same process is applicable to attitudes and beliefs. The first assumption of the theory is that most people are able to defend their attitudes and beliefs when something threatens them. The second assumption assumes that you can learn to increase your already existing ability to defy your counterarguments (McGuire, 1961). Both of these assumptions are applied in advertising messages for large companies and those messages for a

political audience. The first assumption says that when a person is presented with a counterargument to their position they are able to successfully defend their attitudes and beliefs. This means most of us have come to believe what we believe and generally, it is hard to change our minds about that. Counterarguments are integral in this theory. Counterarguments are a set of reasons that are offered to go against a theory or argument. The key question becomes will a person change their position based upon the counterarguments or not? This assumption says that most of us will not. The second assumption says that you can learn to increase your existing ability to resist and defy counterarguments. This may be done by the introduction of counterarguments. The counterarguments must be weak enough that the person being inoculated against can successfully defend their position. By arguing and defending their position, it serves to reaffirm or deepen the person's commitment to the theory. This is akin to training and practice in defending one's beliefs.

Inoculation Theory has two key concepts that are important as well. The threat is an important concept that says people are motivated to resist change when their attitudes and beliefs are being challenged by counterarguments. Without being pushed there will be no reason to cause a person to strengthen or deepen their beliefs. These are defined as explicit threats and implicit threats. An explicit threat occurs when a person is warned in advance that they will be challenged on their beliefs and attitudes. The implicit threat is when there is no expectation of being challenged. The second key concept is refutational preemption. Refutational preemption occurs when counterarguments and the data to prove them wrong are given to the person at the same time.

There are several claims proposed by Inoculation Theory. The first is that people can be inoculated against persuasive messaging. The second is that in order for the inoculation to take place the belief must be in place beforehand. If a person does not believe in the right for a woman to have an abortion you cannot inoculate her to withstand arguments against pro-choice. Inoculation theory initially focused a lot on cultural truisms instead of axioms. Early scholars said that a cultural truism is an attitude or belief so widely held and accepted that it is virtually universal.

### **Heuristic Value**

The heuristic value of Inoculation Theory is very high, especially in this domain of politics and campaign advertising. Due to the extreme level of partisanship in this country, many very interesting and unique questions could be asked around mindlessness on political ideas. For instance. Has anyone tried to get you to switch your support of a candidate? Have you ever switched support of a candidate even though he was a member of a party you previously supported? Do you ever believe it necessary to change your support based upon ideas?

### **Parsimony**

Inoculation Theory has excellent parsimony. This theory is easy to understand because of the overall understanding of vaccines and inoculation in the medical field. In the medical community, patients are introduced to a very weak strain of a virus or disease in order to trigger the body to send antibodies to successfully ward off and kill the weak strain. McGuire says the same process is applicable to attitudes and beliefs. The first assumption of the theory is that most people are able to defend their attitudes and beliefs when something threatens them. The second assumption assumes that you can learn to increase your already existing ability to defy your

counterarguments. There are very few assumptions one must make to understand what is occurring in this theory.

### **Explanatory Power**

The explanatory power of the Inoculation Theory is very low. Although the theory is easy to understand, it leaves a lot to be desired as to why it is so effective. More research is necessary for this area for this theory.

### **Predictive Power**

The predictive power of the Inoculation Theory is very high. It is easy to determine if a person will be inoculated based upon if they are a strong supporter of a candidate or idea. If a person is a strong supporter inoculation theory says once they have been presented with weak arguments it will fortify or strengthen the level of commitment a person has. Therefore it is simple to see if this holds true and easy to predict the outcome.

### **Falsifiability**

I believe that this theory cannot be falsified. When a person is a strong supporter of an issue or candidate, they have a predisposition to want to believe and continue that support. In the face of weak arguments, they become further entrenched. It becomes incredibly difficult to get that person to look at anything other than the initial reasons that made them support the issue or candidate with so much veracity.

### **Internal Consistency**

The consistency of this theory is very consistent. It can be applied across multiple domains. Inoculation theory is in use in marketing, public health campaigns, and politics.

### **Organizing Power**

This theory is well organized and easy to follow. Weak arguments are offered to strong supporters in order to inoculate them. The practice of responding to weak arguments and successfully defending your positions helps to increase support for the candidate or issue.

### **Conclusion**

The successful implementation of inoculation theory on social media is responsible for the lack of civility and inability of either of the two major political parties in this country to work in partnership to create legislation that is harmonious with the needs of both sides. Research is necessary to create an effective countermeasure to this theory because of the pervasive nature of social media.

### **Annotations**

**Lessne, Greg J., Didow & Nicholas M. Jr., (1987). Inoculation Theory and Resistance to Persuasion in Marketing. Psychology and Marketing (1986-1998); New York, Volume 4 (2), 157-166.**

Competitors, government regulators, and customers challenge advertising and marketing claims. Authors Lessne & Didow propose a strategy that companies can use to protect their customers' opinions about their products or services against these claims. Marketing has benefitted tremendously from psychological theories of persuasion. Campaign advertisers could benefit by taking advantage of the psychological perspectives upon instilling a resistance to persuasion in their campaigns.

**Binder, S.A. (2015). The Dysfunction of Congress. The Annual Review of Political Science, (7), 14.**

This article makes the case that Congress is dysfunctional and has failed to solve problems effectively. The author bases her opinion on research in comparison to previous legislatures, the American public, and legislative scholars. The stalemates and battles in Congress have reached a new low according to Binder.

**Pfau, Michael. (1988). Inoculation in Political Campaign Communication. Human Communication Research, 15(1), 91.**

Michael Pfau in this article hypothesizes that political operatives should begin using inoculation theory as a strategy to assist supporters in resisting the effects of attack messages in campaign advertising. He studies potential voters in the 1986 United States Senate campaign and found his theory was supported. He also says it is proven through his research that this theory was better than others in ensuring strong supporters are not converted or conveyed by attack ads. The timing of this article correlates to a time where partisanship was relatively low and politicians in congress and other houses of government acted in a manner more conciliatory. In the time since the implication of his theory in a new domain, partisanship has been increasing and resistance to deal-making in our federal legislature and state legislatures has become increasingly difficult.

## **References**

McGuire, William, (1961). Resistance to persuasion conferred by active and passive prior refutation of same and alternative counterarguments. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, (63), 326-332.

Lessne, Greg J., Didow & Nicholas M. Jr., (1987). Inoculation Theory and Resistance to Persuasion in Marketing. *Psychology and Marketing* (1986-1998); New York, Volume 4 (2), 157-166.

Binder, S. (2015). The Dysfunction of Congress. *The Annual Review of Political Science*, (7), 1-17. <https://www.annualreviews.org/journal/polisci>

Pfau, Michael. (1988). Inoculation in Political Campaign Communication. *Human Communication Research*, 15(1), 91.