Summary

When people come across a persuasive communication they disagree with, a communication supported by a majority generally causes more attitude change than one supported by a minority. Because people prefer not to identify with a minority, they are not motivated to process a minority message and, consequently, they will not change their attitudes. This dissertation describes four laboratory experiments examining the influence of several variables on attitude change after messages supported by either a majority or a minority. Study 1, reported in Chapter 2, examined the influence of involvement in the topic of the message (focal issue). When involvement was relatively high (the issue is important to one’s personal values), both a majority supported message and a minority supported message did not result in attitude change. When involvement was relatively low, only a majority supported message resulted in attitude change. Thus, not only minority support, but also a high involvement can hinder focal attitude change. Besides focal attitudes, attitudes towards issues related to the topic of the message were also measured. It was hypothesized that people will change both their focal and related attitudes when they are processing the message content. Results showed indeed that majority influence leads to attitude change on related issues. Moreover, after a minority message related attitude change only occurred when value involvement, and consequently the motivation to process the message, was relatively high.

In addition, Study 1 also examined the influence of the discrepancy between own opinion and the opinion stated in the persuasive message. When there was moderate discrepancy, that is, when people neither accepted nor rejected the opinion advocated in the message, the amount of support had no effect: majority and minority messages causes an equal amount of attitude change. When there was greater discrepancy, that is, people rejected the opinion advocated, there was more attitude change after a majority message than after a minority message, but only when the involvement was relatively low. The amount of discrepancy did not influence related attitudes. Apparently, the mere fact that one’s own opinion differs from the opinion stated in the message is more important than the size of the discrepancy.

It has been demonstrated repeatedly that attitude change after a majority
supported message is not a matter of mindlessly adopting the ideas of the majority. In Study 2 and 3, reported in Chapter 3, we tried to gain more insight in how thoroughly the messages were processed. In Study 2, half of the subjects were distracted while reading the message (again supported by a majority or a minority), so they could contemplate less on the message content. If people only change their attitudes when they have the opportunity to process the message thoroughly, no attitude change would be expected to occur when people are distracted. In line with this reasoning, people only displayed attitude change towards the message when they were not distracted. Building on previous research, Study 3 introduced an additional manipulation of argument quality in order to obtain more insight in the processing of the message. People read a message with either strong or weak arguments. Results showed that they changed their attitudes more towards a majority than a minority supported message when two conditions were satisfied: (1) when they were not hindered in a thorough processing and (2) when the message contained strong arguments. Differing reactions on messages with strong and messages with weak arguments suggested again that people actually considered the content of the messages.

Study 2 also examined the influence of majority and minority messages on related attitudes. After a majority supported message, people showed both focal and related attitude change. Contrary to the results of Study 1, there was no attitude change following a minority supported message. Study 2 did not distinguish between subjects differing in involvement. Therefore, subjects in Study 2 were likely to be less motivated to process a message than the high involved subjects in Experiment 1. For minority supported messages, only this last group did show related attitude change.

The first three experiments lead to the conclusion that after a majority supported message, people will change both their focal and related attitudes, as long as their value involvement is relatively low. Furthermore, this attitude change will only take place when people are able to process the content of the message. Minority supported messages can change related but not focal attitudes, but only when the motivation to process the message is sufficient.

In the first three experiments subjects (students) always received a message with the support of a majority or a minority from a general group of students. Study 4 compared the influence of a message from the ingroup with that from an outgroup. According to selfcategorization theory, a group can only
influence attitudes if this group is considered to be a part of the own group. Dissimilar others are expected to have another opinion, so that their opinions can be ignored. However, results from Study 4 showed the opposite pattern, a message from the outgroup causing more attitude change than a message from the ingroup. The unexpected results may be explained by the fact that Study 4 created a context in which the two groups had a common 'goal'. By contrast, research showing that only ingroup messages influenced attitudes utilized groups that were clearly distinguished and hardly had anything in common. Presumably, in the context of Study 4 it was difficult to ignore the opinion of the other group.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the results and discusses the processing of majority and minority supported messages. To facilitate this discussion, the concepts 'conversion' and 'divergence' were used. The conversion effect means that only related attitudes change, without focal attitude change. This effect was expected to occur for minority supported messages. The current results show that this conversion effect may also occur in case of majority support. Both for majority and minority support the conversion effect occurred only when the motivation to process was high enough. Alternatively, a divergence effect occurs when people process the focal issue, leading to an independent opinion not necessarily the same as the opinion stated in the message. The present studies only show evidence for the divergence effect where messages were supported by a minority. Compared with the conversion effect, for the occurrence of a divergence effect less thorough processing seems to be required. Chapter 5 concludes with a number of implications of these four studies.