

Empowerment's Influence on the Use of Shortcuts as Opinions are Formed

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Abstract

Empowerment can influence many parts of one's psychology, including the use of in/out group short-cuts when forming an opinion. Looking at this relationship when it comes to political opinions and political parties, subjects were randomly assigned to be given one of three versions of a description of farm subsidy policy where one version contained a cue suggesting Democrats support & Republicans oppose the policy, another version contained a cue suggesting Republicans support & Democrats oppose the policy, and the third version did not indicate which political party supports or opposes the policy. They had to rate their own support for that policy. It was found that high levels of empowerment are generally related to higher use of such short-cuts, meaning that subjects would indicate more support if they were assigned to the condition that indicated that the political party they self-identify with were said to support the policy and indicated less support for the policy if they were assigned to the condition that indicated that the political party they self-identify with were said to oppose the policy. These results were inconsistent with the original hypotheses I developed for this study. In addition to this counter-intuitive finding, it was found that subjects who feel like they are less influenced by their political leaders' opinions are actually more influenced by the part-support cue given during the experiment.

Introduction

Throughout every day, the brain is constantly being bombarded with more information than you can consciously process. Therefore, it makes sense that the brain has come up with short-cuts for processing information, such as tuning out information that happens continuously. These short-cuts can be used to process information and to aid in opinion formation and decision making. Examples of these short-cuts include the use of generalizations, which will be discussed later. In order to form an opinion on something, one would hope to have all of the information about the topic before forming the opinion. However, human beings form too many opinions in a day to actually gather all of the necessary information, so the brain uses short-cuts to aid in this task.

An excellent example of the use of opinion formation short-cuts for routine activities is when individuals evaluate products while shopping. Kirchler and colleagues (2010) demonstrated the use of the short-cut where consumers assume that higher prices indicate better product quality. Using questionnaires to measure participants' estimations of the quality and price of various products (e.g. food & beverages and computers), it was found that a participants' estimation of a product's price was positively correlated with their estimation of the product's quality.

A similar phenomenon can be seen when looking at how we, as humans, often use social cues to help us form opinions. This concept was studied by Kleef and colleagues (2015), who investigated

part of the Olympics. All of the participants were then shown a phone number, though only some of them were instructed that they would later be asked to recall

expresses Democrat support and Republican opposition toward the policy) led Democrat subjects to judge that Democrats, in general, are in more agreement with the policy and Republican subjects to judge that Republicans, in general, are in less agreement with the policy.

In addition to establishing the types of short-cuts individuals use when developing opinions and attitudes, prior research has further demonstrated the existence of individual differences in the use of such short-cuts. For instance, the strength of the effect of "in-group" versus "out-group" framing on opinion formation is influenced by the type of group an individual most closely identifies with (Han & Federico, 2018). In relation to the study described in the prior paragraph, it was found that gender-conflict framed-news had a greater impact on the strength of the opinion formed than political-fiction framed-news. Participants also responded to questions assessing how favorable they found the following groups to be: Democrats, Republicans, men and women. Based on the results, researchers suggest that the increase in strength of opinion (higher or lower ratings of agreement) were caused by the participant identifying more strongly with their gender group than their political group, essentially leading to a stronger attachment to the "in-group" gender than for political belief.

Another individual difference that may influence the use of short-cuts when forming opinions and attitudes could be an individual's sense of empowerment. For the purpose of the study I am proposing to conduct, a sense of empowerment is defined as one's belief in their own abilities and competence, their autonomy, and their ability to take action & enact change within their lives/community.

Forming an opinion is guided by gathering relevant information in addition to weighing relevant opinions that are already held. In order to have an opinion on a political policy or someone running for office, one has to have some degree of awareness of the political

information relevant to the formation of the opinion. However, individual differences exist with respect to such awareness, as some individuals are more aware/informed about facts and perspectives relevant to the opinion than others. Bleck and Michel (2018) observed how socioeconomic empowerment, defined as having household agency along with being able to move outside of the village with more freedom, is positively correlated with political awareness and engagement. They studied and surveying a population of women in a village in rural Mali. The researchers suggest that a greater sense of this form of empowerment could lead to engaging in a greater amount of discussion, decision making, and participating in households that are pro-women. This may explain the relationship between empowerment and political awareness. Socioeconomic empowerment is essentially the beginning steps to a sense of the type of empowerment defined for my proposed study. The socioeconomic empowerment was shown to be an important factor for being aware of political occurrences, which then suggests that further empowerment, such as was defined for the study, would aid in being aware and making informed opinions about politics instead of relying on group-based short-cuts.

A sense of empowerment can be similar to the confidence one feels their ability to do something and can also impact one's use of that confidence when forming an opinion and making decisions. Fadda and colleagues (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews in order to evaluate parents' knowledge and beliefs about a measles vaccine, their self-perceived degree of psychological empowerment, their confidence in their ability to wisely decide whether or not to vaccinate their child, and their perception of the risks/benefits associated with the vaccine. It was found that parents who weren't confident in their ability to make such a decision (analogous to having a weak sense empowerment) would be more likely to defer to the expert's decision (e.g. a pediatrician). In another study (Hall et al., 2015) it was found that individuals who judge

themselves to be more self-reliant when making medical decisions (analogous to having a strong sense of empowerment) use online sources to search for medical information more frequently than individuals who judged themselves to be more reliant on doctors when making such decisions (analogous to having a weak sense of empowerment). Thus, this suggests that individuals with a stronger sense of empowerment rely more on gathering/evaluating facts themselves and less on the opinions of others in forming their own opinion, and thus, mabnj6

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more likely to utilize the political-based “in-group” vs “out-group” short-cut to form their opinion.

Method

Participants

There was a total of 405 people who participated in this study, 300 of which took the MTURK version and 105 took the survey through Stockton University's SONA system. Those who participated through Stockton's system were compensated with class credits, while the MTURK participants were compensated with \$3.00 for their time. Of those 405 participants, the average age was 32.32 years, with a standard deviation of 10.50 years. 47.7% of them were female, the remaining 51.6% being male. The education of the participants was broken up as follows: 0.7% did not graduate high school, 19.6% completed high school, 22% attended some college, 32.8% earned a college degree, 2% attended some graduate school, 22% had a graduate degree, and 1.2% attended a trade school. The racial breakdown of the participants was as follows: 15.1% were Black, 2.7% were Native American, 69.1% were White, 6.4% were Asian, 4.9% were Hispanic, and the remaining 1.7% identified as other. 59.8% of the participants described themselves as Democratic, 27.7% identified themselves as Republicans, and the remaining 12.6% identified themselves as Independents.

Materials

Empowerment A participant's sense of empowerment being defined as their belief in their own abilities and competence, their autonomy, and their ability to take action and enact change within their lives/community. It will be measured using the empowerment scale

developed by Rogers and colleagues (1997) which contains five factors: self-efficacy, self-esteem, power-powerlessness, community activism, righteous anger

to identify which political ideology they belong to, which will also be ranked using a seven point Likert scale.

Procedure

This experiment will be conducted as an online survey, where participants will begin by being randomly assigned into one of three groups. Each group will read a version of the policy description. The first group will read a version that shows Democrats as supporting the policy described. The second group will read a version that shows Republicans as being supportive. The third group will be a control group and will read a version that does not indicate either group as supportive against the policy. Once that is read, all of the participants will go through the questionnaires in the same order. It will begin with the question about their opinion on the policy

Results

Analysis for Replicating Malka & Lelkes (2010)

Democrats vs. Republicans in Control Condition In order to determine if the major effects of Malka & Lelkes (2010) were replicated in the current sample, I performed an analysis comparing Democrat and Republican participants with respect to their support or opposition to the farm subsidy policy when exposed to the control condition. I found that Democrats ($M = 5.07, sd = 1.47$) and Republicans ($M = 5.53, sd = 1.48$) did not significantly differ from each other with respect to the mean value of the farm subsidy support rating ($t(111) = -1.47, p > .05$).

Party-Support Cue vs. Party-Oppose Cue For the remaining analyses, a new variable was created that identified the subject was assigned to the condition in which the party they identified with was said to support the policy (the "In-Party Support Cue Group") or assigned to the condition in which the party they identified with was said to be against the policy (the "Out-Party Support Cue Group"). For the purpose of this, participants who were in the control condition and those who identified as independent were excluded.

To further assess if the main effects observed by Malka & Lelkes (2010) were replicated, I performed a new analysis which compared the Party-Support Cue Group to the Party-Oppose Cue Group in respect to their support/opposition to the farm subsidy policy. Those who identified with the group who was said to support the farm subsidy policy were significantly more likely to show support for the policy ($M = 5.29, sd = 1.46$) than those who identified with the group which was said to oppose the policy ($M = 4.69, sd = 1.54$), $t(239) = 3.14, p < .05$.

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Optimism/Control Over the Future. In order to analyze the effects of the in/out party cue and optimism, a 2 (In vs Out Party Support Cue Group) x 2 (High vs Low Optimism/Control Over the Future) ANOVA was used. A median split was again used to compare the high vs low optimism/control for the future groups, the median being 3.00. There was a significant main effect of optimism on the average support shown towards the farm subsidy policy, $F(1, 234) = 8.19, p < .05$. Subjects with higher scores of optimism showed more support for the farm subsidy policy ($M = 5.35, sd = 1.44$) than those with lower optimism ($M = 4.65, sd = 1.44$), $t(234) = 2.87, p < .01$.

Community Activism/ Autonomy Another 2 (In vs Out Party Support Cue Group) x 2
(High vs Low Score on Community Activism/Autonomy subscale) ANOVA was used to
investigate the impact of the in/out party support cue and community activism/autonomy has on

Power/ Powerlessness. The final subscale was investigated along with the in/out party support cue in another 2 (In vs Out Party Support Cue Group) x 2 (High vs Low Power/Powerlessness) ANOVA. Another median split was used to compare the high vs low power/powerlessness groups, the median being 2.63. There was a significant main effect with the in/out party cue, once again showing that those who identified with the party that was said to support the farm subsidy policy tend to show more support ($M = 5.28, sd = 1.46$) than those who identified with the party that was said to oppose the farm subsidy policy ($M = 4.69, sd = 1.54$), $F(1, 235) = 11.82, p < .05$. There was also a significant main effect of the high vs low power/powerless on the support shown for the farm subsidy policy, $F(1, 235) = 7.65, p < .05$. Those who believed themselves to be less powerful showed more support for the policy ($5.22, sd = 1.41$) than those who believe themselves to be more powerful ($4.68, sd = 1.63$). Additionally, a significant interaction was found, $F(1, 235) = 7.60, p < .05$. Those who believed themselves to be more powerful were affected by the in/out party cue (mean difference 1.18) than those who believed themselves to be less powerful (mean difference .13).

Table 5

Means and standard deviations of power/powerlessness subscale

		Power/Powerlessness Subscale	
		High	Low
Experimental	In-Party Support Cue	5.28 (1.53)	5.20 (1.53)
Condition	Out-Party Support Cue	4.10 (1.52)	5.15 (1.40)

Follow-up Analyses Investigating Reasons for High Power Subjects to be More Influenced by In-vs-Out-Party Support Cues than the Low Power.

The results found the in the ANOVA looking at the power/powerlessness subscale of empowerment were counter-intuitive, as prior research discussed earlier led to the prediction that the opposite would occur with respect to which group would be more affected by the in vs out party support cues. It was determined, based prior research, that those with higher empowerment (i.e. higher power/powerlessness subscale) would focus more on the facts and perspectives relevant to the policy, and less on the political-cues indicating which ideological group supports/opposes the policy, when developing opinion to either support or oppose the policy. That prediction was also based on the idea that those with a weaker sense of empowerment would be more likely to utilize the political-based "in-group" vs "out-group" short-cut to form their opinion. However, the opposite ended up occurring.

Power/Powerlessness and Belief in How Effected Participants are by Political Leaders
Cross Tabs Analysis
To begin investigating this counter-intuitive result, an analysis seeking to determine the relationship between sense of Power & Powerlessness and feelings of how influenced or not they are by political leaders was conducted. Cross-Tab analysis shows that there is a greater percentage of those with a low sense of power who believe themselves to be extremely influenced by political leaders (20.3%) than those with a greater-sense of power (3.6%). Also, there is a smaller percentage of those with a low sense of power who believe themselves to be not at all influenced by political leaders (16.9%) than those with a greater sense of power (34.3%). These differences are statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 33.02, p < .001$.

Table 6

	Not at all Influenced	Somewhat Influenced	Extremely Influenced
Low Power	39 (16.9%)	145 (62.8%)	47 (20.3%)
High Power	58 (34.3%)	105 (62.1%)	6 (3.6%)

Power/Powerlessness and Belief in How Affected Participants are by Political Leaders ANOVA Analysis 2 (In vs Out Party Support Cue Group) (Not at all vs Moderately vs Extremely Influenced) ANOVA was used to test for effects on the support ratings for the farm subsidy policy. There was a significant main effect of the in vs out party support cue found, indicating that those who were in the in-party support cue group would, on average, show more support ($M = 5.29, sd = 1.46$) than those who were in the out-party support cue group ($M = 4.68, sd = 1.54$), $F(1, 234) = 7.75, p < .05$. The interaction in the analysis was not significant, $F(2, 234) = 2.62, p > .05$, but the non-significant interaction did follow the trend for those who claimed to be not at all influenced by political leaders' opinions were more influenced by the in/out party support cue (mean difference = 1.39) than those who claimed to be moderately influenced by political leaders' opinions (mean difference = 0.47), who were also less influenced by the in/out party support cue than those who claimed to be extremely influenced by political leaders' opinions (mean difference = 0.07). This is consistent with the findings relevant to the interaction between power/powerlessness and in-vs-out-party support cues, as those who express higher senses of power (when looking at the individual items, meaning that they feel they rely less on experts, rely less on "going with the group") exhibit behaviors that are evident of feelings of low power.

Table 8

	Sub-scale of Empowerment			
Racial	Self-Esteem/	Power/	Community	Optimism/
Group	Self-Efficacy	Powerlessness	Activism/Autonomy	Control Over the

participant believing themselves to be less influenced by the opinions of their political leaders. This showed a disconnect between what a person believes influences them and what they are actually affected by when forming such an opinion.

While I had originally predicted that those with high empowerment would be less effected by the in/out party support cue, opposite was found. According to Rogers (1997), each of the five empowerment subscales are positively correlated with each other, therefore it makes sense for so many of these subscales to follow the same trend of those with higher scores being more impacted than the those with lower scores. One of the subscales is self-esteem, which was shown to be related to in-group bias in a meta-analysis conducted by Aberson and colleagues (2000). In their study, they looked into how self-esteem can impact the use of the in-group bias by individuals. They found that indirect measures did not create a difference in the bias shown by either high or low self-esteem participants, but that when indirect measures are used, those with high self-esteem showed more in-group bias. This article also discusses how individual studies struggle to clarify this relationship between self-esteem and in-group bias, but that by using meta-analysis they were able to clarify it more.

In addition to in-group bias usually increasing with higher self-esteem, it has also been shown in a study done by Hansen and colleagues (2014) that people are likely to remain unchanged of how objective they believe themselves to be, even if they express they are aware of a bias in their judgement making strategies. This could help explain how those who believed themselves to be more influenced by political leaders were actually less influenced by the in/out party support cue than those who believed themselves to be less influenced by political leaders.

There were several limitations to this study, one of which was created by the use of the median split when separating the high and low groups of the empowerment sub-scales. This

treats all values above the median as equal and the values below the median as equal and separates some subjects who had similar scores of empowerments.

Another limitation involves the type of article used for the farm subsidy policy description. The description is short, and while it was chosen to minimize the existence of prior opinions, it also relies on the subject making assumption. There is minimal information about farm subsidies in the description. It is possible that a longer, more informative version would change the influence of the in/out party support cue.

In the future, a study looking at how the groups that is often used by individuals can be mitigated should be conducted. In order to do further investigation into the cause behind phenomena such as those found in this study, those of which found in Abernson and colleagues' study. Another version of this study, using a longer, more informative version of the farm subsidy description may be used in order to see if the amount of information provided can influence the use of such shortcuts. This study found that the influence from the cue exists and that personal factors can influence the use of it, such as certain aspects of empowerment. How to minimize this, and if it was caused by a lack of information, should be looked into.

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Appendix A

Supportive Democrats version of policy description.

The U.S. government gives billions of dollars to American farmers every year. The reasons for this policy, which is supported by Democrats, are to protect American farmers from losing their jobs and to keep the cost of food low for Americans.

However, Republicans have argued that the government should stop giving money to farmers. They note that this policy prevents poor agricultural countries from growing economically and bringing their citizens out of poverty. Also, the money saved by Americans in food costs is taken from them in taxes anyway.

Supportive Republicans version of policy description.

The U.S. government gives billions of dollars to American farmers every year. The reasons for this policy, which is supported by Republicans, are to protect American farmers from losing their jobs and to keep the cost of food low for Americans.

However, Democrats have argued that the government should stop giving money to farmers. They note that this policy prevents poor agricultural countries from growing economically and bringing their citizens out of poverty. Also, the money saved by Americans in food costs is taken from them in taxes anyway.

Neutral version of policy description.

The U.S. government gives billions of dollars to American farmers every year. The reasons for this policy, which is supported by various groups, are to protect American farmers from losing their jobs and to keep the cost of food low for Americans.

However, various other groups have argued that the government should stop giving money to farmers. They note that this policy prevents poor agricultural countries from growing

economically and bringing their citizens out of poverty. Also, the money saved by Americans in food costs is taken from them in taxes anyway.

Appendix B

