Party Over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs

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Four studies demonstrated that the power of group influence in persuading people's blindness to it. In one condition, a study of moral decision-making, attitudes toward and supporting social policies were found to be driven by the group's acceptance of the position, regardless of one's own ethical commitment. This effect has implications for both the analysis and the interpretation of public opinion. Even when people's attitudes are influenced by their group, they still may hold onto their personal views, especially when they believe other group members are influenced by their personal values. The study also examined the role of social identity in maintaining group solidarity. In general, external social identity may lead to a more committed view of the group, while internal social identity may lead to a more flexible view of the group. In summary, the study demonstrates that group influence can be a powerful force in shaping people's political beliefs, and that understanding this influence is crucial for effective political communication.

One of the most durable lessons in social psychology is the power of group influence. Yet, this lesson comes at a cost. The social media have created a new context for political communication, and the study of group influence has become increasingly important.

The intergenerational transmission of meaning is underscored by the finding that, at an early age, 12-month-old human beings interpret objects in light of the emotional expressions of others. (Mosse, 2005; Rosicky, 2006; Kroeber-Riel, 2007). In the context of persuasion, the judgments of other people in a reference group define the social meaning of attribute objects. Social meaning is defined here as the perceived compatibility of an object with judgments of socially shared values. (One also Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Kanter, 1999; Sears & Funk, 1991). Because social groups serve as a primary source of personal values (Bettencourt & Hume, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 1984; Heerwagen, 1999; Higgins & Blumenthal, 1988; Newcomb, 1943; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965; Turner, 1971), people can safely assume that other members of a self-defining reference group have a moral sensibility similar to their own, at least with respect to issues relevant to their group identity. Interpersonal membership in many groups is predicated upon a commitment to common goals, and everyday experience reinforces the expectation that people who share one's (i.e., group) identity will also share one's values. The judgments of group representatives and leaders can thus be viewed as diagnostic, if not definitional, of social meaning.

One aspect of this definitional process involves the moral qualities ascribed to the attitude object (Asch, 1952; Lichtenstein, 1970; Robinson, Kelman, Ward, & Ross, 1995). In a seminal series of studies by Solomon Asch (1948), students who were told that their peers felt negatively toward "politicians" continued to agree that there were significant differences among politicians and saw the object as inferior to the attitude object (see Allen & Wilder, 1980; Lord & Legge, 1990; Wood, Pool, Leck, & Pasquale, 1999; Griffin & Brandt, 1993).

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[Notes and references are omitted for brevity.]
GROUP INFLUENCE AND POLITICAL BELIEFS

In group influence, the attitude of one member can change the attitude of another member. In the absence of social pressure, people tend to maintain their own attitudes. When a group is formed, however, people may feel pressure to conform to the group's attitudes, even if those attitudes differ from their own. This phenomenon is known as social influence and is a key concept in the study of group dynamics.

Social influence can occur through both direct and indirect means. Direct influence involves explicit communication between group members, such as discussions, arguments, or debates. Indirect influence, on the other hand, occurs through more subtle means, such as peer pressure or the perception of social norms.

The study of social influence is important because it helps us understand how people's beliefs and behaviors are shaped by their social environment. This, in turn, has implications for a wide range of social issues, including political beliefs and attitudes, consumer behavior, and even health decisions.

In this chapter, we will explore the nature of social influence and its effects on individual attitudes and behaviors. We will examine the factors that influence the process of social influence, such as the size and composition of the group, the status and power of members, and the nature of the communication that occurs within the group.

Overview of Studies

The first objective of the present studies involved testing the perceived effect of group influence on attitude. Political parties evaluated an object program to the values of their group—a proposed welfare reform. As involved participants, they were expected to understand different (i.e., liberal vs. conservative) processing of the information (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The studies utilized the effect of group influence (whether Democrats or Republicans supported the policy) on prior ideological beliefs (whether participants were liberal or conservative) and policy content (whether the policy was generous or stringent). When reference group information was absent, participants' ideology and policy content together were expected to determine response, with liberals supporting the generous policy and conservatives the stringent one. However, when reference group information was available, the impact of group influence on policy content was expected to decrease, with liberals and conservatives supporting the stringent one. How- ever, when reference group information was available, the impact of group influence on policy content was expected to decrease, with liberals and conservatives supporting the stringent one. A second objective of this research involved testing the correspondence between the actual effect of group influence on attitude and the perceived effect. All four studies thus involved participants to estimate how much they had been influenced by the provision of their party.

Study 1

Liberal and conservative college students were presented with one of two versions of a welfare policy. One version provided government benefits, whereas the other version provided stringent benefits. Initial liberal testing indicated both that self-identified liberals preferred the generous policy to the stringent one and that self-identified conservatives preferred the stringent policy to the generous one (effects were systematically documented in Study 2).

The manipulation of policy content was coupled with a manipulation of reference group information. Half the participants were told that Democrats supported the policy; the remaining participants were told that Republicans supported it. The manipulation thus featured a 2 (participant ideology: liberal vs. conservative) × 2 (policy content: generous vs. stringent) × 2 (reference group information: Democratic, favor vs. Republican, favor) between-subjects design.

Method

Participants

At least 12 participants were recruited from several forms of a list of students at the introductory psychology class where the present study was conducted.


(Tharpel, 1993). On the contrary, what is critical is social meaning—the perceived "goodness of fit" between the attitude object and socially shared values. Social meaning can be inferred, as when people are aware of the position of their group and reactivate the attitude thatsomeone with their values should hold. For example, political parties might infer the liberal or conservative stance of a social program by evaluating its features in light of preexisting beliefs about the appropriate goals of such a program (see Urban, Anson, & Steele, 2000; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). But more often, social meaning is less inferred but manifest. It is defined by the judgments of other individuals who detect such social allegiances—that is, individuals who share one's social identity. For example, a Republican who learns that other party members support a government-funded job training program will regard that program as conservative by definition. As he or she will construct the attitude object itself as conforming to social meaning, by separating it value-consistent factual qualities (e.g., "reduces the costs of job training") taller than value-inconsistent ones (e.g., "gives money away"), and by highlighting moral commitments congruent to the party's position (e.g., "we must help people to help themselves") rather than incongruent (e.g., "we must reduce government spending"). According to this analysis, atti- tudes derive from the objective features of the attitude object, and their form is light of preexisting beliefs, primarily when informa- tion above improves judgments in absent and social meaning more than he inferred. Attitudes are less resistant to these fashions when information about ingroup judgments is available and social mean- ing directly conveyed.

Blindness to Group Influence

In spite of the myriad large impacts of group influence, people may be blind to it, and instead assume that their attitudes follow from an independent assessment of relevant facts. Several phenomena are relevant to this prediction. First, people are motivated to see themselves as objective and free of bias, as research on the "bias blind spot" (Poniv, Liu & Ring, 2001; "naive realism", Reshef- ton et al., 1995; Ross & Ward, 1995; Valonne, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) the "illusion of objectivity" (Arment, 1999), and the "fundamental effect" (Devine, 1980) all attest. Second, people have heightened belief in the true sources of their beliefs and behavior, and they tend to be their own self-analysis on widely held group boundary cues (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Petty, Wegener, & White, 1993; Wilton & Zimbra, 1996). To the extent that one group member's claim to a world in which the belief that self-identity is essential to society (Moscov Kligman, 2001), the impact of group influence may be underestimated (cf. Miller & Kinner, 1998). Although this review is suggestive, research evidence is scant. In the present studies, group influence on political attitudes is manipulated, and its actual effect compared with its perceived effect.
for this participation. The other 12 students were recruited by telephone from a separate departmental pool of participants and paid $5.

Liberal and conservative students were matched using a mass testing survey administered earlier in the academic term. Students indicated their political affiliation (1 = very much a Democrat, 9 = very much a Republican), their political ideology (1 = very much liberal, 9 = very much conservative), their attitude toward welfare (1 = very much oppose, 9 = very much favor welfare), and how strongly they felt about their attitude toward welfare (1 = not at all strongly, 9 = extremely strongly). Students who identified that they were extremely Democrat and liberal (4 or lower on either of the relevant scales) and that they favored welfare (6 or higher on the welfare scale) were considered 'liberal' participants. Students who indicated that they were extremely Republican and liberal (4 or lower on either of the relevant scales) and that they favored welfare (6 or higher on the welfare scale) were considered 'conservative' participants. (Because of the limited number of conservative students in the participant pool, the relevant liberal-conservative criteria were loosened somewhat.) To help ensure a range of involved pathways, all participants also were required to have indicated that they felt strongly about welfare (as or above the median response on 5). The selection procedure yielded a sample of 48 subjects (67% women and 33% conservatives; 42% white)...

Procedure

Upon arrival, participants were told that the study concerned "memory of everyday current events." They were informed that they would read a random selection of two newspaper reports and afterward complete a test assessing their recall. They were told that each report was followed by a questionnaire probing their reactions, as their "level of response to your performance on the latter memory exercise." While the first report served no purpose except to reinforce the plausibility of the cover story, the second one presented a basic welfare proposal. Although it was fabricated, the report was formatted to resemble an authentic newspaper article.

Policy content manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two versions of the welfare policy report. The "generic policy" version offered almost $500 per month to a family with one child, an extra $200 for every additional child, full medical insurance, $2,000 in food stamps, mini subsidies for housing and dry care, a job training program, and 2 years of paid leave for college. While losing benefits to 4 years, it guaranteed a job after benefits ended, and it assumed aid if the family had another child. By contrast, the "specific policy" version provided only $200 per month and $50 for each additional child. It offered only partial medical insurance and imposed a lifetime limit of 1.5 years without the possibility of retraining aid. In contrast to the general policy, the specific policy was not proposed to stop evictions, improving care, day care, job training, paid work, or college tuition. By real-world standards, the contrast between the two policies was stark. No existing program was more generous than the generous one featured here—even all real-world programs provided more than $700 per month and limited lifetime benefits to 5 years or fewer. None provided all the additional services supplied in the proposed policy, used in our present research (see Social Policy Discussion Project, 1981; Washington, 1982). Likewise, no existing program was more stringent that the stringent one presented here—all real-world programs provided more than $250 per month, and virtually none imposed a time limit shorter than 7 years.

Reference group information manipulation. Policy endorsement was also manipulated in the welfare report. In the demographic favor condition, the report notes that the policy was supported 95% of House Democrats (and 99% of Republicans) in the Republican favor condition, these percentages were reversed. This manipulation was buttressed by including policy-relevant claims assembled by prominent Democrats and Republicans. In the Democratic favor condition, a Democrat was quoted in saying that the policy would "lighten the financial burden of the poor," and predict Republicans of "trivial blaming." A Republican was also quoted in saying, stating that "the program was too costly," and would reward people for "having children that they cannot support." By contrast, in the Republican favor condition, a Democrat was quoted in saying that the policy was "only a band-aid effort." A Republican was quoted in saying, stating that the program "provides substantial coverage... without undermining basic work ethic and sense of individual responsibility." Depending measures. To assess attitude participants were asked to indicate their support of the policy on a scale ranging from 1 (extremely opposed) to 7 (extremely in favor). To assess the perceived causal source of their attitude, they were asked to evaluate the extent to which each of the following four factors contributed to their attitude toward the welfare proposal: "The specific details of the proposal," "Their own personal philosophy of the role of government in social issues," "What the typical Democrat or Republican believes," and "Their own background/relationship with people on welfare." Responses were made on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (don't agree at all) to 7 (totally agree). Next, memory of the report was assessed, and the responses served as checks on the instructions. Participants were instructed the procedures of Democrats and Republicans who supported the policy, and that they reinstalled the credit payment and the relative time limit on benefits. Finally, participants were thanked and thanked.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

To ensure that the experimental manipulations were successful, memory of relevant report details was assessed. With a few exceptions, participants accurately remembered both policy content and reference group information. Moreover, accuracy of recall was not as low as a function of experimental condition. Ultimately, however, data from 7 students were discarded prior to analyses—3 students whose mental care of policy content or of reference group information was too variable, and 4 who had no standard deviations away from the relevant condition means and an additional 2 students who passed the experimental hypotheses. Because most participants in all studies accurately recalled the content of the manipulations, these checks receive no further discussion.

Analyses of Attitude Data

Attitude data were examined using a 2 (participant ideology: liberal or conservative) × 2 (policy content: generous or stringent) × 2 (reference group information: Democrats favor or Republicans favor) analysis of variance (ANOVA). As predicted, reference group information was the most influential of the three independent variables. The relevant interaction involving partici- pant ideology and reference group information proved highly significant, F(1, 64) = 120.81, p < .001. Regardless of whether...
The policy was generous or stringent, liberal participants supported it (M = 5.46) and they opposed it if it made Democrats support it (M = 3.15), r(64) = 7.67, p < .001. Likewise, conservative participants supported the policy if told the Republicans supported it (M = 5.49) and they opposed it if told Republicans opposed it (M = 2.69), r(64) = 7.89, p < .001. (See Table 1 for the relevant cell means.) By contrast, policy content had no direct effect for either partisan group; the relevant interaction involving participant ideology and policy content was not significant, F(1, 64) = 1.05, p = .31.

Summary
For both liberal and conservative participants, the effect of reference group information overload on the policy content if their party endorsed it, liberals opposed even a lavish welfare program, and conservatives supported even a lavish one. The results are consistent with the contention that people base their attitudes on social meaning. Once the policy was socially defined as liberal or conservative, the persuasive impact of its objective content was reduced to nil. Participants also denied having been influenced by the stated position of Democrats and Republicans, and instead they claimed that their beliefs followed from an appreciation of policy content (guided by their personal philosophies of government).

One unexpected finding was that each party was more persuasive when its actual position differed from its expected one (e.g., when Democrats supported a stringent policy, and when Republicans supported a generous one). This result could reflect people’s preferences for moderate extremes (see Kellner & Robinson, 1966), their tendency to consider the merits of expectation-violating messages more carefully than those of expectation-consistent messages (Maheshwara & Chaiken, 1991) or their trust of communicators who express positions contrary to their assumed biases, beliefs, or self-interests (see Eagly, Chaiken, & Wood, 1981; Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966). While future research could profitably investigate the issue, this result suggests that participants noticed the incongruity between the stated position of their party and the expected one. Yet they conformed, even though the stated position plainly defied their party’s (and their own) prevailing ideological commitments.

Study 2
A second study was conducted to replicate and extend the initial findings and to address questions that were not answered in Study 1. One question involved the predicted pattern of results in a condition where reference group information was absent. As discussed in introducing the present studies, under such circumstances people are expected to infer social meaning by evaluating the policy in light of long-held ideological beliefs. Liberals should thus prefer the generous policy to the stringent one, and conservatives should prefer the stringent policy to the generous one. The effortful determination of social meaning would appear to reflect systematic or central-route processing, an entailment of such processing in responsiveness to message content (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), however, as in Study 1, it was predicted that this effortful processing would be bypassed or redirected, in light of reference group information. The addition of a no-group information condition would also help to improve upon the test used to assess awareness of group influence. Participants in Study 1 may have been aware of the effect of “other Democrats and Republicans,” but they may have reasoned that policy content was more influential because it constituted the very object of judgment. Study 2 addressed this issue by simply assessing whether participants given group information claimed to be more affected by their party’s position than participants given no group information.

A third question addressed by Study 2 concerned the role of prior knowledge in moderating group influence. On this hand, people who are knowledgeable about welfare might feel more confident in their own appraisal of the policy and thus be less influenced by the position of their party, especially if they are aware of relevant background information such as cost-of-living expenses. On the other hand, high-knowledge individuals might prove as responsive to group influence as their low-knowledge peers, if they too base their attitudes on objective content per se, or on subjective and socially confirmed meaning.
Method

Design and Participants

The selection criteria were identical to those used in Study 1. Because of the limited number of ‘conservative’ students in the participant pool, only liberal students (17 women, 17 men) took part in Study 2. They were assigned to one of four experimental conditions: In two of the conditions, either the generous policy or the stringent one was presented without further commentary. In the remaining two conditions, either the generous policy or the stringent one was presented with reference group information expected to attenuate the effect of policy content (generous policy/Republican favors; stringent policy/Democrats favors). The other two conditions used in Study 1—the generous policy/Democrats favor condition and the stringent policy/Republicans favor condition—were conceptually unnecessary, indeed, the effect of group affiliation in these conditions would be limited by ceiling or floor effects. Accordingly, these two conditions were dropped from Study 2. To assess the effect of prior knowledge, the multi-public questionnaire also asked students to rate their knowledge of welfare on a scale ranging from 1 (very little knowledge) to 9 (a great deal of knowledge).

Procedure

Except for the noted change in the framed experimental conditions, the procedure was generally identical to that used in Study 1. A more detailed view was made to the questionnaire item used to assess awareness of group influence. Rather than ask participants to rate the influence of "the typical Democrat or Republican," the reference item consisted the parenthetical term "typical" and simply referred to "other Democrats and Republicans." *Results and Discussion*

Data Analytic Strategy

A median split was performed on participant knowledge, yielding a low knowledge group (with scores ranging from 1 to 5) and a high knowledge group (with scores ranging from 9 to 12). Two one-way ANOVAs were then undertaken to analyze the attitude data. Since the effect of policy content was, as predicted, attenuated by reference group information and whether the effect of group information was, in turn, attenuated by participant knowledge. Because of the nature of the experiment design (i.e., policy content was not fully crossed with group information), a conservative omnibus test was also undertaken—4 (conditions) x 2 (participant knowledge) ANOVA. After both analyses were performed, follow-up contrasts were conducted to yield obtained effects. A few participants failed to fill out the questionnaire completely; as a result, degrees of freedom vary slightly for different comparisons.

Attitude

Both the policy content x group information interaction obtained in the 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA, F(1, 46) = 27.66, p < .001, and the overall main effect of condition obtained in the 4 x 2 ANOVA, F(1, 46) = 9.23, p < .001, yielded a highly significant result. In the absence of group information, participants (all of whom, as noted, were liberal) favored the generous policy more (M = 6.75) than the stringent one (M = 3.31), t(45) = 3.51, p < .002. However, when group information was available, these preferences reversed, such that participants favored the Democrat-supported stringent policy (M = 5.00) more than the Republican-supported generous policy (M = 3.20), t(46) = 3.92, p < .001. Neither analysis yielded main effects or interactions involving participant knowledge, all Fs < 2. (Using participant knowledge as a continuous variable in a regression model yielded the same result, all Ps > .1.)

Self-Perceived Bases of Attitude

As in Study 1, participants attributed their attitude to policy content (M = 5.65) and to their philosophy of government (M = 3.41) more than to the views of "Democrats and Republicans" (M = 3.35), paired t(53) = 9.38, p < .001; t(53) = 8.51, p < .001, respectively. Indeed, they felt that their experience with people on welfare was marginally more important (M = 3.87) than the stated position of their party, t(53) = 1.82, p = .07. Moreover, they did not rate the position of their party as more influential in the two group information conditions (M = 3.48) than in the two no-group information conditions (M = 2.91), t(56) = 1.24, p < .22.

Summary

In the absence of reference group information, liberal participants favored the generous policy more than the stringent one. Without knowledge of the views of their group, participants behaved as contemporary models of persuasion would predict they would under conditions of effortless processing. They processed the policy carefully enough to discern its merits, and they chose their attitude accordingly (Table 1). From the above results, it was apparent that the effect of policy content was generally lessened by the presence of group information. To what extent does the presence of group information attenuate the effects of policy content? A systematic investigation of the role of group information in the processing of persuasive messages is clearly needed. The current study has demonstrated that group information can significantly affect the processing of persuasive messages in an individualistic culture. The results also suggest that group information can attenuate the effects of policy content on attitude formation.
have downplayed its significance so as to avoid appearing foolish in the eyes of the experimenter (i.e., because of social desirability pressures). To address these two issues, an additional study was run manipulating reference group information, using only percentile information, omitting the policy-relevant heuristic. Twenty-nine liberal participants were presented with the generous policy either without further commentary or with the additional information that Democrats opposed it. To heighten anonymity, and to minimize social desirability pressures, participants were instructed at the study's outset to seal their questionnaire in a manila envelope upon completion (without providing any identifying information), and then to deposit this envelope in a drop-box (where a stack of previous participants' envelopes was visible). In all other respects, the procedure was identical to that used in Study 2. This study replicated the primary results obtained thus far. While attitudes were more favorable in the no-group-information condition (M = 5.20) than in the Democrats oppose condition (M = 4.07), r(27) = 3.27, p < .005, the perceived contribution of "Democrats and Republicans" was not significantly lower in the no-group-information condition (M = .87) than in the Democrats oppose condition (M = 3.45), r(27) = −1.03, p > .30.

Study 3

Study 3 was designed to resolve concerns raised in the two previous studies, and to begin the effort to assess variables mediating the effect of group information on attitude. The first concern involved an alternative explanation for the observed effect on attitude. The reference group information might provide anchors for the generous and stringent endpoints of the welfare benefit scale—that is, "perspective." As implied in the present results, perspective theory asserts that liberal participants who learned that their party favored a stringent $200-per-month policy defined that amount as the generous endpoint of the generous-stringent continuum of benefits, and further assumed that the stringent, Republican endpoint or alternative was less than $200. Likewise, conservative participants who learned that Republicans favored the $800-per-month welfare policy might have realized that the stringent, Democratic endpoint or alternative was more than $800. Both liberals and conservatives may thus have viewed the policy supported by their party as superior to the assumed alternative.

Study 3 addressed this problem by holding the range of benefits—the perspective—constant. Participants were presented both with a generous policy and with a stringent one. In the no-group-information condition, they were provided with no additional information. In the group information conditions, they were told that Republicans supported the generous policy and that Democrats supported the stringent one. Because the two policies were presented side-by-side, the generous-stringent perspective was fixed, and the policy alternative held constant. Study 3 also attempted to assess variables mediating the effect of reference group information on attitude. It is possible that the effect is driven not by a shift in social meaning, but by heuristic or peripheral-route processing. The results would be perfectly understandable if participants read the message in such a low-effect fashion that they failed to comprehend the content of the policy. One result that casts doubt on this possibility involves participants in the no-group-information condition in Study 2. Because those participants were responsive to policy content, they clearly processed effecttively enough to determine the merit of the policy. Nevertheless, it is possible that the reference group information elicited heuristic or peripheral-route processing, causing participants to scrutinize the message less than they otherwise would (Mackie, Gastarini-Comac, & Skelly, 1992; but see also Mackie et al., 1990). Assuming that their party's position was correct, people may have seen little reason to evaluate the policy carefully. In contrast to this conceptualization of group influence, the one offered here asserts that people who were provided with group information continue to process persuasive information in a systematic manner. However, that processing is biased or redirected to yield a representation of the object consistent with its assigned social meaning (see also Alvaro & Crano, 1996; Ash, 1952; Chaffee & Bawn, 1964; Chen et al., 1998; Chaffee & Petty, 2000).

Several new measures were included to test whether reference group information (a) elicits heuristic or peripheral-route processing and/or (b) biases the direction of systematic processing. First, cognitive effort was measured by asking participants to indicate how closely they read the report (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Atkinson, 1986). Second, cognitive responses were assessed by asking participants to list these thoughts (positive, negative, and neutral) about the policies (Cacioppo et al., 1986; Chaffee & Bawn, 1964). Third, results were assessed more thoroughly in Study 3 than in the previous two studies by using an open-ended memory exercise (Cacioppo et al., 1963).

To the extent that group information elicits heuristic processing, participants should report reading the message less closely, generate fewer thoughts, and remember less in the group-information condition than in the no-group-information condition (Fleming & Petty, 2000). To the extent that group information biases systematic processing, the number of positive versus negative thoughts generated about either policy (i.e., the direction or valence of processing) should vary as a function of condition (Chaffee & Bawn, 1964).

The cognitive response measure could also yield more evidence in support of the contention that processing of a message containing reference group information is effortful and systematic in nature. If attitudes arise from systematic or central-route processing rather than from heuristic or peripheral-route processing, then they should follow from thoughts—positivity of attitudes should correlate with positivity of thoughts (Cacioppo et al., 1966; Chaffee & Bawn, 1964). If attitudes are equally elaborated in the group information condition and in the no-group-information condition, the relevant correlations should be comparable.

Method

Design and Participants

To generalize beyond the liberal sample used in the prior study, Study 3 featured conservative participants (11 women; 20 men). In the control condition, they were presented with both a generous policy and a stringent one without further commentary. In the group-information condition, they were presented with the same two policies, but informed that Republicans supported the generous policy and that Democrats supported the stringent one.
Procedure

The procedure was similar to the one used in the previous studies. However, the content of the two policies was altered slightly in order to shorten and simplify the news report and to maintain its verisimilitude.2 Once again, the main concern was whether policy content would determine attitudes when reference group information was absent. Whether the effect of policy content would be attenuated (or overruled) when reference group information was available. 

With two exceptions, the dependent measure questionnaires were identical to that used in the previous studies. The first exception was that attitudes toward each of two policies (rather than only one) were assessed. The second exception involved a refinement in the item used to assess perceived favorability of group policy. Participants in Studies 1 and 2 may have failed to consider "Democrats and Republicans" as referring to Democratic and Republican lawmakers (as opposed, for example, in registered voters). This "bug" was remedied by changing the relevant item to "What Democratic versus Republican lawmakers apparently believe." In addition, three new sets of measures were introduced to assess cognitive processing (similar to those used by Cinotti et al., 1986, and by Chakos & Malarkey, 1994). The first set of measures assessed cognitive effort. Participants were asked, "How closely did you read the article? (1 = not at all at all; 5 = extremely closely)" and "how much did you try to carefully read the details about the welfare proposals?" (1 = very little; 7 = a great deal). The second measure assessed cognitive responses by providing participants with five true or false statements about the article and the two welfare proposals it contained. The third measure assessed recall by asking participants to recall "all that you can remember about the two welfare proposals." 

Two evaluators independently evaluated the cognitive response measures. They recorded the total number of topics, the relevant in each thought (generous policy or stringent policy), and the valence of that thought (positive, negative, or neutral). They also counted the number of program-details listed in the recall exercise. Both evaluators were unaware of participants' experimental condition. Interrater agreement was satis- factory (intragroup r = .80 to r = 1.0, with a mean r = .92), and ratings were then averaged to provide a single score for each dimension.

Results

Two participants failed to answer several questionnaire items, again resulting in slightly variable degrees of freedom for different comparisons. In addition, 3 participants participated the authenticity of the report-2 in the control condition and 1 in the group information condition—and hence their data were discarded prior to analysis.

Attitude

The attitude data were evaluated using a 2 (policy: generous or stringent) x 2 (reference group information: absent or available) ANOVA with policy serving as a repeated measure. The interaction between policy and group information was highly significant, F(1, 26) = 10.43, p < 0.005. In the no-group-information condition, participants (all of whom, as noted, were conversant) favored the stringent policy more (M = 4.77) than the generous one (M = 3.00), t(26) = 2.49, p < 0.02. This difference was eliminated (indeed, fully reversed) in the group information condition, where participants favored the Republican-supported generous policy more (M = 5.00) than the Democrat-supported stringent one (M = 3.57), t(26) = 2.48, p < 0.05.

Measures of Cognitive Processing

Cognitive effort. Participants' responses to the two items assessing the effort they invested in reading the report were highly correlated, t(26) = 8.31, p < 0.001; accordingly, they were averaged into a single composite. The mean response was near the maximal value of the 5-point scale (M = 6.07), and no difference was found between the group information condition (M = 6.29) and the no-group-information condition (M = 5.87), F < 2, Processing in both conditions thus appeared equally effortful. 

Cognitive responses and recall. This assertion is further sup- ported by results along the cognitive response and recall measures. Participants in the group information condition neither generated fewer thoughts than did participants in the no-group-information condition (M = 6.46 and 7.30, respectively), F < 2, nor recalled fewer policy details (M = 8.92 and 10.14, respectively), F < 1. If group information biased the direction or valence of processing, it should have caused thoughts about the stringent policy to become more negative and thoughts about the generous policy to become more positive. Contrary to predictions, it did not. The number of negative thoughts concurring the stringent policy was subtracted from the number of positive thoughts concerning that policy (see Chakos & Malarkey, 1994). The same procedure was repeated for the generous policy. Neither index was affected by condition, F < 1.

2 While the generous policy used in Studies 1 and 2 was monthly benefits at about $800 for 9 years, the generous policy used in Study 3 was at $1,000 for 7 years; it also stipulated that after 3 years benefits would participate in a "government work-far program." Moreover, while the stringent policy in Studies 1 and 2 fixed monthly benefits at $250 for 9 years, the stringent policy in Study 3 fixed them at $400 for 3 years. As Studies 1 and 2, the generous policy included complete medical coverage, full employment, housing, and day care; the stringent policy was not. While these alterations, as noted, served to shorten and simplify the report, they also helped to maintain its credibility by reducing slightly the contrast between the two proposals. Unlike Studies 1 and 2, Study 3 aimed to maximize the difference between the generous policy and the stringent policy without sacrificing the verisimilitude of the report and thus introducing threats to internal validity (i.e., participant response and experimental demand). However, 3 participants (2 in Study 1 and 1 in Study 2) elected to read the entire study, and the data were rerun to verify the results of Study 3. This rerun yielded a pattern of results consistent with the original findings. In addition, the rationale for Study 3 (as opposed to the public administration of the social service agency) is beyond the scope of this article.
The results thus far suggest that attitudes were cognitively elaborated, that is, based on systematic or central-route processing. Participants in both conditions asserted that they read the report carefully, and in the no-group-information condition they based their attitudes on policy content. Another indicator of relatively systematic processing is whether positivity of thought correlates with positivity of attitude (Cacioppo et al., 1996; Chaiken & Mahanen, 1994). In fact, the extent to which thoughts were biased in favor of the stringent policy over the generous one predicted the extent to which attitudes favored the stringent policy over the generous ones. \( r^2 = 0.27, p < .05 \); and this correlation did not differ by experimental condition, \( F < 1 \). There was thus no evidence that attitudes were less cognitively elaborated in the group information condition than in the no-group-information condition.

**Self-Perceived Bases of Attitudes**

Once again, participants ascribed their attitude to policy details \( (M = 3.41) \), to their philosophy of government \( (M = 5.48) \), and, to a lesser extent, to their experience with people on welfare \( (M = 3.93) \), each of which was rated as more influential than the stated position of party lawmakers \( (M = 3.11) \), paired \( r(26) = 5.56, p < .001 \); \( r(26) = 5.68, p < .001 \); \( r(26) = 1.65, p = .11 \), respectively.

In fact, they did not rate the position of party lawmakers as more influential in the group information condition \( (M = 3.36) \) than in the no-group-information condition \( (M = 2.85) \), \( r < 1 \).

**Discussion**

The results of Study 3 clarify and extend upon those obtained in Studies 1 and 2. Participants again based their attitude on policy content if reference group information was absent, but they seemingly defined that content if reference group information was available. This effect occurred even though the report presented the stringent policy and the stringent one side-by-side. The effect of group information on attitude thus cannot reflect a shift in scale perspective (Dawson & Lupsa, 1968), because both the generous and stringent range of the benefit scale and the policy alternative were held constant across conditions. In addition, participants again appeared to be blind to the effect of given information on their attitudes.

The measures assessing cognitive processing yield two conclusions. First, group information had a large effect on attitude without decreasing depth of processing or otherwise eliciting heuristic or peripheral-route processing. In both conditions, participants reported reading the report with equal care, generated an equal number of thoughts, and showed equally satisfactory recall. In both conditions, participants exhibited the same correlation between positivity of thought and positivity of attitude—a hallmark of cognitive elaboration (Pettty & Wegener, 1998). Second, contrary to predictions, no evidence was found to suggest that group information biased systematic processing. One simple methodological explanation for this null effect, however, involves the possibility that participants had insufficient time to provide a thorough account of their positive, negative, and neutral thoughts toward each of the two policies (a suspicion reinforced in post-debriefing interviews, and a problem subsequently remedied in Study 4).

Two important questions remain unresolved. First, what psychological processes mediate the effect of group information on attitude? Second, would group information affect behavioral outcomes more consequential than the paper-and-pencil ones assessed thus far?

**Study 4**

Groups affect attitudes by changing perceptions of the social world. Objects are socially defined as compatible or incompatible with long-held values, and they are then perceived in a manner consistent with their assigned social meaning. This account was tested in Study 4. Liberal participants were presented with a federally funded job training program—one that pilot testing had confirmed to be attractive among politically liberal undergraduates. In the no-group-information condition, the program was described without further commentary. In the group information condition, it was also noted that Democrats opposed the program.

Three measurement strategies were used to assess hypothesized mediating processes and perceptions. First, participants appraised the social meaning of the program by rating it along the liberal-conservative dimension. Second, participants completed the same cognitive response measure used in Study 3, but they were provided with more time to finish it. In addition, their cognitive responses were coded to assess two possible shifts in cognitive processing. On the one hand, group influence could affect the valence of processing but not the content processed. Thoughts might refer to the same factual qualities in both conditions (e.g., "pays people in jobs"), but these qualities might be evaluated more negatively in the Democrats oppose condition than in the no-group-information condition. On the other hand, group influence could define the very content to be processed (Asch, 1952). Thoughts might refer to more stringent factual qualities in the Democrats oppose condition (e.g., "imposes mental labor") and to more generous factual qualities in the no-group-information condition (e.g., "offers high-paying jobs").

The second strategy used to assess mediating processes involved asking participants to express and explain their attitude in the context of a written editorial. Like the cognitive response measure, the editorials tapped the perceived factual qualities of the attitude object. In addition, the editorials also tapped its perceived moral connotations. As research in political psychology suggests, liberals are invested in two values that sometimes conflict—individualism and humanitarianism (see Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Huxheurson, & Chamberlin, 2002; Tetlock, 1986; Tetlock et al., 1996). As interviewed in the context of our pilot testing suggested, one reason that liberals supported the job training program used in Study 3 was that it reconciled these two values. Encouraging personal responsibility could be viewed as a means to achieving a humanitarian end but Kristensen & Sonia, 1994). To the extent, however, that participants downplay the importance and efficacy of cultivating personal responsibility, and highlight the importance and urgency of providing direct humanitarian relief, they ought to support the program less, and support more the existing welfare system and similar program alternatives that allocate resources immediately without the requirement of work. Participants in the no-group-information condition were thus expected to write editorials appealing both to individualism and to humanitarianism, whereas participants in the Democrats oppose condition were
expected to appeal to individualism and to humanism more (see also Kristiansen & Zhao, 1994).

Beyond assessing relevant media-qua-social processes, Study 4 also had a part of secondary objectives. The first involved assessing the effect of group information on consequential behavior. Rather than simply indicate their attitude on an anonymous questionnaire, partici-
pants could write an editorial either in support of the program or against it, and they were led to believe that their “response” would affect the decisions of real policy makers. The other objective involved assessing attributions made for the attitudes of others. Although participants were expected to be blind to the effect of group information on themselves, they were expected to be perfectly able to recognize its influence on others (see also Kenworthy & Miller, 2002; Prentin et al., 2002). They may even go a step further and assume that their beliefs are more objective than those of other people (Armer, 1999; Ross & Ward, 1995). To explain their own beliefs, people will naturally cite the most available causal cues—i.e., their thoughts and feelings toward the object (see Moelli, 1999), failing to realize that those thoughts and feel-
ing have been shaped, to a large extent, by their group. When explaining the beliefs of others, however, people have no direct access to such rich subjective information. As a result, they are unlikely to discount the causal signifiance of salient external forces like group influence. As Epley and Dunning (2000) write, perceptions of others “may be more accurate not because of the information people possess about others, but rather because of the information they lack” (p. 888).

Method

Participants

Because of their group availability in the participants pool, liberal students were again recruited (50 women, 19 men).

Procedure

Upon arrival, participants were told that the purpose of the study involved surveying student opinion about social-political issues for the on-campus “Institute of Social Policy Studies.” To that end, they were asked to review a social program aimed at helping poor families to achieve economic sufficiency. Participants were given a report (actually fab-
iculated) intended to resemble an article from the Economist. The report described a government-funded program that “would guarantee both job training and cash payments...to poor people who receive welfare benefits and to those whose benefit would end.” Beyond assuring the poor, the program also had three specific features—a tax incentive to encourage businesses to hire disadvantaged people, mandatory participa-
tion for welfare recipients, and projected economic benefits such as higher employment rates. In the no-information condition, the report pre-
sented the program and evidence of its efficacy without further commen-
tary. In the Democratic option condition, the report further noted that Democrats opposed the program and the Republican supported it. As in Study 3, the report also specified the policy alternative—willful benefits of “$750 per month...along with food stamps and medical insurance.” Like Study 3, Study 4 thus removed the potential confound of a shift in scale perspective.

The dependent measures were generally the same as the one used in the prior studies. In contrast to Study 3, however, thoughts valence on the cognitive response measure was assessed by asking participants to write either a “+” or “−” or “0” next to each thought depending on whether it was positive, negative, or neutral (see Plotting & Petty, 2000). Participants were also given 4 min (rather than 3 min) to complete the thought-listing exercise.

These new dependent measures were also included. The first new dep-
endent measure tapped the social-consensus dimension of the program. Participants rated the program along the liberal-conservative dimension using a single 7-point scale (1 = extremely liberal, 7 = extremely conservative).

The second new set of dependent measures targeted several items assessing the perceived cause of other people’s attitudes. Participants were again presented with each of the four factors that they had previously rated in terms of its contribution to their own attitude. However, they now read the contribution of each factor first to the attitude of the wrong Democrats at their school and then to the attitude of the average Republicans at their school (see Robinson et al., 1995, for a similar procedure). Participants then estimated the contribution of policy details, philosophy of govern-
ment, party lawmakers, and experience with people in welfare to their own attitude, that of the average Democrat, and that of the average Republican on a 12-segment 7-point scale. Participants also rated the ob-
jectivity of their own evaluation of the program, that of the average Democrat, and that of the average Republican.

The 36 new dependent variables was behavioral support. Participants were asked to write an editorial in response to the program. The exper-
imenters explained that their editorial would be forwarded to the on-campus Institute of Social Policy Studies, where it would be used to “assess the views of the students body and...to inform public policy.” The experi-
menters gave participants two forms—one designated for use if they op-
posed the program and the other designated for use if they supported it. Each form was printed on blank paper, and stapled with the Institute’s letterhead. Participants were told to mail their signed editorial at no envelope (addressed to the Institute) upon completion, and then to insert this envelope in a drop-box. Beyond providing a measure of behavioral support, theeditors (as needed) were also asked to assess both the actual factual mem-
ory of the program and its perceived political ramifications. After com-
pleting their editorial, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Assessments of Cognitive Responses

Two codes independently assessed each participant’s cognitive re-
sonse exercise. Neither was aware of participants’ experimental condi-
tion. The exercises were evaluated along three dimensions—verbal con-
tent of thoughts, overall content of thoughts about the program, and specific program-specific (i.e., ambiguous) program features. To assess overall veracity of thoughts, the codes created the number of positive, negative, and neutral

For explanatory purposes, this manipulation had also been crossed with a manipulation of the response argument. One version of the report used ambiguous arguments (e.g., statements of people like commitmen
te principles), while the other versions used unambiguous arguments (e.g., scient-
ific evidence of the efficacy of the program along economic indices). Because source cues lead to a stronger impact of respondents to ambigu-
ous information than on responses to unambiguous information (Cheshier & Mulhern, 1994), it seemed plausible that the effect of group information would be larger for the ambiguous program than for the unambiguous one. This expectation was confirmed in analyses of perceived argument quality (measured using a version of Likert scales). The arguments in the ambiguous report were rated as strong in the no-group-information conditions but weak in the Democratic group condition. By contrast, the arguments in the unambiguous report were rated as strong across both conditions. However, in analyses of the primary attitudinal, behavioral, and emotional responses, neither main effects nor interactions involving re-
pon ambiguity were found. These null effects again reflect the power of group influence. Participants generated and discounted inconclusively among arguments if they contradicted the judgment of their group.
thoughts directed in the program consisting thoughts irrelevant to the program, and connecting various errors in the identified valence of thoughts. To assess overall content of thoughts, the coders counted the number of thoughts that referred to generic program qualities (e.g., "provides effective job training" or "gives good wages") and the number of thoughts that referred to specific program qualities (e.g., "provides only mental labor" or "provides only minimum wage"). The final set of assessments was made to test the prediction that group information would have little effect on thought valence toward features that were less ambiguous than the job and training component of the program, and hence less amenable to alternative factual verification (see Chluch & Mahlerman, 1994). To assess valence of thought toward these unambiguous program features, the coders counted the number of positive, negative, and neutral thoughts directed toward the program's tax incentive, its mandatory component, and its punitive economic benefits. Although participants might evaluate the tax incentive or mandatory component positively or negatively, or view the punitive economic benefits as likely or unlikely, little if any ambiguity surrounded the factual definition of these features. Intermittent reliability provided satisfactory for each dimension (ranging from r = .70 to r = 1.0, with a mean r = .91), and the scores of the two coders were subsequently averaged to provide a single rating for each dimension.

Assessments of Written Editorials

The coders first assessed each editorial along dimensions similar to those used to evaluate the cognitive response exercises. They counted the number of references made to generic program qualities and the number of references made to specific program qualities. They also counted both the number of positive references and the number of negative references to the tax incentive, the mandatory component, and the punitive economic benefits. Next, the coders assessed the verbal communications highlighted in the attitude object. They evaluated each editorial along four dimensions tapping the intention of appeal to individualistic values relative to humanitarian ones: (a) expressed desirability of achieving personal responsibility, as signified by statements such as "it is important to encourage self-sufficiency"; (b) expressed danger of providing too much humanitarian aid, as signified by statements such as "it is too much for the less fortunate"; (c) expressed danger of providing insufficient humanitarian aid, as signified by statements such as "it is too little help for the poor"; and (d) expressed danger of providing insufficient aid, as signified by statements such as "it is too much help for the poor without food."). Assessments for these three dimensions were made using separate 5-point scales ranging from 1 (entirely false) to 5 (great degree). The coders also assessed the concept of poverty expressed in each editorial along the individualism-humanitarianism dimension—that is, the extent to which the causes of poverty were implied to rest in the individual (e.g., "poor people lack a work ethic") or in the environment (e.g., "poor people lack resources"). The relevant scale ranged from 1 (very much inside the individual) to 5 (very much in the environment). Interrater reliability proved satisfactory for each dimension (ranging from r = .71 to r = .80, with a mean r = .84), and the scores of the two coders were again averaged to provide single ratings for each dimension. The danger of providing insufficient aid dimension and the concept of poverty dimension were reversed coded so that higher values for each of the four moral communication items signified more emphasis on individualism relative to humanitarianism. A factor analysis confirmed that all four dimensions loaded on a single factor (with eigenvalues ranging from .78 to .91). The items were subsequently averaged to a composite index of individualism (Cronbach's a = .85). Endorse of one's conversion validity was assessed by asking each participant to what extent he or she personally felt that the group information had been accurately assessed by averaging the party affiliation and political ideology scores obtained for each participant in a response set 6-8 weeks prior to participa-


cien in the program (M = 3.00) than in the no group-information condition (M = 1.50). For the group-information condition (M = 3.00), F(1, 45) = 7.03, p < .01. Moreover, thought valence constituted a significant covariate in the analyses involving attitude, F(1, 44) = 28.20, p < .001. While controlling for thought valence did not eliminate the effect of group information on attitude, it did reduce that effect to F(1, 44) = 4.91, p < .03. The modified Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986) found that the composite index used in between-condition significance tests was correlated after each dimension was first standardized (4th order variance with the other dimensions. Because the composite index was positively skewed, a square root transformation was also performed (after a value of +5 was added to each score to avoid zero values). For ease of interpreta-

tion, however, the squared means are derived from an untransformed composite of scores along the original (standardized) dimensions. Anal-

yses using this latter composite yield the same (i.e., statistically significant) basic result.

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1989) concluded that this reduction was significant. \( z = -2.34, p < 0.02 \). Bledsoe's systemic nicotine suppressed almost 50% of the effect of reference group information on attitude.

However, group information did not bias the valence of processing so much as it defined the very program content to be processed (cf. Asch, 1946, 1948). The number of thoughts referring to stringent program quality was reduced from the number of thoughts referring to generic program qualities. As predicted, the assessed factual qualities of the program were less generous in the Democratic opponent condition (\( M = 9.40 \)) than in the no-group-information condition (\( M = 3.03 \)).

4 F1 (1, 45) = 4.92, \( p = .03 \). 4 A secondary finding indicates that group information affected the only interpretation of ambiguous program content, but the salience of ambivalent program content. When participants were both assigned a negative valence to the mandatory component (\( M = -0.98 \)), the mean number of thoughts about this component was higher in the Democratic opponent condition (\( M = 1.24 \)) than in the no-group-information condition (\( M = 0.53 \)).

5 F1 (1, 45) = 3.97, \( p = .05 \). Evidence of a pure shift in evaluation would be provided if individuals who thought about an ambiguous program feature were found to evaluate that feature more negatively in the Democrats opponent condition than in the no-group-information condition. Analyses were thus undertaken to assess the extent of group information on thought valence toward each of the three specific program features, with richness confirmed to participants who had generated at least one thought about the relevant feature. With one exception, no effects emerged. Fs < 2. The exception was that participants evaluating the tax issues more negatively in the Democrats opponent condition (\( M = -0.11 \)) than in the no-group-information condition (\( M = 0.70 \)).

Written editorials. Analyses of the written editorials reinforce the claim that group information did not bias processing as much as it defined the object to be processed. The number of references to stringent program features was subtracted from the number of references to generic program features. As predicted, the editorials presented the program to less generous in the Democrats opponent condition (\( M = 0.35 \)) than in the no-group-information condition (\( M = 0.55 \)).

6 F1 (1, 45) = 5.13, \( p = .03 \). On balance, participants evaluated a stringent program more than three times as often as the Democratic opponents conditie (54% did so) than in the no-group-information condition (10% did so), \( 2(1, N = 49) = 7.42, p < .01 \). With the exception, there were no significant effects involving either the frequency or the valence of references to the three ambiguous program features, Fs < 2. The exception was that marginally more negative references to the mandatory feature were made in the Democrats opponent condition (\( M = 0.94 \)) than in the no-group-information condition (\( M = 0.53 \)).

In summary, the results thus far indicate that reference group information changed the perceived factual qualities of the object of judging, but the next set of results indicate that it also changed perceived moral connotations. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed on the individualism scores assigned to the editorials, using participant liberalism (assessed in mass testing) as the covariate. The analysis yielded a significant effect \( F(1, 45) = 4.95, p = .03 \). In the no-group-information condition, Deutshak struck a balance between humanism and individualism; the mean score adjusted \( H = -2.68 \) did not differ from the scale midpoint (1 = extremely humanistic, 5 = extremely individualistic), \( 4(4) = -1.64, p > .10 \). By contrast, the mean score in the Democrats opponent condition focused humanism over individualism (adjusted \( H = 2.00 \), \( 4(4) = -1.47, p < .01 \)). Overall, an important test of mediation. When an ANCOVA was performed on attitude using social meaning biased processing, and emphasized on individuals with participant liberalism statistically partialled out, all three proved significant covariates, \( F(1, 45) = 17.23, p < .001 \). \( F(1, 45) = 16.04, p < .001 \). \( F(1, 45) = 3.15, p = .08 \), respectively, and the effect of reference group information was reduced to nil, \( F = .01 \).

Perceived Causal Attributes of Attitudes for Self

Once again, participants claimed that the details of the program (\( M = 5.58 \)) and their own philosophy of government (\( M = 5.30 \)) contributed to their attitude most, as they stated that the position of party lawmaking contributed least (\( M = 3.43 \), paired \( t(48) = 7.44, p < .001 \), \( 4(4) = 5.03, p < .001 \), respectively). They viewed the position of party lawmaking as more important than their experience with people on welfare (\( M = 3.47, p < .01 \). There were two other noteworthy results. First, the position of lawmakers was rated as more influential in the group information condition (\( M = 3.60 \)) than in the no-group-information condition (\( M = 3.17 \)). F(1, 41) = 1, again suggesting little if any awareness of group influence. Second, program details were rated as more influential in the group information condition (\( M = 6.00 \)) than in the no-
group-information condition (M = 5.19), P(1, 45) = 8.69, p < .005. Participants thus asserted that they had based their attitude on an autonomous and rational consideration of the facts, and, if anything, they made this assertion more rather than less in the group-information condition.

Perceived Causal Bases of Attitudes of Others

As predicted, participants viewed their peers as more conformist and less rational than themselves. They claimed that the position of party lawmakers had a far greater effect on Democratic allies (M = 3.54) than on themselves (M = 3.43), paired t(48) = 6.40, p < .001; and that it had an even larger effect on Republican adversaries (M = 5.61) than on Democratic allies, paired t(48) = 2.71, p < .01. Participants also asserted that the details of the program contributed both to the attitude of Democrats (M = 5.02) and to the attitude of Republicans (M = 4.78) less than it contributed to their own attitude (M = 5.58), paired t(48) = 2.83, p < .01; t(48) = -4.11, p < .001. Furthermore, they claimed that one's "background with people on welfare" informed the attitudes of Democratic allies marginally less (M = 2.98) than their own attitude (M = 3.47), paired t(48) = -1.84, p = .07, and that it informed the attitudes of Republican adversaries even less (M = 2.39) than those of Democratic allies, t(48) = -3.36, p = .002. In short, participants ascribed their own beliefs to relevant facts and real-world experience, but they ascribed the beliefs of their allies, and especially those of their adversaries, to group influence. More generally, participants felt that their own beliefs were more "objective" (M = 4.39) than those of fellow Democrats (M = 3.74), t(48) = 3.21, p < .005, and that the beliefs of Democrats were more objective than those of their Republican rivals (M = 3.33), t(46) = 1.98, p = .05.

Discussion

Seven to nine percent of students in the no-group-information condition responded to the program by submitting negative editorials to a policy newsletter. But if they were informed that their party opposed that program, almost the same percentage of students submitted negative editorials, even though program content—and program alternatives—we held constant across the two conditions. Moreover, although participants were unaware of the effect of group information on themselves, they readily perceived its effect on their political adversaries and even on their political allies (see also Kenworthy & Millett, 2002; Robinson et al., 1995; cf. Miller & Ramer, 1998).

The cognitive processing measures yield two major conclusions. First, the effect of group information on attitude was mediated, in part, by biased systematic processing. Second, this biased processing did not so much skew evaluations of an invariant object, but rather redefined the very object to be evaluated (Asch, 1948, 1952). Analyses of the written editorials further supported this claim. They also indicated that group information affected not only the assumed factual qualities of the object, but its perceived moral connotations. Participants in the no-group-information condition highlighted the role of personal responsibility as much as the value of humanitarianism, and they presumably saw support of the program as an expression of those two moral commitments. By contrast, participants in the Democrats oppose condition highlighted personal responsibility less than humanitarianism, and they evidently saw opposition as logically following from the overriding importance of direct humanitarian relief.

As in Study 3, group information did not discount systematic, central-route processing. The number of thoughts, and the amounts recalled, did not differ as a function of condition. Likewise, the cognitive elaboration of attitudes (i.e., the correlation between thought positivity and attitude positivity) did not decrease in the Democrats oppose condition, if anything, it increased (see also Alva & Crano, 1996). One inconsistency between the results obtained in the present study and those obtained in Study 3, however, is noteworthy. Although biased systematic processing did not mediate the effect of group information in Study 3, it partly mediated that effect in Study 4. It seems likely that providing a thorough and accurate account of thoughts in response to two attitude objects (as participants did in Study 3) is more difficult than providing such an account in response to one attitude object (as participants did in Study 4). The shorter amount of time allowed to complete the relevant measure in Study 3 may have exacerbated this problem.

General Discussion

Four studies demonstrated the impact of group influence on attitude change. If information about the position of their party was absent, liberal and conservative undergraduates based their attitudes on the objective content of the policy and its merits in light of long-held ideological beliefs. If information about the position of their party was available, however, participants assumed that position as their own regardless of the content of the policy. The effect of group information was evident not only on attitude, but on behavior (Study 4). It was as apparent among participants who were knowledgeable about welfare as it was among participants who were not (Study 2). Important alternative explanations for the obtained results, such as effects of heuristic processing and shifts in scale perspective, were ruled out (Studies 3 and 4).

Considerations of Underlying Process

Attitude change did not result from mindless conformity. No evidence was found that message saliency or attitude elaboration was lower in the group information condition than in the no-group-information condition. In absolute terms, scores along many of the depth-of-processing indices proved high. That participants in the no-group-information condition based their attitudes on message content attest further to the effortful nature of their processing (Petty & Wegener, 1998). Participants in some of the group-information conditions, moreover, might have expended additional cognitive effort to figure out why the actual position of their party differed from the expected one (Materswan & Chakas, 1991).

Groups affect attitudes by shaping perceptions of objects in the social world. Study 4 illustrated this process. Participants who were presented with Democratic opposition to a policy defined that policy as "not liberal," and they perceived the object in a manner consistent with its assigned social meaning. While individuals in the no-group-information condition thus envisioned a job training program that would help poor people to "find employment and support themselves," many participants in the Democrats oppose condition called to mind a program that would "dump beneficiaries."
Relevance to Dual-Process Models of Persuasion

Both the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion and the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion inform the analysis of attitude change presented here. As these models suggest, people may undertake biased “systematic processing” or “message elaboration,” evaluating the object in a manner congruent to the judgments of their group (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Chen et al., 1999; Fleming & Petty, 2000; see also Lord et al., 1979). Consistent with this claim, Study 4 found that biased processing accounted for approximately half the effect of group influence on attitudes. However, group influence did not bias information processing as much as it posited the information to be processed.

Implications for Self-Deception

The results suggest that self-deception can arise from the failure to apply a valid social theory to oneself (see also Epley & Dunning, 2000; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Participants in the present research realized the power of group influence in a general sense; thus, they could accurately estimate its impact on the attitudes of others. In assessing the causes of their own attitudes, however, they found reasons to believe that they were exempt from its effect (see Prentin et al., 2002). In cases where people are aware of a general social process but perceive themselves to be immune to it, they may paradoxically have better insight into the causes of others’ behavior than into the causes of their own (see Epley & Dunning, 2000).

Clarifications, Limitations, and Unanswered Questions

The present studies were not intended to suggest that group influence always predominates over message content. After all, the impact of each variable depends not only on its conceptual significance but on the manner in which it is operationalized. Closely, with the right procedures, one could show that group influence biased to override message content. For example, liberals might resist Democratic support of a stringent program that cut all state and federal assistance. This criticism is relevant to the present research to the extent that the manipulation of message content lacked magnitude or salience relative to the manipulator of group influence.

By statistical criteria, however, the message-content manipulation lacked neither magnitude nor salience. Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated that the magnitude of the effect of message content in the no-group-information conditions was as large as the independent effect of reference group information. Group information did not override the effect of message content by decreasing its psychological salience. As the various depth-of-processing measures indicate, processing of message content was equally attentive regardless of whether group information was available or not. Judged by relevant real-world criteria, moreover, the manipulation of policy content was large. As previously noted, the two policies were more extreme than the most generous policy and the most stringent one available in much of the United States. By contrast, the manipulation of reference group information was arguably small. It constituted only a few of the references to the position of Democrats and Republicans, and it was not atypical of political discourse in the real world. Studies can be informative of the real-world implications of independent variables, but the effect of a manipulation that is small by real-world standards is shown to override the effect of a manipulation that is large by real-world standards (see Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

Three limitations in the present research are noteworthy. First, the manipulation of group information confronted the judgments of the ingroup with those of the outgroup. Whether the results reflect conformity to the ingroup position, or “reactive deviation” of the outgroup position (Ross & Ward, 1995), thus remains a question for future research. However, given that political identification tends to be dichotomized in American culture (Brady & Sniderman, 1985), knowledge of one’s party position might influence knowledge of the other. Second, the studies concerned only political decision making. To the extent that political attitudes are symbolic in nature (Sears & Fiske, 1991), they may be especially responsive to social influence. This problem is balanced by the recognition that arguably few decision domains are as important as the political. A third limitation concerns the participant sample. Although an effort was made to select students who cared about politics in general and welfare in particular, the reliance on college undergraduates could limit the generalizability of the results. On the one hand, college students’ political beliefs may be more malleable than those of older adults (see Sears, 1986), artificially inflating the reference group effects found here. On the other hand, college students’ group loyalties may be less crystallized than those of older adults (as seen by Sears, 1986), artificially depressing the reference group effects found here. In short, it would be desirable to attempt to replicate these results with a more diverse sample and in different decision domains.

One unresolvable question concerns whether a reference group less relevant to the decision domain could produce attitude change. For example, would the judgments of one’s classmates affect attitudes toward a welfare policy? Although past research finds that such issue-irrelevant groups can produce attitude change (e.g., Asch, 1948; Griffin & Brohler, 1993; Mack et al., 1990; Wood et al., 1996), whether they produce as much attitude change as issue-relevant ones remains unclear. On the one hand, issue-irrelevant groups might have smaller effects because the values motivating their judgments may be unclear. While participants in the present research could attribute the judgments of lawmakers to shared ideological values, they may have found the judgments of classmates on the same topic difficult to explain. On the other
hand, however, issue-irrelevant groups might produce large atti-
tude change effects through processes beyond the ones considered
here. For example, they might elicit heuristic processing, and thus
produce conformity of a more mindless nature (Mackie et al.,
1990, 1992). While future research will help to resolve these
issues, it should be borne in mind that people consult with groups
relevant rather than irrelevant to the decisions they face (Katz,
1957).

A final question concerns the role of dispossonance reduction
processes in mediating group influence. In certain experimental
conditions in the present research, participants may have experi-
enced dissonance between the cognitions "I approve of this policy"
and the cognition "My group opposes it." To reduce dissonance,
they could either bring their attitude in line with that of their group
or reduce the psychological importance of their group. Insofar as
people invest effort and identity in a group membership, however,
its psychological importance may be relatively fixed. Attitude
change may constitute a less painful route to dissonance reduction.
Investigators could test this account by measuring dissonance
arousal (Elliot & Devine, 1994) and statistically assessing its role
in mediating group influence. On the other hand, they could also
test whether the effect of group influence on attitudes is attenuated
by manipulations known to forestall dissonance-motivated rational-
ization, such as the opportunity either to disattribute dissonance
arousal to a decision-irrelevant cause (Zanna & Cooper, 1974) or
to affirm an alternative source of self-identity (Smeek, 1988; see
also Cohen et al., 2000; Sherman & Cohen, 2002).

Beyond these conceptual issues, practical concerns are also
raised by the present research. The process of attitude formation
and change described here can exacerbate intergroup conflict.
Once an issue represents socially shared values, it constitutes "a
point on which people do not do much form opinions as choose
sides" (Elliot & Gross, 1994, p. 23). To the extent, moreover,
that people remain blind to group influence on themselves, they
may feel that they alone have based their beliefs on a rational
assessment of the facts, while their adversaries, and even their
allies, are biased. The transmission and maintenance of social
meaning is thus central not only to persuasion, but also to social dis-

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