In-group interest cues do not change issue attitudes

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate whether people change their attitudes about societal issues when they learn that those issues affect others like them. In three pre-registered survey experiments, I find that these in-group interest cues have little to no effect on issue attitudes. This is true for social groups based on gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. People who closely identify with an in-group do not react more strongly to group interest information. Findings suggest that neither linked fate nor in-group favoritism necessarily cause people to care about issues affecting their group. They raise new questions about exactly when and why group memberships influence political attitudes.

When people try to make sense of the political world, social groups are easy reference points. Compared to abstract concepts such as ideology, groups are more tangible and play a larger role in daily life. They are also connected to personal identities and emotions in a way that makes them highly salient. As a result, group memberships and attitudes toward in- and out-groups can be strong drivers of political opinions.

There are many reasons why members of a demographic group might feel differently about an issue: the issue is associated with a disliked out-group; opinion leaders in the group have taken a public stance on the issue; there is an opinion norm within the group; action on the issue would confer social status to the group (e.g., marriage equality); the demographic is correlated with ideology; and so on. In this study, I focus on the effects of in-group interests. I do this by presenting respondents with new information about how an issue affects their in-group. For example, I ask whether women change their opinions about poverty after learning that women are more likely to be poor. In order to minimize the influence of group norms and other alternative explanations for issue attitudes, I focus on issues that are not traditionally associated with the group in question.

There are two mechanisms that could link attitudes about an issue to knowing the interests of a social in-group. First, information about in-groups could affect opinions through people's understanding of their self-interest. This mechanism has been called self-interest by proxy (Sears et al., 1980), the group utility heuristic, or linked fate (Dawson, 1994). According to this theory, group members use the effects of an issue or policy on their group as a whole to guess how that issue or policy might affect them personally. For instance, knowing that women are more likely to become poor, a woman might believe that she is more likely than others to face poverty in the future.

A second mechanism is in-group favoritism: the desire to further the interest of in-group members, even if there is no benefit to oneself (Tajfel et al., 1971). According to social identity theory, in-group favoritism happens simply when someone is a member of (and feels some level of identification with) a social group. Similarly, Converse (1964) theorizes that

social groups can influence political opinions once people are aware of their membership in the group, and of the connection between a political entity and that group. For example, a policy or politician may have provided material benefits to the group (Kinder, 1998). The treatments in this study provide precisely this type of linking information: if respondents' in-groups are disproportionately affected by an issue, they would benefit more than others if the issue were to be prioritized. If in-group favoritism is the reason why group members care about their group's interest, then members who strongly identify with the group would likely care the most.

In this study, I look at the effect of in-group interest cues on gender groups (women and men), racial groups (minorities and white people), and LGBT people. While linked fate and in-group favoritism apply to all of these groups, previous findings suggest that some groups play a larger role in political thinking than others. Gender groups are likely to be the least powerful opinion drivers, as gender gaps in opinion are generally narrow, even on women's issues (Huddy et al., 2008)—though recent research has found larger gender gaps in subgroups such as parents, Republicans, and people with strong gender identities (Lizotte, 2017; Barnes and Cassese, 2017; Bittner and Goodyear-Grant, 2017). I nonetheless included gender groups in this study, because gender is one of the most-discussed demographic cleavages in public opinion research—along with ethnicity and race.

Racial/ethnic cleavages are typically more intense than gender (Burns and Kinder, 2012). Identification with racial in-groups is strongest for Black Americans, but also exists for (some) Latinos and Whites (Dawson, 1994; Sanchez and Vargas, 2016; Jardina, 2019). Finally, I included LGBT people because they should be most likely to react to group cues. They are the smallest social group (4.5% of the US population, Gallup 2018), and their political opinions are relatively coherent compared to other groups (Haider-Markel and Miller, 2017).[1]

Surprisingly, I find that new information about in-group interests has minimal effects on

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[1]The pre-analysis plans for this study did not specify that effect sizes for racial groups were expected to be larger than for gender groups. They did, however, specify that LGBT effect sizes were expected to be larger than either.

attitudes across all groups—even for people who identify strongly with the group. Pooling data from all groups, I estimate that average effect on concern about the issue (four-point scale) is .06 (or less); the effect on support on spending for the issue is .07 (or less). Respondents moved treated issues up by just .25 of a place on average in a ranking of issues by importance. Robustness checks show that these small or null effects are not due to respondents declining to believe or absorb the information. People also do not change their perceptions of their self-interest. It appears that opinions on these issues are not driven by either linked fate or in-group favoritism.

The findings suggest that in these cases, group thinking about political issues is not (just) about what is in the interest of the in-group. Instead, in-group–issue connections may come from elite messages or personal experiences, or they may be limited to issues that map "naturally" onto people's existing beliefs (stereotypes) about the groups. Alternatively, the results might simply raise questions about the power of informational treatments to change opinions.

Experiment 1: Gender

Methods

This experiment had two phases: pre-treatment and treatment. In the pre-treatment phase, respondents recruited via Mechanical Turk in September 2018 first indicated their gender (262 male, 222 female). I measured their gender identity strength through Leach et al.'s (2008) Centrality subscale. Next, I asked participants about four issues (poverty, depression, obesity and car accidents). I measured three types of attitudes: concern about the issue, importance of the issue, and support for government spending to tackle the issue. Then I recorded prior beliefs: whether participants thought that each issue was more likely to affect women, men, or both at the same rate.

Participants were recontacted one week later for the treatment phase. I randomly as-

signed each respondent to be treated on one of two issues matching their gender (poverty and depression for women; obesity and car accidents for men), or to be part of the control group. Treated respondents received information that their gender group is disproportionately affected by the issue. So, one third of men saw information about men's higher obesity rates; one third read information about men being in more car accidents; and one third were not treated.

I chose issues with broad social relevance, whose connection to gender was true, but little-known. Treatments included a real, reliable source for the information, with a link to a webpage. Across experiments, results do not seem to depend on how *much* more affected the group is; whether the issue affects few or many people; and whether it is usually ascribed to personal choices or social ills (see Appendix section 3.5).

In the end, participants again indicated their attitudes toward all issues, and their beliefs about the gender imbalance in each issue. The treatment effectively moved respondents toward correct beliefs (Appendix section 1.5). Finally, to test linked fate as a mechanism, I asked about respondents' self-interest: their perceived likelihood that the issue could be a future threat to them.

Appendix section 1 has further design details, including flowcharts, sample descriptions, and justifications for the dependent variables and for centrality as the identity strength measure. Pre-analysis plans for Experiments 1–3 can be found here, here and here. Appendix section 4 presents all survey questions and treatment statements. Appendix section 1 contains details about model specifications and equations.

Results

I find that in-group interest cues have small, at most marginally significant effects on issue attitudes. Cues increase concern by less than .1 (.14 standard deviations) on a four-point scale ($p < .1$). They move an issue up by about .3 places (.14 standard deviations) in an eight-issue importance ranking ($p < .1$). The effect of cues on support for spending is equally

tiny (.1 on a four-point scale, .08 standard deviations, $p > .1$).

To place limits on these average treatment effects, we can inspect 90% confidence intervals around the estimates (cf. Rainey 2014). A priori, the upper bounds of such intervals have a 95% probability of being larger than the true average effect. Using this logic, we can reject effect sizes larger than .16 (concern), .51 (importance) and .17 (spending).

In a second model, I examine how the treatment interacts with respondents' group identity strength (centrality). There is a small, marginally significant interactive effect on spending: unexpectedly, increasing centrality by one point (on a seven-point scale) *decreases* the treatment effect by about .1. No other dependent variables show substantially or statistically significant interaction effects.

Appendix section 2 summarizes effects sizes with their confidence intervals for all experiments, with and without identity centrality. Section 3.3 shows that neither the small main effects, nor the small or negative interaction with centrality, can be ascribed to respondents' existing knowledge about how issues affect their group.

Respondents perceive the treated issue as a slightly bigger threat to themselves (.09 on a four-point scale, $p > .1$). Since the effects of in-group interest cues are small, it would be surprising to find significant mediation of them through self-interest. Indeed, average causal mediation effects are negligible (concern: .008; importance: $-.004$; spending: .007; all $p > .1$). These small and non-significant effects do not support linked fate theory.

Experiment 2: Race/ethnicity

In this experiment, I ask whether White and minority (Black or Latino) respondents change their attitudes about an issue, after learning that the issue affects White people/minorities more than others. The design and analyses are the same as in Experiment 1. Participants were recruited on Mechanical Turk in September–October 2018. Respondents randomly received information about an issue that affects their racial/ethnic group disproportionately:

climate change and air pollution for Black and Latino people ($n = 267$); suicide and opioid addiction for White people ($n = 451$).

Results

Connecting an issue to respondents' racial/ethnic in-group did not make them more concerned (effect size: .02, $p > .1$). It increased the importance of the issue slightly, moving it up .2 places on average in respondents' rankings ($p < .1$). It did not change support for government spending on the issue ($-.01$, $p > .1$). Inspecting the upper limit of the confidence intervals, we can reject average effect sizes larger than .09 (concern), .37 (importance) and .07 (spending).

The one noticeable effect of in-group interest—on issue importance—is in fact dependent on group centrality (identity strength). Surprisingly, if centrality goes up by one, the treatment effect is *decreased* by about .1 ($p < .1$). As before, the treatment effect on perceived self-interest is trivial ($-.02$, $p > .1$). So are the average causal mediation effects (concern: $-.001$; importance: $-.001$; spending: $-.001$; all $p > .1$).

Since Black, White and Latino Americans relate to their racial/ethnic identity quite differently, I also explored effects for each group.[2] Again, among the dependent variables, only importance saw a (small, marginally significant) effect, and only for Black and White people (Black—concern: .06; importance: .34; spending: .00. White—concern: .03; importance: .22; spending: $-.02$). For Latinos, effects were smaller or even negative, and never significant (concern: $-.06$; importance: $-.07$; spending: .01).

Experiment 3: Sexual orientation

In Experiment 3, LGBT participants ($n = 198$) learned that two issues affect LGBT Americans more than straight people: unemployment and sexual assault. They were recruited via

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[2]This analysis was not pre-registered. See Appendix section 3.1 for more on intergroup differences in identification.

Mechanical Turk in November 2018. Since the sample was smaller, this study consisted of only one phase to avoid attrition. I did not measure dependent variables before treatment, to avoid anchoring participants' attitudes. I also did not take pre-treatment measurements of belief in the connection between the issues and sexual orientation, because respondents might react differently to a treatment correcting a belief they just stated.

In this between-subject design, outcomes are post-treatment measurements of each issue attitude. Before treatment, I measured personal importance of the issue for the respondent (Krosnick, 1990). In the results below, I use this as a covariate. Treatment effect estimates without it are almost identical.

Results

Learning about an issue's connection with an in-group based on sexual orientation did not make respondents more concerned about the issue ($.07$, $p > .1$); it did not make the issue seem more important ($.03$, $p > .1$); and it did not significantly increase their support for spending on the issue ($.09$, $p > .1$). We can reject average effects larger than $.17$ (concern), $.35$ (importance) and $.23$ (spending).

There is a marginally significant interaction between the treatment and group centrality on support for government spending. Once again, the direction is counter-intuitive. If centrality goes up by one, the treatment effect is decreased by about $.1$ ($p < .1$).

The effect of the treatment on perceived self-interest is not significant, though slightly larger than in previous experiments ($.17$, $p > .1$). Mediation effects of self-interest are near-zero (concern: $.03$; importance: $.01$; spending: $.01$; all $p > .1$).

Robustness checks

These null or small effect findings are robust to different specifications (see Appendix section 3). Pooling data across experiments, I estimate an effect of $.06$ (or less) on concern; of $.25$

on issue importance ranking; and .07 (or less) on spending support. Confidence intervals suggest we can exclude average effects larger than .11 on concern; .40 on issue importance; and .15 on spending support. Effect sizes are not consistently larger for any of the issue–group combinations, suggesting that the overall treatment effects are not due to the choice of issues.

Effects are small even for respondents whose beliefs were actually changed by the treatment, and even when I account for ceiling effects (respondents who would have chosen the highest answer option even without treatment). Nonetheless, any effects of in-group interests on concern or spending support might have been clearer with more nuanced (less compressed) attitude response scales. Respondents are unlikely to have anchored themselves on pre-treatment measurements, since those happened at least one week earlier (or, in Experiment 3, not at all). Finally, the Appendix discusses alternative explanations—for instance, that some people are reluctant to advantage their own group, or that respondents do not identify with in-group members who are affected by the issues.

Discussion

This article describes three experiments testing the effect of telling people that an issue affects their social group especially. To isolate the effect of in-group interests, I chose issues that are not stereotypically connected to the group, and whose connection to the group would be surprising to most people. I find that the information has very little effect on attitudes about these issues.

Unexpectedly, strong identifiers were slightly *less* likely to be affected by the treatment (though this effect was only sometimes, and only marginally, significant). I also find that respondents do not use group interest as a heuristic for self-interest. This is perhaps less surprising: since people know their own life circumstances, the experience of in-group members may not be much help for predicting their own. Moreover, people's political opinions

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rarely seem to be informed by their self-interest (Kinder, 1998).

The findings show weak support for both in-group favoritism and linked fate. They may help explain why members of a group (gender, class, generation, region, etc.) hold opinions that are often weakly connected to that group's interests (Huddy et al., 2008; Bartels, 2005; Huddy, 1991; Hopkins, 2018). At the same time, they raise questions about the reasons why some opinions are so clearly based in racial group memberships or racial attitudes (Jardina, 2019; White and Laird, 2020).

One interpretation of these results is that connections between groups and issues do not follow automatically from in-group interests. Instead, group thinking may be most prominent for issues that map "naturally" onto group frames, or that have been associated with groups through repeated (elite) framing efforts. Winter (2008, 2006) shows that attitudes on such issues can be correlated with perceptions of groups even when people have not been primed with the group relevance of the issue—and even when the connection to the group is symbolic rather than interest-based. Perhaps group thinking is strongest for issues that are firmly connected to a social group already, because political action on such issues confers social status to the group.

Group interest cues may also be more effective in the form of a narrative (Betsch et al., 2011), or if they appeal to empathy. Alternatively, issues could become connected to groups when the respondent has personally seen the issue affect members of their social group. Finally, perhaps group politics is more about the source than about the content of messages. Group leaders, or fellow group members, can communicate that some political attitude is a norm in the group—whether or not that norm is rooted in the material interests of the group (Harrison and Michelson, 2017; White and Laird, 2020).

While the pattern of results is clear, these conclusions need a few qualifications. First, there is abundant evidence on how (negative) sentiment towards *out-groups*, or ideological objections to helping those groups, can explain policy stances (e.g. Kam and Kinder 2007; Green et al. 2006). In experimental studies, linking a policy to an out-group tightens the

connection between opinions about the policy and opinions about the out-group (Nelson and Kinder, 1996; Winter, 2006). Related, perhaps the most politically relevant traits are not people's group memberships or identities, but rather "group ideologies" such as feminism or racial conservatism (Burns and Kinder, 2012).

It is also possible that in-group interests inform behavior, but not opinions. For example, people seek more exposure to media content on issues that specially affect a social group they belong to (Bolsen and Leeper, 2013). Another open question is whether the results would have been similar for groups whose identities are even more salient or more strongly based on common interests, such as workers or farmers. Finally, it may be that in the US, most issues are now so closely connected to political parties that they can no longer be "claimed" by other social groups—whether or not that claim is based on group interests. These experiments might have had different outcomes in less a politically polarized society.

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