

Undecided voters may already have decided, study suggests

October 28 2008

Do "undecided" voters actually make their choices before they realize? That is a question University of Virginia psychology professor Brian Nosek and his colleagues are trying to answer.

"Many people, especially early in the political process, declare themselves as undecided," Nosek said. "But while they have consciously said that they are undecided, they unconsciously may have already made a choice."

And in a close election, undecided voters may determine the outcome the moment they make their decisions known on Election Day.

Nosek and colleagues Mahzarin Banaji of Harvard University and Tony Greenwald of the University of Washington developed the Implicit Association Test to assess mental associations that may be different than what people know or say about themselves.

A dozen years of research and hundreds of published studies suggest that people have implicit belief systems that may contradict their declared beliefs. These implicit beliefs can affect actions, such as how they vote at the moment it comes time to explicitly decide.

The research team operates "Project Implicit," a publicly accessible research and education Web site (www.implicit.harvard.edu) at which visitors can complete the Implicit Association Test to measure their own implicit associations. The test is available for a variety of topics,

including an "Obama-McCain" task that was developed for the U.S. presidential election.

In its 10 years of existence, about 7 million people have completed tests at the Web site, including more than 25,000 who have tested their implicit preferences regarding presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain.

In the latter project, being conducted by Nosek, Greenwald and Colin Smith, a U.Va. graduate student, almost 15 percent of the participants (about 4,000 people) declared themselves as undecided between voting for Obama or McCain. However, many of these same participants show an implicit preference for Obama or McCain despite their explicit indecision.

"Undecided voters may have decided implicitly before they know that they have explicitly," Nosek said. U.S. undecided voters, on average, reported feeling slightly warmer toward Obama than McCain, but they implicitly showed a slight preference for McCain over Obama.

The researchers will follow up with the participants immediately after the election to assess their ultimate vote. Will implicit or explicit preferences drive the undecided voters' votes?

"We do not know, but we are excited to find out," Nosek said.

Importantly, while Project Implicit's sample of voters is large, it is not a representative sample of the United States. "With this study, we cannot draw conclusions about the electorate as a whole or whether implicit preferences are strong enough to swing the election," Nosek said.

Instead, the study offers an opportunity to learn how implicit preferences may shape the decisions of undecided voters. It follows a recent Italian

study that showed that the implicit preferences of undecided voters predicted their eventual vote.

Other preliminary findings from the large U.S. study:

- Implicitly, Democrats are strongly pro-Obama, and Republicans are strongly pro-McCain, similar to their explicit preferences.
- Independents are implicitly pro-Obama, on average, similar to current polling results.
- The most intriguing subsample is the large number of undecideds who appear to be leaning toward McCain implicitly and toward Obama explicitly.

"Participants are often surprised to learn that they may have unconscious biases regarding candidates, or racial or religious views that are quite different from their stated beliefs," Nosek said. "For example, few people in modern society are actively racist, but most of us possess implicit associations linking white people with good and black people with bad more easily than the reverse."

This divergence between implicit and explicit beliefs suggests that behavior may be influenced both by deliberate, explicit beliefs and by automatic, implicit reactions, Nosek said.

When it comes to "undecided" voters, the comparative influence of these unique feelings will become apparent the moment the vote is cast.

Source: University of Virginia

Citation: Undecided voters may already have decided, study suggests (2008, October 28) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-10-undecided-voters.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.