

Hypothetical questions can influence behavior

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(PhysOrg.com) -- With the election cycle now underway, many Americans will be responding to political polls about who they support in the races for president and other offices. But can the poll questions themselves influence how people vote?

Despite the frequent use of hypothetical questions in political polling, [market research](#) and jury selection, there has been little research focusing on how and under what [circumstances](#) such "What if...?" questions influence our behavior. A new series of studies offers some clarity.

Researchers found that hypothetical questions can help our brains access specific positive or negative knowledge referenced by the question. As a result, the questions themselves can alter our behavior, though we can resist these influences if we are aware of their effects on us.

The research, from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, the University of Alberta School of Business, the University of Southern California and Stanford University, is set to be published in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* and is now available online at [sdl.myipcn.org/science/article ...ii/S0749597811001099](http://sdl.myipcn.org/science/article...ii/S0749597811001099).

"Hypothetical questions are essentially wolves in sheep's clothing," said Gavan Fitzsimons, professor of marketing and psychology at Fuqua. "Seemingly innocuous questions can make positive knowledge accessible

while negative questions can make negative knowledge accessible. In other words, being asked hypothetical questions that are consistent with our existing knowledge or our preconceived notions has a biasing effect on us -- without our knowledge and without our consent."

The researchers conducted a series of surveys that examined voting choices, legal decision-making and consumption behavior. One survey asked students a series of hypothetical questions about politicians, with some questions framed positively and some negatively. Additional surveys featured questions about the nutritional value of sugar substitutes, defendants in simulated court cases and snack food preferences.

"Political pollsters are very aware that the language they use in so-called 'push polling' can not only influence the way questions are answered, they can also push people away from one candidate and pull them toward another," said Sarah Moore, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Alberta.

"In one of our surveys," Moore said, "we asked respondents if learning a politician had been convicted of accepting a bribe would make them less likely to vote for that person. Alternatively, we asked another group of respondents if learning a politician had refused to accept a bribe would make them more likely to vote for that person. The negative question resulted in 37 percent of respondents being less likely to vote for the convicted politician. The positive question found 83 percent of respondents more likely to vote for the honest politician. In both cases, the bribe context was purely hypothetical, and yet the two groups' voting intentions differed dramatically."

One survey asked a group of prospective jurors waiting to serve at a courthouse to imagine they were being screened by attorneys at a criminal trial. During a simulated jury selection, the group was asked a

series of hypothetical questions alluding to the defendant's gang membership. These jurors were much more likely to issue guilty verdicts and recommend harsher sentences than jurors who were not asked the hypothetical questions related to gang membership.

Another group of respondents undertook a similar survey; however, this group was first told that the screening questions were submitted by attorneys for the defense and prosecution and, as potential jurors, they should not use the questions to draw conclusions about the case. Respondents in this group were able to correct for the biases normally induced by the hypothetical questions, becoming less likely to vote the defendant guilty and recommending shorter jail terms.

"Our research has shown that hypothetical questions can influence our actions, but we've also confirmed that when we are aware of the effects of hypothetical questions, we can correct our biases," said Baba Shiv, professor of marketing at Stanford. "Public education is needed to raise awareness of how hypothetical questions can sway our actions."

Provided by Duke University

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