

# New study shows "undecideds" not impartial

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As the U.S. presidential election approaches, political analysts are paying a lot of attention to the undecided. New research by a team of psychologists from Canada, Italy and Switzerland shows that undecideds are not impartial, but instead reveal a preference for information that confirms their gut reactions.

"Many people who are undecided about a political issue or competing candidates have at least some kind of gut reaction toward the available options," explains Bertram Gawronski, Canada Research Chair in Social Psychology at Western University. "Because it feels uncomfortable being exposed to information that questions one's thoughts and preferences, undecideds search for information that confirms their gut reactions and avoid information that could question them."

The article "Selective Exposure in Decided and Undecided Individuals: Differential Relations to Automatic Associations and Conscious Beliefs," authored by Gawronski, Silvia Galdi, Luciano Arcuri, and Malte Friese, is published in the May issue of the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* ([psp.sagepub.com/content/38/5/559.abstract](http://psp.sagepub.com/content/38/5/559.abstract)).

According to Gawronski, selective exposure to supportive information can determine future decisions at a time when people still feel that they have not made up their mind.

"People use whatever information they have to make a decision and they tend to believe that their decision is objective and unbiased. But they often don't realize that they have selectively exposed themselves to

information that simply supports their gut response," says Gawronski.

To investigate information preferences in undecideds, Gawronski and his collaborators asked their participants about their personal views on a controversial political issue and then identified their spontaneous gut reactions, or "automatic associations," by means of a computer task that measured how quickly they responded to positive and negative words and pictures related to the political issue. Afterwards, the participants were given the opportunity to read several newspaper articles whose headlines indicated either a favorable or unfavorable view on the same issue. Although many participants told the researchers that they were undecided, they chose to read only those articles that were consistent with their gut reactions measured by the computer task.

The results provide further insights into earlier findings by the same research team, showing that future political choices of undecideds can be predicted by measuring their automatic associations. The findings suggested a new way for pollsters to determine how undecideds will vote, even before the voters know themselves. The new findings indicate that undecided voters selectively search for information that confirms their automatic associations, which ultimately determines their future voting decision.

According to Gawronski, the results also challenge a common view on how people make decisions.

"It is pretty rare that people take a neutral look at the available information and then make up their mind. In many cases, we already have a preference and then just try to find arguments that justify our preference," offers Gawronski.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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