

Induced changes to political attitude can last over time

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VOTE

YES NO



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Cognitive scientists at Lund University and Karolinska Institutet in

Sweden have demonstrated that experimentally induced changes in political attitudes can last over time. Notably, participants who verbally motivated these "false attitudes" exhibited the largest changes. This is the first time a lasting effect of the choice blindness phenomenon has been observed.

In the study, a total of 372 [participants](#) completed a survey on health care, education, and environmental policy issues. Afterwards, half of them were asked to simply verify their answers, whereas the other half was asked to also give underlying arguments for their views. However, they were unaware that some of their answers had been manipulated by the experimenters and shifted to the opposite side of the spectrum. Only about 50 percent of these manipulated answers were corrected by the participants, and the rest were accepted as being their own.

"This is in line with previous results using choice blindness to influence ideological [attitudes](#)," says Petter Johansson, one of the researchers behind the study. "But a critical question of interest to us was whether this attitude shift would persist, despite us not giving any further arguments or encouragement for the new position."

To investigate this, at the end of the experiment, the participants were asked to complete a second survey with new questions, which also included the questions that were previously manipulated. They then returned after one full week to complete a follow up, again including the manipulated questions.

The results showed that when participants initially accepted the manipulated responses as their own, their attitudes later on shifted significantly in the direction of the manipulation. However, responses to questions that had not been manipulated kept the same position throughout all the questionnaires.

"This is of particular interest given that it's the first time lasting attitude change from choice blindness has been shown. Importantly, it shows how false beliefs, and feedback about those beliefs, can powerfully shape the interpretation and memories about one's political opinions." Philip Pärnamets, researcher at Karolinska Institutet, points out.

"It seems that part of what it might mean to hold a political attitude is to be able to draw on memories of having stated that attitude. In a sense, me being against tax cuts might result from me remembering having expressed that attitude previously. Using our manipulation, we are able to alter the participants beliefs about themselves, and we find that this leads them to change their attitudes," he explains.

When comparing those participants that only verified their answers with those who also gave supporting arguments, the researchers found that both groups exhibited lasting opinion changes, but that the effect was much larger for the participants who provided arguments.

"When people argue for a manipulated answer, we know that regardless of what they say, it cannot possibly be the reason for their original choice. This type of confabulation has hardly been studied outside the clinical context, but perhaps it is something we constantly do in our ordinary lives," main author Thomas Strandberg says.

"We also found that people who started to argue for a manipulated answer, but then suddenly stopped to correct it, still modified their opinions somewhat. These smaller shifts need to be further investigated, but it suggests that even seemingly innocuous amounts of confabulation can impact our attitudes," he continues.

"On a more positive note, in the current political climate of increasing polarization and ideological hostility, our study shows that people truly have the potential to be flexible in their political views. All that is

needed is a way, like choice blindness does, to invite people to reason openly, and unleash their own powers of argumentation," Thomas Strandberg concludes.

Footnote: The study was entirely anonymous. After the experiment, the researchers explained to the participants exactly how and why their answers had been swapped, and they gave their consent to be included in the study.

More information: Thomas Strandberg et al, False beliefs and confabulation can lead to lasting changes in political attitudes., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000489](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000489)

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