

Self-Distancing and Political Ideology:
The Impact of Altered Perspectives on Campaigns and Other Political Organizations

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Abstract

Two studies examined the effectiveness of self-distancing to facilitate changes in emotionally charged attitudes about controversial political topics. In each study, participants were randomly assigned to a self-distancing manipulation, a self-immersion manipulation, or a control manipulation. I hypothesized that self-distancing (mentally taking a step back in order to observe oneself from a “fly on the wall” perspective) would attenuate people’s emotional reactions to uncomfortable topics, allowing them to reassess their initial reactions to politically charged scenarios. No significant effect of self-distancing on political issues was found. I discuss reasons for these null results in the general discussion section.

Keywords: Self-distancing, Political ideology, Liberalism, and Conservatism

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When engaging in political discourse, people routinely and easily place themselves and others on a single political spectrum running from “liberal” to “conservative.” This ability to label reflects a socialization of political ideology, arising from differing perceptions of controversial issues. Psychological research has found that emotional reactions are often central to moral and political judgments and decision-making, and are clearly relevant to policy preferences. Some research suggests that liberals overcome their initial emotional reactions to certain topics such as gay marriage, but conservatives do not. In light of this, one obvious question is whether decreasing emotionality would lead to more tolerant responses to an issue such as gay marriage, for example. Self-distancing is a process which has been shown to diminish emotionality. I hypothesize that instructing people to self-distance when thinking about controversial issues will reduce emotionality, and cause individuals to adopt a more liberal response to controversial political issues.

Political Ideology Development

In the United States, virtually every voter, media outlet, politician and researcher recognizes a single political spectrum. This continuum is recognized as a left to right scale of liberalism to conservatism. These labels have changed in meaning throughout U.S. history, but have for centuries represented the two prevailing schools of thought regarding political discourse.

Currently, liberalism is the support of a larger government which provides services to all people and encourages reforms which defend equality. Conservatism, in contrast, is the support of a smaller government, which provides people with traditional structure and order (Flanigan &

Zingale, 2006). While voters can identify as extreme or moderate in their political leanings, and can even break down their ideological predilections into fiscal, social or other categories, ultimately everyone can be placed somewhere on this spectrum of political attitudes. These two political perspectives are arguably what drives discussion of society and government in America.

The Role of Political Ideology in Decision-making

Scholars have recognized that political decision making is not immune to the use of cognitive shortcuts (Zaller, 1992). Indeed, Political scientists often view political ideology as a grouping of heuristics for voters to quickly and consistently identify their own political preferences. Why are individuals in need of such heuristics? For the simple reason that many people do not have sufficient time to devote to politics or even much interest in doing so. Consequently their opinions and political ideology are formed from interactions with their parents, friends, and other people around them (Downs, 1957). Inevitably, they also obtain political information from elites who are attempting to influence their ideology through campaigns (Lippmann, 1922). People then synthesize this information into heuristics for future decisions, which become important in molding their policy preferences with regard to novel issues (Mondak, 1993).

There is some disagreement about the importance of political ideology, and what effects it has on judgments of specific issues. Some political scientists believe each person's attitudes vary from issue to issue, and that political ideology is a little more than a constraint on an individual's thoughts about related issues (Converse, 1964). Like many political scientists, Converse (1964) believes that the average voter is uninformed about politics. He believes that each person's views change from election to election, or even more frequently, so that political ideology does not have a large influence irrelevant in the context of policy preferences.

However, even Converse also recognized the idea of constraint, or the interdependence of several issues, on every individual's political views, suggesting at least some level of organization of political ideas for every individual. Additionally, other political scientists have recognized varying levels of consistency of political viewpoints in the American electorate (McCloskey and Zaller, 1984). Recognizing that additional education about issues helps to crystallize people's views, these political scientists contend that socioeconomic elites have better knowledge on which to base political decisions than do average Americans, and thus exhibit greater ideological consistency. Moreover, Mondak (1993) concluded that while politics may not be every person's top priority, ultimately, using heuristics balances the electorate's inattention to politics. This means that the decisions which stem from individual political ideology are important in making real decisions about government affairs.

Although scholars disagree about the degree to which ideology dictates liberals' and conservatives' policy preferences, most agree that political ideology informs one's views on controversial issues. This holds for issues on which people have reflected at length, as well as for novel situations. Political paradigms inform people of how they might vote on a plethora of issues, and frequently this generates an identification with a political party. Party identification can be defined as a strong political affiliation, which is used in numerous contexts and helps people determine which party affiliated politicians would agree with their policy preferences (Green and Palmquist, 1994). Most research in the field of political science uses party identification and political ideology to study the ways people support or oppose various policies, candidates, or political actions. Not only have political scientists studied influences of ideology and party identification, but psychologists have also examined the cognitive and emotional

tendencies of liberals and conservatives, thereby advancing the understanding of political decision making processes.

Psychological Research and the Emotional Nature of Moral and Political Decision-making

Some psychological research has indicated that the political identities and the party labels people employ to describe themselves and others are rooted in their moral beliefs. The social construction of political identity is thus important to the interpretation of controversial topics for both liberals and conservatives.

Psychologists and political scientists have often noted that liberals and conservatives hold different worldviews based on different sets of morals and values, often relating to issues of reform versus tradition (Graham, Haidt and Nosek, 2009). Liberals have a tendency to embrace novel experiences and new ideas (McCrae, 1996). In contrast, conservatives have a strong preference for situations and concepts which invoke a sense of familiarity (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; McCrae, 1996). In addition, a great deal of research has shown that conservatives have a higher tendency to exhibit authoritarian traits than moderates and liberals (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski and Sulloway, 2003). Jost, et al. (2003)'s review of this literature has concluded that the socialization of political ideologies is related to the different ways liberals and conservatives process information (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski and Sulloway, 2003). For example, conservatives have been shown to exhibit higher emotional sensitivity to threats to the social order than liberals (Altemeyer, 1996; McCann, 2008; Stenner, 2005).

Graham, et al. (2009) find that these opposing views of reform and tradition correlate with differences in what they call "moral foundations." For example, liberals identify levels of harm and fairness as the two most important factors in making moral decisions, and rate considerations regarding ingroup status, position of authority, and purity as less relevant. In

contrast, conservatives rate all five factors as being equally relevant to the moral decisions they make.

Beyond prioritizing differing considerations in moral decision making, other scholars have found that liberals and conservatives differ in the ways they perceive social problems (Skitka, Mullen, Griffen, Hutchison and Chamberlin, 2002). Skitka, et. al claim that both groups make similar first-pass attributions about situations, but liberals take additional, effortful steps to overcome their initial reactions because they are motivated to fit the social problem to the way they perceive the issue in question. This concept fits well with findings from research using the Implicit Association Test (IAT), in which participants often demonstrate an implicit association between stigmatized minorities (e.g., with regard to race or sexual orientation) and negative concepts (e.g., the word “bad”) independent of the participant’s political orientation (Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz, 1998). For example, in Greenwald, et al. (1998)’s studies, participants in an IAT experiment demonstrated a clear association of white with positive words, even for whites who self-report being unprejudiced. Although this initial negative, and most likely emotional, response is experienced by all individuals, only some use it to inform their political decisions.

In contrast to Skitka, et al. (2002)’s ideas about the similarity of individuals’ first-pass reactions, other psychologists found that conservatism is a good predictor of disgust sensitivity (Inbar, Pizarro and Bloom, 2008). They found that conservatives report higher disgust sensitivity to nonpolitical, non-moral situations than do liberals (e.g., “when using a public toilet I try not to touch any part of the toilet seat”) and this disgust sensitivity correlates with scenarios involving abortion and gay marriage. Thus, there may also be individual differences in the strength of liberals’ and conservatives’ initial negative reactions to certain political issues.

Namely, as a result of their higher disgust sensitivity in general, conservatives' initial reactions might very well be harsher than those of liberals.

These results suggest that social conservatism is based to some extent on emotional cues about social dilemmas. This implication is in stark contrast to conventional wisdom about liberals. A frequently used attack on liberal candidates and policies is the label of "bleeding-hearts." This phrase suggests those who fall on the left side of the political spectrum employ emotion and feelings, instead of logic or reason, to make their political decisions, or at least do so more often than they should.

By extension, I hypothesize that most individuals, regardless of political orientation, have automatic negative responses of varying intensity to certain politically charged stimuli, such as abortion, issues surrounding gay rights, welfare programs, etc. One method of overcoming such implicit negative reactions is for an individual to engage in emotion regulation. The main goal of the present research is to address this issue by examining the role that self-distancing plays in allowing people to overcome their emotional reactions and re-evaluate their policy preferences.

Self-distancing and the Emotional Nature of Moral and Political Decision-making

Self-distancing, as implemented by Ayduk and Kross (2010), involves taking a step back from a memory of a given situation and seeing the situation unfold from a third-person point of view. In other words, instead of reliving the situation by seeing it unfold again through one's own eyes (which Ayduk and Kross call "immersion"), when a person self-distances from a memory, he or she would see not only his or her conversation partner, but also him or herself engaging with the conversation partner. Self-distancing may be relevant to the political decisions under consideration here because its use tends to modulate emotional reactions (Ayduk and Kross, 2010).

Ayduk and Kross (2010) have shown that not only does self-distancing reduce emotional reactivity when people reflect on negative memories, but self-distanced participants also tend to focus more on reconstruing and less on recounting these negative experiences. In fact, the negative association between self-distancing and emotional reactivity was mediated by the way participants construed the experience rather than by avoidance (Ayduk & Kross, 2010).

If political decisions about contentious social issues are, indeed, guided by automatically elicited negative emotions, then self-distancing, as a technique that has been shown to reduce emotional reactivity, has the potential to alter those decisions. Thus, I hypothesize that using self-distancing to reduce emotionality in contentious social issues that involve an initial negative emotional reaction (e.g., abortion, gay marriage, activities of stereotyped outgroups such as Muslims, etc.) helps to attenuate the severity of reactions against these groups or activities. I predict this will result in conservatives adopting a more liberal expression of policy preferences.

Study 1

Study 1 aimed to provide an initial test of the prediction that self-distancing would lead to less negative reactions to emotionally arousing political issues by randomly assigning participants to reason about a contentious political issue – the potential construction of a mosque several blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center, now often referred to as “Ground Zero” – from either a self-distanced or a self-immersed perspective. I chose this issue because it seemed at the time to be especially emotionally provocative, and it also seemed to be an issue in which emotions could easily get in the way of the results of a more calm and considered judgment.

Participants were first asked to rate their current levels of happiness and calmness using the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM; Bradley & Lang, 2004). After this they were randomly

assigned to one of three conditions: a self-distanced condition, a self-immersed condition, or a control condition. They were then asked to answer several questions about the morality and sensitivity of building the mosque. Following these questions participants were again asked to indicate their current levels of happiness and calmness using the SAM before completing manipulation checks. Finally, participants answered questions about their political orientation, religious views, and other demographic information.

I hypothesized that those in the self-distanced condition would say that the construction of the mosque was less morally wrong and less insensitive as a result of overcoming their initial, adverse emotional reaction to the mosque construction scenario.

Methods

Participants.

Participants were 240 (129 Male) undergraduate students at the University of Michigan. All subjects were over 18 years old, but none were older than 22; Average age was 18.9 ($SD = .98$). The sample was 73% white, 15% Asian, 4% Hispanic, 5% Black, with 4% reporting other ethnicities. Self-reported political orientation was left of center. On a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely liberal* to 7 = *extremely conservative*) the average self-report was 3.62 ($SD = 1.49$). All were undergraduate students in psychology courses at the University of Michigan who had to participate in research as a course requirement. The University of Michigan institutional review board approved all methods.

Procedure.

Baseline Affect.

I first asked participants to rate their current levels of happiness and calmness using the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM; Bradley & Lang, 2004). SAM is effective in providing reliable

measurement of pleasure and arousal (Bradley & Lang, 2004). On a 9-point scale (1 = *unhappy* to 9 = *happy*) the average rating of happiness was 6.09 ($SD = 1.27$). On a 9-point scale (1 = *calm* to 9 = *excited*) the average rating of calmness was 3.77 ($SD = 1.71$).

Experimental Manipulation.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a self-distanced condition, a self-immersed condition, or a control condition. In prior research, self-immersion and self-distancing have been manipulated by asking participants to think about a prior emotionally arousing experience either from their own perspective as they experienced it at the time (self-immersed) or as a third party would see it, that is to say, thinking about their experience while seeing both their interlocutor and themselves (self-distanced; e.g. Ayduk & Kross, 2008). Because I was not asking participants to evaluate a past experience, but instead to make an online judgment, I modified past instructions to ask them to attempt to see themselves from the outside as they were making the judgment.

Participants in the self-distanced condition received the following type of instructions:

...After you finish reading these instructions, close your eyes and imagine moving away from yourself until you can take the perspective of a fly on the wall of this lab room. From this “fly on the wall” perspective imagine watching the “distant you” sitting in front of this sheet of paper and reading these instructions again.

Participants in the self-immersed condition received a set of instructions that were structurally similar, but referred to their own perspective: “After you finish reading these instructions, close your eyes and imagine sitting in front of this sheet of paper and reading these instructions again from your own perspective.” Participants in a control condition were simply presented with the

mosque scenario and the judgment with no special instructions about how to think about either of the two.

Reasoning Exercise.

Next, participants were given a scenario about the potential construction of a mosque close to the wreckage of Ground Zero in New York City. They then answered two questions about the proposed construction of the mosque. The first question asked about moral acceptability of the construction of the mosque (1 = *Completely Morally Unacceptable* to 9 = *Completely Morally Acceptable*; $M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.96$), the second asked about the degree of insensitivity involved in the construction of the mosque (1 = *Very insensitive* to 9 = *not at all insensitive*; $M = 4.12$, $SD = 2.03$).

Manipulation Check.

The manipulation check read: “As you thought about your answers to the mosque scenario questions above, how far away from yourself did you feel?” (1 = *Very close, looked through my own eyes* to 9 = *very far, saw myself as an observer*; $M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.62$).

Post-manipulation Affect.

I again asked participants to rate their current levels of happiness and calmness using the SAM. On a 9-point scale (1 = *unhappy* to 9 = *happy*) the average rating of happiness was 5.85 ($SD = 1.28$). On a 9-point scale (1 = *calm* to 9 = *excited*) the average rating of calmness was 3.78 ($SD = 1.61$).

Results.

Affect.

I administered the SAM before and after the scenario was presented to participants to assess the change in participants’ emotions from pre- to post manipulation. I expected to see a

shift from happy to unhappy and calm to excited, as a result of being exposed to the scenario about the building of the mosque. To test this prediction I ran a repeated measures ANOVA with affect as the within participants factor (baseline vs. post manipulation) and condition as the between participants factor. This analysis did not reveal any significant results ($F_s < 1$), indicating that reasoning about the contentious issue did not lead to shifts in participants' affect.

Manipulation check.

I predicted that participants in the self-distanced condition would report feeling further away from themselves when making the judgment about the mosque, and indeed this is what I found $F(2,238) = 10.75, p < .001$, with participants in the self-distanced condition feeling furthest away from themselves when making the judgment ($M = 4.31; SE = .171$), participants in the immersed condition feeling closest to themselves ($M = 3.12; SE = .177$) and participants in the control condition landing in between ($M = 3.68; SE = .170$).

Morality questions.

I did not observe any difference in reports of moral acceptability, insensitivity, etc. of the mosque's construction across conditions ($F_s < 1$).

Exploratory analyses.

Although the reasoning exercise did not successfully induce negative affect, I proceeded with exploratory analyses to further examine possible effects of the experimental manipulation. For example, I examined the zero-order correlations between affect and the morality/sensitivity variables mentioned above, as well as the zero-order correlations between rating of distance on the manipulation check and the morality/sensitivity variables mentioned above. These analyses did not yield any significant results.

Discussion.

Because there was little change in arousal and happiness from baseline to post manipulation, there is reason to believe that the scenario did not provide an emotionally evocative experience for participants. Therefore, it is not surprising that I observed no effect of self-distancing, as this process functions to reduce negative affect. Therefore, the current results neither refute nor confirm my hypotheses. Here are three potential explanations for why this paradigm was unsuccessful at eliciting negative affect.

First, the absence of emotional change as a result of thinking about the mosque scenario may indicate that this issue was simply not as important to college students as I anticipated. The events of September 11, 2001 lie almost one decade in the past now, and college students may not be very interested in the building of the mosque near the site of the attacks on the World Trade Center. In addition, conservatives represented a distinct minority in my sample, and judging by tenor of the public outcry, they seem to be the ones who were most disturbed by the construction.

Second, it is possible that using SAM as a tool to assess emotionality may have impacted participants' understanding of the intention and purpose of the study and ultimately altered the way they responded. The manikins were the first questions participants were exposed to in the study, which might have caused them to embrace a heightened sense of attention to their emotions and this may have altered their subsequent emotional reaction to the scenario.

Third, I developed a novel manipulation of self-distancing for the purposes of this study. Although it had the intended effect on the manipulation check, this may have been the result of the manipulation check being somewhat obviously related to the instructions.

Study 2

My second study attempted to overcome some of the limitations of Study 1 in the following ways.

First, I used a different type of vignette, which I thought would be more emotionally evocative. I used vignettes in which either a gay or straight couple who were involved in an open relationship, and were having sex with multiple partners, wanted to get married. I hypothesized that self-distancing would reduce emotionality generated from the vignette, resulting in a greater tolerance for alternative lifestyles, and thus greater approval of the gay couple's right to get married as well as the straight couple's right to get married.

Second, I assessed emotionality only once and did so immediately after the experimental manipulations, rather than before and after the manipulation as in Study 1. By doing this I hoped to eliminate any suggestion that I was looking for emotional differences in this study, and thus avoid participants consciously attending to their emotional reactions to the scenario, and in doing so interfering with the way in which their natural emotional reaction would ordinarily unfold.

Finally, I used a different type of manipulation that I believed would be a more powerful way of inducing distance. Ongoing research in Ethan Kross' lab has indicated that thinking about a stressful situation using third person pronouns and one's own name decreases the stress of that situation and increases self- and other rated performance (Burson & Kross, 2011, unpublished data). I attempted to modify their instructions for use with an online survey, and decided to instruct participants in the online survey to write about the open marriage scenario in the third person. Participants had indicated some difficulty with the task of imagining themselves visually from a distanced or immersed perspective while reading the mosque scenario in Study 1. Since the first and third person thinking manipulation had been successful at

engaging self-immersion and self-distancing in prior studies, I thought that writing in the first or third person might do so as well. Additionally, the written record of the participants' thoughts would ensure that participants actually engaged in the activity – something that was not guaranteed when I simply asked them to think from a certain perspective in Study 1.

Methods

Participants.

Participants were 241 (95 male) individuals who participated in an online survey at their convenience. They were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk), a "crowdsourcing" platform that links people who wish to perform short tasks for small amounts of money with people who supply such tasks. In using Mturk, I hoped to increase the political, economic, and social diversity of my sample. Mturk is a valid way of collecting data that has been used for several years in judgment and decision-making research (see e.g., Kurzban, Dukes, & Weeden, in press). The University of Michigan institutional review board approved all methods.

All subjects were over 18 years old, ($M = 31.0$, $SD = 11.28$). The sample was 83% white, 10% Asian, 2% Hispanic, 2.5% Black, 1% Native American, with 2% reporting other ethnicities. Self-reported political identification was left of center. On a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely liberal* to 7 = *extremely conservative*) the average was 3.45 ($SD = 1.67$).

The sample was indeed diverse in age, educational attainment, income, and religious orientation. For example, in terms of household income, 26% reported \$0-25,000 per year, 28% reported \$25,000-\$49,999 per year and 27% reported \$50,000-\$99,999 per year. However, the sample was even less ethnically diverse than in Study 1, and was also, unfortunately, no less liberal than in Study 1.

Procedure.***Experimental Manipulation.***

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions of this 2 (gay versus straight couple vignette) x 4 (essay type) factorial design. Participants were given a scenario about two individuals in an open relationship yet seeking a marriage license. In four conditions the couple (Robert and Anthony) were gay and in the four conditions the couple (Steven and Jane) were straight. Participants in the gay couple conditions received the following scenario:

Robert and Anthony are a gay couple and have been in an open relationship for six months. Both Robert and Anthony have had multiple sexual partners while they have been together. Nonetheless, they would like to spend the rest of their lives together and, therefore, want to get married.

The other scenario replaced Robert and Anthony with Steven and Jane, and removed mentions of the word “gay”.

Each participant was given one of four sets of instructions with regard to thinking about the scenario. One set of instructions, representing a control condition, simply asked people to read this scenario and on the next page respond to questions about it. The remaining three sets of instructions involved writing an essay about one’s thoughts about the question: “Should the couple in the scenario have a legal right to get married?” One set of essay instructions, which represented the self-distanced condition, asked participants to use third person pronouns (i.e., “he” or “she”) and their first names to refer to themselves, as in the experiments referenced above by Burson and Kross (2011). A second set instruction of instructions, which represented the self-immersed condition, asked participants to use first person pronouns (i.e., “I” or “me”) to refer to themselves. A third set of instructions, which represented a control condition, asked

participants to simply write the essay and did not mention any particular point of view. In all cases participants were given 5 minutes in which to write. They were then actually given the question “Should the couple in the scenario have a legal right to get married?” (1 = *Definitely should have the right to get married* to 9 = *Definitely should not have the right to get married*; $M = 6.56$, $SD = 2.42$).

Thus, to review, the design was a 2 (gay versus straight couple vignette) x 4 (no essay, third-person instructions essay, first-person instructions essay, no special instructions essay) factorial.

Manipulation Check.

Following the main questions, a manipulation check was provided: “As you wrote down your thoughts a few moments ago, to what extent do you feel that you took the perspective of a distanced observer of your judgment?” (1 = *Not at All a Distanced Observer of My Judgment* to 7 = *Distanced Observer of My Judgment*; $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.99$).

Post-Manipulation Affect.

I then asked participants to rate their current levels of happiness and calmness using the SAM. On a 9-point scale (1 = *unhappy* to 9 = *happy*) the average rating of happiness was 6.11 ($SD = 1.71$). On a 9-point scale (1 = *calm* to 9 = *excited*) the average rating of calmness was 3.12 ($SD = 1.71$).

Results.

The sample was filtered for several reasons. Six cases were removed because three participants took the study multiple times. Another participant was removed for taking nearly 27 minutes to complete the study (four standard deviations above the mean time for all participants). I also removed five participants who did not follow the instructions for writing the essays.

Because this was not a controlled laboratory environment, I also inserted an instructional manipulation check, (Davidenko, Oppenheimer, & Meyvis, 2009) to assess whether participants were actually reading the instructions I was giving them. 57 participants failed the instructional manipulation check. Thus, in total, 69 participants were excluded prior to analysis, leaving 172 participants in the data set.

Affect.

I administered the SAM after the scenario was presented to participants to assess the influence of each manipulation on the emotions of the participants. I expected to see a shift from happy to unhappy and calm to excited, as a result of being exposed to a scenario about a gay couple. I did not find a main effect of essay instruction on the emotion questions of the SAM ($F < 1$).

Manipulation check.

I predicted that participants in the self-distanced condition would report feeling more like a distanced observer of their judgment, but I found no significant differences among conditions ($F < 1$).

Exploratory analyses.

Although the manipulation check did not reveal a difference among essay conditions, I proceeded with exploratory analyses with the thought that third person writing may not have been well-suited to the manipulation check that I created for this purpose. I performed a 2 x 4 factorial ANOVA to assess the effect of essay condition on whether the gay or straight couple had a right to get married, and found no differences ($F_s < 1$). In addition,, I examined the zero-order correlations between affect and the dependent variables mentioned above, as well as

between the rating of distance on the manipulation check in the dependent variables mentioned above. This did not result in any significant differences.

However there was one analysis that did result in a difference. Using ANOVA, I examined political orientation (i.e., liberalism versus conservatism) as a dependent variable. I simultaneously ran contrasts comparing the third person writing conditions to all other conditions. The effect of essay condition as a whole was not significant $F(3,165) = 1.87, p = .137$, but contrasts did reveal a difference between first person ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.85$) and third person ($M = 3.08, SD = 1.72$) writing conditions $t(168) = 2.01, p < .05$ (see Fig 1). Although a nonsignificant ANOVA is often considered a “red light” for planned comparisons, this view is not entirely correct. It is possible for individual pairwise comparisons to indicate legitimate differences even if the omnibus test is not significant (e.g., see Gonzalez, 2009, p. 193). However, it should be noted that this difference is exploratory, and serves primarily to direct future analyses on similar projects.

Discussion.

Although I chose a seemingly more emotionally evocative scenario, I did not find differences among the essay conditions on my main dependent variable, namely whether the unconventional couples had a right to get married. One reason I may not have been able to find significant changes in policy preferences related to these issues is the low level of emotional response to my scenario. I did not find differences in emotionality among any of my four conditions, including the self-immersed or self-distanced conditions. Kross and Ayduk (2009) have found that self-distancing is effective only if emotionality is high. Unfortunately, I did not succeed in evoking enough emotion to test my hypothesis of the efficacy of self-distancing with regard to political decision-making. Again, these results neither refute nor confirm my

hypotheses. Here are two potential explanations relating to the experimental paradigm itself as to why significant results were not found on my main dependent variables.

First, the absence of emotional change as a result of thinking about a gay marriage scenario may indicate that this issue was simply not as important as I anticipated. The events of Robert and Anthony's marriage do not influence the lives of participants in an obvious way. In addition, conservatives again represented a distinct minority in my sample, and current political discourse indicates that they are the group that is most disturbed by the prospect of gay marriage.

Second, my novel manipulation of self-distancing through third person writing may have not been effective. It did not have the intended effect on the manipulation check, but the manipulation check may have also not been well-suited to this novel manipulation.

Aside from possible flaws in my manipulation, other explanations for these null results exist as well. For example, in the present study I used an online sample obtained through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Mturk participants did not take the study in a controlled environment, and thus, also took the study in a wide variety of environments. These environments might very well have been filled with distractions that add noise to any possible effects of the manipulations in this study. In fact a good number of participants indicated to us that they were engaged in some other activity while taking my study. It was often impossible to judge how distracting these activities were from the brief descriptions of the participants. Other participants may well have also been engaged in activities other than the study, but refrained from telling us out of the (unjustified) fear that this would affect their compensation.

The instructional manipulation check that I used indicated that a large proportion of the Mturk participants were indeed not paying attention, leading to the exclusion of a large number of these participants from analysis. Although it is common in online studies to exclude a

significant percentage of participants, the proportion that I excluded was higher than average.

This may also have represented a problem that was reflected in my lack of significant findings.

General Discussion

The main question to address is why the scenarios I focused on in this research were unsuccessful at eliciting affect. Study 1 referenced an event which was happening at the present time, but the emotionally stimulating component of the scenario –the terrorist attacks– were nearly ten years in the past, and referenced an event that happened at least 1,000 miles away from the participants. Study 2 used a scenario that third parties indicated was much more emotionally evocative, however, it failed to result in changes in emotional self-report in the Mturk population. Without sufficiently high negative emotionality generated by the scenarios, the manipulations could not be effective, as there was no negative affect from which to distance. Before abandoning the possibility of a causal relationship between self-distancing and change in the evaluation of emotionally-charged political issues, however, future research that is successful at eliciting intense affect surrounding such issues should be performed.

The studies addressed highly divisive issues in the current political landscape of the United States. While these issues are important, relevant, and controversial, they are only two of the many topics in politics which garner a great deal of media attention and result in vociferous public discourse. No two political issues are exactly alike, and more of them that generate high amounts of emotion should be tested in the context of self-distancing. Such topics include abortion, capital punishment, gun rights, universal healthcare, and welfare programs, all of which often seem to trigger a knee-jerk reaction from many individuals.

As a result of my exploratory findings in Study 2, it would also be interesting to examine self-reports of liberal and conservative ideological leanings in the context of self-distancing and the aforementioned political issues. If self-distancing results in changes in political self-identification across a broad range of issues, then self-distancing may be useful for major

political campaigns and party persuasion tactics. However, if self-distancing results in changes on only a few issues (or produces divergent effects issue by issue), then the use of self-distancing might be most relevant to specific issue advocacy campaigns.

Due to my struggle to generate scenarios that triggered a strong negative emotional reaction, the scenarios should be altered in future studies. Before continuing to apply the same manipulations to additional topics, I suggest conducting a pre-test of the scenarios used in the future studies; each scenario should be tested independent of the manipulation to see if it triggers emotional changes without the questions, instructions and other items present. Time and other constraints did not allow us to pretest in the mechanical Turk population. For example, the population of people who engage in surveys on Turk is relatively small, and previous participants cannot be excluded from subsequent studies. Therefore, had I done a pre-test, many participants who engaged in my study would have been already exposed to materials. One way to effect greater emotional response in the future would be to bolster my stimulus materials with relevant illustrations which might trigger greater negative emotional reactions. Alternatively, I could provide more specific, graphic language in the details associated with the new scenarios I provide.

Other future studies on self-distancing and political ideology might consider varying not only emotionality, but also political importance. For example, future studies might consider a scenario which evokes emotion, but lacks any political component (a possible scenario could be an ambiguous officiating call in a sports contest between well-established rivals). If self-distancing reduces emotionality in such a situation, then subsequent judgments of political scenarios may be less extreme. Although the utility of such a design may not be immediately obvious, it could very well be useful. Emotions have strong effects on judgments and decision-

making, and people are often unaware of the true source of their current emotions (Schwarz & Clore, 2007). Therefore, emotionality that is extraneous to a given political issue can certainly be misattributed to one's consideration of the political issue. For this reason, prompting people to adopt a self-distanced perspective prior to considering a political issue may result in a more moderate stance on that issue by diminishing the extraneous emotionality that otherwise would be interpreted as resulting from their consideration of the issue. This may even result in changes regarding the extremity of ideological self-identification, as may have occurred in Study 2.

Conclusion

In spite of the lack of significant results in these two experiments, I continue believe that the potential for self-distancing to moderate extreme, emotionally-based political stances is both theoretically and practically interesting. Should self-distancing in the future be found to affect policy preferences, then this could be an important tool that could potentially be used on a large scale. It is well known that many organizations exist with the sole purpose of influencing the results of elections. Political parties, think tanks, research groups, lobbying firms, interest groups, and other sources of organized political advocacy are essential to determining the outcome of elections, and all of these organizations make use of tactics designed to motivate voters to support their cause. Knowledge concerning the contexts in which self-distancing may be effective would be potentially important and could be translated into speeches, advertisements and other campaign materials. Advocacy groups and others would know when it would be helpful to ask voters to "take a step back" and examine their opinions in a more self-conscious manner. Furthermore, while politicians and other advocacy organizations cannot convince all voters to modify their opinions, if they can find a clever way to convince people to self-distance,

they may be able to win the attention of people who would otherwise not even listen to their appeals.

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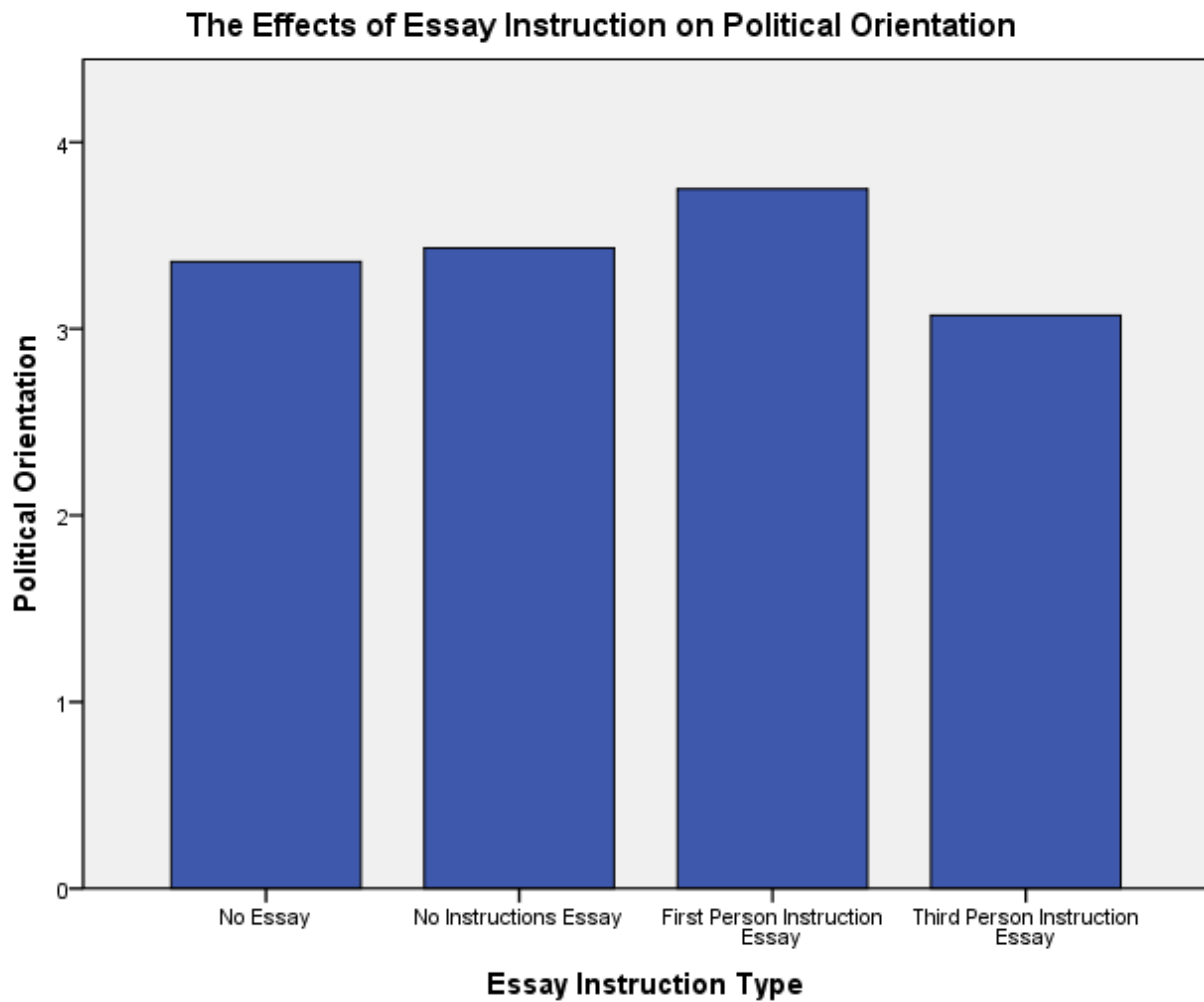


Figure 1. Possible effects of essay instruction type on political orientation (1 = *extremely liberal* to 7 = *extremely conservative*). Contrasts that were exploratory in nature did reveal a difference between first person ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.85$) and third person ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.72$) essay instructions.