

Group 7

PAPER 7: FALSE MEMORIES FOR FAKE NEWS DURING IRELAND'S
ABORTION REFERENDUM

Introduction

- Political campaigns and the tendency to vote on the basis of recollection of memorable campaign events or candidates;
- Previous studies and their findings:
 - Do false memories about events align with individuals' beliefs?
 - Is low cognitive ability a factor in forming false memories?
- None of the studies have recorded false memories during a real-world political campaign;
- Ireland's abortion referendum on May 25, 2018 provided an ideal opportunity to study the **process of forming political false memories** - a debate between two groups with deeply held beliefs

Data

- There were a total of 3140 participants recruited via social media, university mailing lists and other similar sources
- 2122 participants reported their biological sex as female, 991 as male, 3 identified as “other” and 24 refused to answer
- The mean age of the sample was 32 years
- Majority of participants (2342) indicated that they would vote “yes”; 379 indicated voting “no”
- The “yes” side voted in favour of appealing the abortion ban
- The “no” side voted against repealing the abortion ban

Procedure of the study

- Participants were presented with 6 news stories from which 4 were true and 2 were fabricated
- Each story consisted of an original photograph accompanied by a short summary
- All participants were shown a balance of "yes" and "no" stories to avoid influencing voters during the real-life referendum
- After viewing all 6 stories, participants were told that some people were shown fake news and asked to let researchers know if they think they had seen any
- Participants were invited to complete a cognitive ability test called “Wordsum”

Fabricated poster story



The Together for Yes campaign was forced to destroy 25,000 campaign posters after evidence emerged that the posters were bought using funding received from American pro-choice lobbyists.



The Save the 8th campaign was forced to destroy 25,000 campaign posters after evidence emerged that the posters were bought using funding received from American pro-life lobbyists.

Fabricated sexual assault story



Speaking after former Ulster rugby players were found not guilty of sexual assault, a pro-choice campaigner made headlines when they said 'we identify with victims of rape, as all women in this country have been raped by the 8th amendment and the patriarchy that supports it'.



Speaking after former Ulster rugby players were found not guilty of sexual assault, a pro-life campaigner made headlines when they said 'this verdict is another blow to the pro-abortion mantra of "trust women" – clearly not all women can be trusted'.

Procedure of the study

After reading the story, participants were asked whether they remembered the event and their answers were classified as:

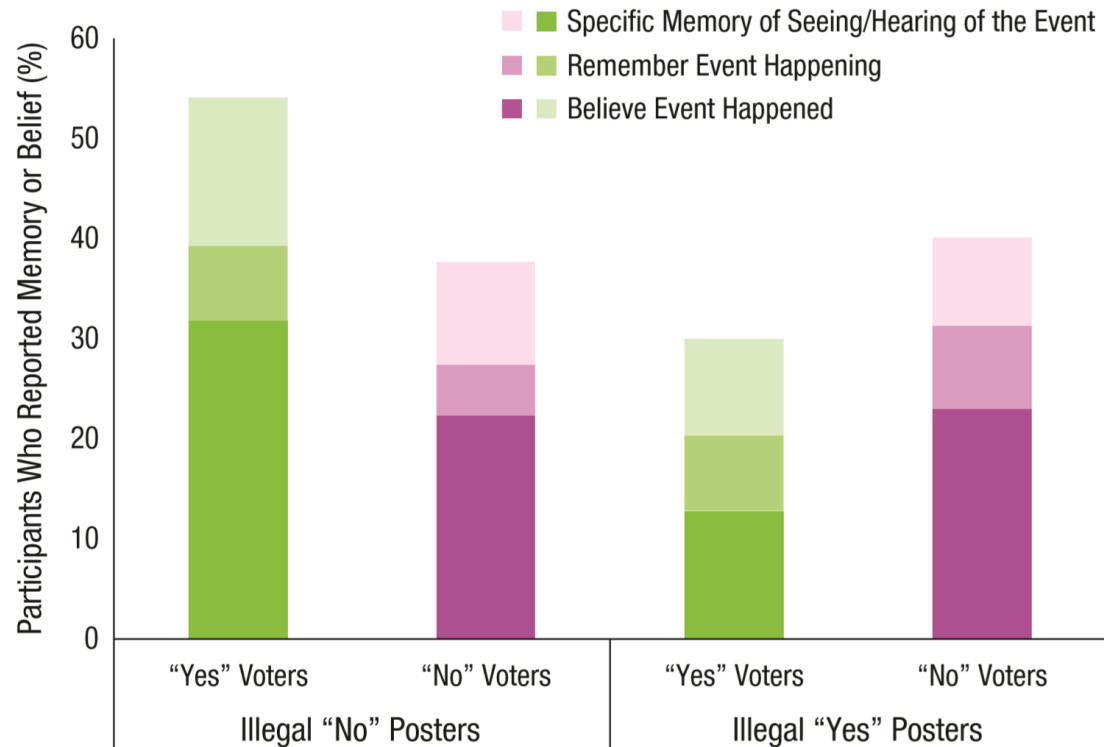
- “I remember seeing/hearing this”
- “I don’t remember seeing/hearing this but I remember it happening”
- “I don’t remember this but I believe it happened” (removed from the analysis)
- “I remember this differently” (classified as not remembering)
- “I don’t remember this”

Hypotheses

The study aimed to test 3 hypotheses:

- **H1:** voters report more false memories for stories consistent with their **political beliefs**
- **H2:** lower **cognitive ability** to be associated with increased false memories
- **H3:** political orientation and cognitive ability can predict participants' ability to identify the fake news stories **after a warning** about the possible presence of misleading information

H1 results



Responses of "yes" and "no" voters to the fabricated stories concerning the destruction of "yes" and "no" posters purchased illegally with U.S. funding.

- The percentage of true stories remembered by "yes" voters (57%) and "no" voters (58%) did not differ significantly
- However, "yes" voters were more likely to remember or believe the fabricated "no" poster story and vice versa
- A model fit onto the data revealed that **participants were 14 times more likely to report remembering the false story if it was in line with their beliefs**

H2 results

- A total of 2,181 participants (69% of the whole sample) completed the cognitive ability test
- There was no difference in cognitive ability between “yes” voters and “no” voters
- A hierarchical binary logistic regression was conducted to assess how false memories for the illegal-poster story were predicted by political beliefs and cognitive ability
- The model showed there was **a direct correlation between cognitive ability and remembering the false story** (11% less likely to report a false memory for every 1-point increase in Wordsum score)
- The **interaction effect** in the model showed that participants who scored high in cognitive ability were more likely to identify stories in line with their beliefs as fake

H3 results

- The fabricated stories were identified as fake (47%) at more than twice the rate of the true stories (19%)
- Participants who initially reported remembering the poster story (excluding believers) were significantly less likely to later select it as fake
- Only 31% of participants who falsely remembered the poster story in the first part of the study then went on to select that story as fabricated. So **69% had robust false memories**
- After fitting a new model for this hypothesis it was clear that:
 - participants were less likely to identify the fabricated story as fake when it was in line with their beliefs
 - for every 1-point increase in their Wordsum score, participants were 13% more likely to correctly identify the story as fake

Conclusion

H1: Voters were more likely to report false memories for stories aligning with their beliefs

➤ This relationship was stronger for participants with lower cognitive abilities

H2: Lower cognitive ability was associated with increased false memories

H3: After a warning about the possibility of fake news, false memories largely persisted

➤ The effects of political beliefs and cognitive ability on identifying fabricated stories remained the same after a warning