Social Identities and Environmental Decision Making

Abstract

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Abstract

Making social identity salient is a powerful form of social influence. Based on the social identity approach and Probabilistic Persuasion Theory, we suggest that political identity may alter the perceived importance of attributes in an environmental decision making context. We report a pilot study that preliminarily supports our basic hypothesis.

**Purpose**

We propose that the decision strategies that a decider uses to make environmental decisions may be impacted by the social identity of the decider. We suggest, based on the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and Probabilistic Persuasion Theory (Reimer et al., 2012), that the social identities of deciders may affect the processing of the decision attributes and the strategies that deciders use to make choices.

We test these ideas in the context of solar panel adoption across the Democratic and Republican parties, which are often polarized on climate change issues (Hornsey et al., 2016; Ter-Mkrtchyan et al., 2022). We expected that having a battery as part of the solar panels would be a more important attribute for Republicans than for Democrats (Horne & Kennedy, 2019), that Democrats would be more sensitive to the amount of renewable electricity (Gromet et al., 2013), and that all participants would be sensitive to the financial benefit of the setup (Vohs et al., 2006).

**Procedure**

We report an initial pilot study of 54 responses, 27 reporting as Democrat and 27 as Republican. Participants made 48 choices in which they either accepted an offer for solar panels or retained only utility electricity at houses they pretended to own. We use the decision models from Gigerenzer et al. (1999) and follow methodological approach of Garcia-Retamero and Dhami (2009) to apply single-rule decision models, a unit weight model, and a weighted-additive model to analyze the results.

**Results**

In our sample, Democrat participants (*M* = 31.1, *SD* = 10) accepted more of the offers of solar panels overall than did Republicans (*M* = 20.5, *SD* = 12.8), *t*(52) = 3.38, *p* < .01.

We created several models and tested their accuracy against actual participant decisions. A weighted additive model predicted 64% of choices accurately, a unit weight model predicted 59% of choices, a take-the-best heuristic was 67% accurate, and three single-rule models predicted 63%, 50%, and 54% of choices, respectively. Democrats’ decisions were slightly better described by more complex models and a renewable energy rule, while Republican choices were best described by considering the battery and the take-the-best heuristic.

**Conclusions and Implications**

This analysis shows preliminary results of a pilot study that suggests that Democrats and Republicans look at different information when deciding whether to get solar panels. Further study will work at confirmatory analysis and at experimental manipulation of the salience of the political identity.