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## False Consensus Effects for the 1992 Canadian Referendum

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### Abstract

The present study used an important political event to examine the extent to which cognitive and motivational factors influence consensus estimates. A significant false consensus bias was observed in estimates of how Canadians would vote in the 1992 Constitutional Referendum. Students who planned to vote Yes estimated, on average, that 56% of the people across Canada would vote Yes, whereas students who planned to vote No estimated, on average, that only 51% would vote Yes. Multiple regression analyses on consensus estimates revealed that Yes-Voters who were selectively exposed to friends and family who favored the Yes side and who were more emotionally involved in a Yes outcome made significantly higher estimates of the Yes vote. Among No-Voters, attributing one's position to the influence of a politician was shown to be related to making higher estimates of the No vote. These results implicate three mechanisms in the false consensus bias and suggest that different processes were at work for Yes-Voters and No-Voters.

### Résumé

La présente étude a eu recours à un événement politique important pour examiner dans quelle mesure les facteurs cognitifs et motivationnels influencent les évaluations de consensus. Un biais important en la croyance en un faux consensus a été observé dans les estimations des intentions de vote des Canadiennes et des Canadiens lors du référendum constitutionnel de 1992. Les étudiants qui entendaient voter oui ont estimé, en moyenne, que 56 pour cent de la population voterait comme eux, alors que les étudiants qui prévoyaient voter non ont estimé, en moyenne, que 51 pour cent de la population voterait oui. Des analyses de régressions multiples sur les évaluations du consensus ont révélé que les personnes ayant voté oui, qui étaient sélectivement exposés à des amis ou à des membres de leur famille optant pour le oui, et qui prenaient à cœur la cause du oui, en arrivaient à des estimations plus élevées du vote pour le oui. Chez les partisans du non, le fait de prendre position en raison de l'influence d'un politicien faisait en sorte que l'on surestimait le vote pour le non. Ces résultats impliquent trois mécanismes dans l'erreur de faux consensus

et suggèrent que différents processus étaient actifs chez les partisans du non et chez ceux du oui.

Two questions that were frequently asked across Canada in October of 1992 were: "How do you plan to vote in the referendum on the Charlottetown Accord?" and "What do you think the result of the referendum will be?" The Charlottetown Accord was an historic constitutional agreement reached by Canada's Prime Minister and its 10 provincial premiers in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island in August, 1992. The constitutional reforms that made up the Accord included changes that would have provided distinct status to the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec, guaranteed self-government for native peoples, and created a new type of senate with broader powers. Canadians voted in a nation-wide referendum on October 26th, 1992 to determine whether the changes proposed in the Accord would become part of a new Canadian Constitution.

The two questions noted above would seem to be quite different. The first asks whether one plans to vote Yes or No in the referendum. The second requires one to estimate how others will vote. Despite their differences, there is reason to suspect that people's answers to the two questions may *not* be independent. In fact, results from recent social cognition research suggest that there is likely to be a systematic bias such that people who support a given side of the referendum issue are likely to overestimate the percentage of people across the country who similarly support that side. This so-called "false consensus bias" is said to be in evidence when people's estimate of consensus for their position significantly exceeds the estimate made by those who endorsed the opposite position (Marks & Miller, 1987). The present study was designed to examine cognitive and motivational mechanisms that may account for biased estimates provided by Canadians about the likely outcome of the 1992 Referendum.

The false consensus bias appears to be a reliable and robust phenomenon (Mullen et al., 1985; Mullen & Hu, 1988). It has been observed for estimates of preferences, opinions and behaviours that range from trivial to consequential. For example, the bias was evidenced for estimates of the percentage of people (a) who prefer white bread to brown bread (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), (b) who would agree to carry a sandwich board that says "Repent" around campus (Ross et al., 1977; Zuckerman, Mann, & Bernieri, 1982), and (c) who would choose to avoid an experiment in which they were required to pose as a panhandler (McFarland & Miller, 1990).

False consensus appears to be an especially strong bias when applied to political opinions (Mullen et al., 1985). Significant false consensus effects have been obtained for estimates of (a) candidate preference (Brown, 1982; Granberg, 1987), (b) approval of president's performance (Goethals, Allison, & Frost, 1979), (c) approval for specific policy decisions like boycotting the

Olympics (Manstead, 1982), and (d) approval for general political movements such as women's rights (Judd & Johnson, 1981; Manstead, 1982). However, studies of political expectations have generally *not* examined the false consensus bias in the context of a real voting decision, nor have they considered the multiple mechanisms that may account for the bias.

#### *Cognitive and Motivational Influences on Consensus Estimates*

Both cognitive and motivational mechanisms appear to contribute to the false consensus bias (Marks & Miller, 1987). Three cognitive explanations that have garnered support focus on selective exposure, salience, and attributions. A selective exposure explanation suggests that people bias their estimates of how others would generally behave because they draw inferences from their experience with the people they most often interact with in everyday life, and people usually seek out the company of others similar to themselves (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). The specific mechanism responsible for the bias resulting from selective exposure may be the availability heuristic, which suggests that people tend to use the ease with which something is brought to mind as a valid index of its probability. Support for the selective exposure account of false consensus was provided by Sherman et al. (1983), who found that estimates of cigarette smoking correlated positively with the number of friends one had who smoked.

In the context of the Canadian referendum, selective exposure could be assessed by asking people how their friends and family members were likely to vote. We would expect that, among people who planned to vote Yes in the referendum, those whose friends and family were also planning to vote Yes would be more likely to overestimate the nation-wide Yes vote than those whose friends and family were planning to vote No. Similarly, among people who planned to vote No in the referendum, those whose friends and family were planning to vote No would be expected to be more likely to overestimate the nation-wide No vote than those whose friends and family were planning to vote Yes.

A salience explanation suggests that people focus their attention on their preferred position rather than on alternative positions and are therefore likely to exaggerate the consensus for their position simply because their own position is the only one in their immediate consciousness (Marks & Miller, 1987). Support for this explanation was provided by studies showing that considering the opposing point of view mitigates the false consensus bias (Goethals, 1986), whereas actively thinking about one's own position and behaviour can enhance the bias (at least for certain individuals) (Kernis, 1984). This suggests that, in the context of the referendum, people who single-mindedly focussed only on their own position would be more likely to make higher consensus estimates than people who considered both their own side of the issue and the opposing side in their pre-vote deliberations.

An attributional explanation suggests that to the extent that people view

their decision or behaviour as being caused by situational rather than personal factors, they will be more likely to assume others would act in the same manner, leading to higher estimates of consensus. Thus, Zuckerman et al., (1982) showed that individuals assumed greater consensus for a behaviour when they were induced to make a situational rather than a dispositional attribution for the behaviour. In the context of a political decision such as presented by the referendum, situational attributions could be most directly assessed by asking people whether their opinions were influenced by key politicians who had spoken out on the referendum debate. It can be suggested that to the extent that people attribute their position to the influence of a particular politician, they are likely to imagine that others were similarly influenced and would therefore be more likely to assume that others would vote as they themselves plan to.

A motivational factor that may contribute to the false consensus bias is having a vested interest in the outcome of the reference group's choice. For example, Crano (1983) designed a study in which college students were told that university officials were planning a tuition surcharge that would affect either upperclassmen or lowerclassmen. Students were asked to evaluate the plan and estimate the proportion of other students who shared their attitude. Results showed that students who thought they would be affected by the plan estimated that considerably more students would share their opinion than did respondents who would not be affected. These results suggest that when the outcome of the reference group's choice has some personal meaning or hedonic relevance, an individual's vested interest may lead them to overestimate the extent to which others share their opinion. We would suggest that an emotional involvement/vested interest mechanism is especially likely to lead to false consensus for consequential decisions such as how to vote in an election or referendum.

#### *The Present Study*

The present study examined the influence of cognitive and motivational factors on consensus estimates for the 1992 Canadian Constitutional Referendum. A correlational design was employed, allowing us to simultaneously consider the role of selective exposure, salience, attributions, and emotional involvement as possible influences on consensus estimates. The issues surrounding the referendum question were complex and open to subjective construal, suggesting that it was the type of question for which a false consensus bias would likely be found (Gilovich, 1990). Following Mullen et al.'s (1985) suggestions for exploring the determinants of false consensus, we employed only a single behavioural choice, measured the consensus estimates prior to the behavioural option, and framed the consensus estimates in terms of subject's choice.

The first purpose of the present study was to demonstrate the false consensus bias in a comparison of Yes-Voters and No-Voters. The second

purpose was to explore factors that predispose individuals to make higher estimates of consensus. Following Marks and Miller (1987), we expected selective exposure to be the cognitive mechanism that contributed most strongly to making higher consensus estimates. We also expected the emotional involvement/ vested interest mechanism to receive support because of the personally meaningful nature of the referendum decision.

#### METHOD

##### *Subjects and Recruitment*

The study was conducted in the week prior to the national referendum on the Charlottetown Accord (October 26, 1992) and involved 129 McGill College students drawn from nine separate Introductory Psychology conferences. Participation was voluntary, but was encouraged by a \$300 reward to the person who was most accurate in estimating the popular vote for the 10 provinces. Subjects completed a six-page questionnaire that was designed primarily to assess people's reasons for following political events, but which included several items relevant to the false consensus bias. Because some subjects did not complete all of the relevant measures on the surveys, only 123 subjects are included in the subsequent analyses.<sup>1</sup>

The average age of subjects was 20.2 years and 71% of them were female. English was the native language for 72% of subjects, French for 14%, and some other language for 15%. Forty-five per cent of subjects were Psychology majors.

##### *Measures*

*Consensus Estimates* Subjects were asked to indicate their guesses of the referendum outcomes in each province. The 10 provinces were listed in geographic order from the western-most province (British Columbia) to the eastern-most (Newfoundland). Spaces were provided for both a Yes and No estimate. The average of the 10 Yes estimates served as the measure of consensus for Yes-Voters, whereas the average of the 10 No estimates served as the measure of consensus for No-Voters.

The referendum was designed so that only if a majority of people in each of the 10 provinces voted Yes would the Constitutional Accord be approved. The media reported polling figures for the country as a whole and also province-by-province. Thus, it was not unnatural to ask subjects to estimate the outcome for each province. An advantage of collecting estimates for each

<sup>1</sup> The six-page questionnaire was designed primarily to examine the relation between political self-regulation and voting-related behaviour. Political self-regulation was assessed by asking subjects their reasons for following various aspects of the referendum debate. The reasons were categorized as either introjected or integrated following procedures developed by Vallerand and colleagues (cf. Vallerand & Bissonette, 1992). The results for this aspect of the study will be combined with two other studies and described in a separate manuscript.

province rather than a single estimate for the country as a whole is that it allowed us to calculate how reliable estimates were. The reliability across the 10 estimates was, in fact, quite high,  $\alpha = .83$ .

*Intended Voting Behaviour* Subjects were asked, "If you were to vote today on the referendum, which option would you choose?" Two alternatives were provided, "Yes, accept the Charlottetown Accord" and "No, reject the Charlottetown Accord."

*Selective Exposure* Selective exposure to similar opinions was assessed by asking subjects "How do you think people who are important to you (e.g., parents, friends) are generally likely to vote?" Responses were given on a seven-point scale (1 = Definite No, 4 = A Mix, and 7 = Definite Yes). For subjects who indicated they were going to vote No, this measure was reverse-scored.

*Salience* Salience of one's own position was assessed by asking subjects to indicate on seven-point scales the extent to which they agreed with two statements: "Figuring out how I would vote has been a slow process that has taken a long time" and "I have had to reconsider my position several times in the past month as new information came out about the accord and its potential consequences." The two items were highly correlated,  $r = .65$ ,  $p < .01$ . Responses were reverse-scored and averaged; higher scores were interpreted as reflecting greater salience for one's own position.

*Attributions* Attributions of one's position to a situational cause was assessed by asking subjects to indicate on 7-point scales the extent to which their voting decision was influenced by four politicians who were prominent in the debate about constitutional reform (Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa, Former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, and Quebec Opposition Leader Jacques Parizeau). We used subject's maximum rating for any politician as a reflection of how much they were influenced.

*Emotional involvement* was assessed by asking subjects to indicate on a list of 15 emotions (6 pleasant/9 unpleasant) how they would feel if the referendum were to go in the direction they preferred. For each emotion a seven-point scale was provided with "Feel No Emotion" and "Feel the Emotion Strongly" as the respective poles. The pleasant emotions were contentment, love, friendliness, affection, happiness, and relief ( $\alpha = .86$ ); the unpleasant emotions were fear, anger, disgust, regret, sadness, worry, irritation, depression, and anxiety ( $\alpha = .86$ ). The mean of pleasant and unpleasant emotions were calculated separately and standardized. A difference score was then calculated between anticipated pleasant emotions and unpleasant emotions. This difference score was interpreted as a measure of *emotional involvement* in one's position.

#### RESULTS

Yes-Voters significantly overestimated the percentage of people who would vote Yes ( $M = 56.5$ ) relative to No-Voters ( $M = 51.1$ ),  $t(121) = 2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ .

TABLE 1  
Correlations Among Factors Hypothesized to Influence Consensus Estimates.

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Emotional Involvement	1.00			
2. Salience	.32*	1.00		
3. Selective Exposure	.38*	.26*	1.00	
4. Attribution to Political Influence	.00	-.15	-.05	1.00

\*  $p < .01$

TABLE 2  
Comparisons of Yes-Voters vs No-Voters on Biasing Factors

	Yes Voters $n = 87$	No Voters $n = 36$	$t(121)$	$p$
1. Emotional Involvement	0.30	-1.02	5.40	.0001
2. Salience	3.82	3.04	2.25	.05
3. Selective Exposure	5.70	4.25	4.88	.0001
4. Attribution to Political Influence	3.80	4.44	-1.82	.07

The estimates of Yes-voters ranged from 37.5 to 90.2 ( $SD = 9.40$ ), whereas No-voters' estimates ranged from 31.6 to 77.0 ( $SD = 8.84$ ). Although this pattern of results supports the false consensus bias, it should be noted that, in fact, actual referendum results showed that 50% of Canadians voted in favour of the Constitutional Accord (when results for each of the 10 provinces are averaged). Thus, only Yes-Voters were inaccurate in their estimate of the true outcome.<sup>2</sup>

Additional analyses were conducted to examine the influence of native language on estimates. Ninety-three per cent of allophones, 68% of anglophones, and 53% of francophones reported planning to vote Yes. Anglophone and allophone subjects showed a similar pattern of bias in their estimates. For anglophones the mean estimates of Yes-Voters and No-Voters were 56.3 and 49.3. For allophones the mean estimates of Yes-Voters and No-Voters were 56.7 and 50.3. Francophone subjects did not show evidence of the false consensus bias: The mean estimate of Yes-Voters was actually slightly lower than that of No-Voters,  $M$ 's = 50.3 vs 53.4.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1 provides the correlations among the cognitive and motivational factors hypothesized to relate to consensus estimates. It can be seen that selective exposure, salience, and emotional involvement were significantly positively related to one another. Attributional influence was unrelated to the other factors.

To examine the relation of the various factors to consensus estimates we used stepwise multiple regression analyses in which subjects' consensus estimates were regressed on the four cognitive and motivational factors.

These analyses were done separately for Yes-Voters and No-Voters. The analysis for Yes-Voters revealed a significant multiple  $R$  of .36,  $F(2,83) = 6.32$ ,  $p < .01$ . Selective exposure and emotional involvement were each significantly positively related to making higher estimates: for selective exposure,  $\beta = .30$ ,  $t(84) = 2.88$ ,  $p < .01$ , and for emotional involvement,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(84) = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ . No other effects approached significance ( $p$ 's  $> .20$ ). These results indicate that Yes-Voters who were selectively exposed to friends and family who favoured the Yes side and who were more emotionally involved in a Yes outcome were significantly more likely to make higher consensus estimates.

The analysis of No-Voters also revealed a significant multiple  $R$  of .30,  $F(1,34) = 3.36$ ,  $p < .05$ . Attributional influence was marginally positively related to making higher estimates:  $\beta = .30$ ,  $t(34) = 1.84$ ,  $p = .07$ . Thus, No-Voters who attributed their position to the influence of a politician were somewhat more likely to make higher estimates of the No vote compared to other No-Voters. No other effects approached significance ( $p$ 's  $> .20$ ).

Given that different factors were associated with the estimates among Yes-Voters and No-Voters, we examined whether the two groups differed in their standing on the predictor variables. As can be seen in Table 2, Yes-Voters were significantly more likely than No-Voters to report having more salient positions, having greater selective exposure to others sharing their position, and being more emotionally involved with the outcome. By contrast, No-Voters were marginally more likely to report having been more influenced by politicians.

The fact that Yes-Voters scored higher than No-Voters on factors associated with biased estimates may account for their greater inaccuracy relative to the actual referendum results. It is noteworthy that Yes-Voters particularly differed from No-Voters in terms of being emotionally involved and having been exposed to others sharing their positions, precisely the two factors that were shown to be predictive of higher estimates among Yes-Voters. Similarly, No-Voters particularly differed from Yes-Voters in reporting greater political influence, and it is for this predictor that a marginal effect was found for consensus estimates.

2 If a weighted mean is calculated for the 10 estimates by taking into account the population of each province, the results are nearly identical:  $M$  for Yes-Voters = 54.3 and  $M$  for No-Voters = 49.7,  $t(121) = 2.56$ ,  $p < .01$ .

3 It was suggested by a reviewer that subjects might be more accurate in making estimates for their home province. Supplemental analyses supported this line of thinking. Yes-Voters estimated that 48.8% of the people in their own province would vote Yes compared to an estimate of 45.5%, by No-Voters. This does not represent a significant difference,  $t(121) = 0.97$ . It should be noted, however, that such an estimate is very unreliable compared to the composite score we have used in our central analyses.

## DISCUSSION

A significant false consensus bias was observed in students' estimates of how Canadians would vote in the 1992 Referendum. Students who planned to vote Yes estimated, on average, that 56% of the people across Canada would vote Yes, whereas students who planned to vote No estimated, on average, that only 51% would vote Yes. Although the effect size for the false consensus bias in the present study was somewhat lower than is typical for political judgements, our study represented a rather conservative test of the bias because the media regularly reported polls in the week prior to the referendum. These polls no doubt served to constrain the extent to which people could exaggerate their estimates of the "Yes" vote across the country. The fact that a substantial monetary reward was offered for accurate estimates may have also served to constrain the extent to which people made biased estimates.

Correlational analyses revealed significant positive interrelations among emotional involvement, selective exposure and salience. These relations suggest some difficulty in distinguishing so-called cognitive and motivational influences on the false consensus bias. Because we employed a correlational design, it is impossible to know whether strong emotional involvement causes individuals to focus single-mindedly on one side of the issue and spend more time with others who share their opinion or whether the direction of influence is the reverse.

The consensus estimates of Yes-Voters involved both cognitive and motivational factors. Students whose family and friends strongly favoured the Yes side made significantly higher consensus estimates, supporting a selective exposure mechanism. Similarly, Yes-Voters who were more emotionally involved in a Yes outcome also made significantly higher estimates of the Yes vote, supporting a motivational, emotional-involvement mechanism. It is not surprising that emotional involvement played an important role in the false consensus bias. The referendum context ensured that there was a built-in contingency between the behaviour of the reference group and the individual making the estimate. That is, the choices that the reference group (Canadians voting in the Referendum) actually made would have an effect on the subject who was estimating their likely behaviour. There is rarely such a contingency in false consensus experiments. We would suggest that when judgements are made in a context where the group's decision will have ramifications for the individual, it is more likely that an ego-centric bias resulting from emotional involvement will lead people to overestimate the extent to which others endorse the position they care about. Initial support for this prediction was provided by Crano (1983).

A very different pattern of results was obtained among No-Voters. Selective exposure and emotional involvement were not associated with making higher estimates of the No vote. However, attributing one's position to the influence of politicians was marginally predictive of making higher No

estimates. Such a result is typically explained by suggesting that to the extent that people view their decision or behaviour as being caused by situational rather than personal factors, they will be more likely to assume others would act in a similar manner, leading to a stronger false consensus effect.

The different pattern of results for Yes-Voters and No-Voters points to the difficulty of identifying a single mechanism that accounts for the false consensus bias across various groups and contexts. As noted by Marks and Miller (1987), it is likely that several sets of explanatory variables are needed in order to provide an account of the phenomenon, and the important theoretical task is to determine the circumstances under which each possible mechanism is more or less relevant. Our results suggest a process in which a moderately high threshold must be reached on a given biasing factor before individual differences on this factor can accurately predict consensus estimates. Thus, Yes-Voters scored highest on selective exposure and emotional involvement relative to No-Voters, and it was these two mechanisms that significantly influenced consensus estimates. By contrast, No-Voters scored higher than Yes-Voters on attributional influence, and it was for this mechanism that a marginal effect was obtained. Given the difficulty of specifying a priori which mechanism will be relevant for a particular subgroup and context, it is probably advisable for researchers to include measures of multiple mechanisms when studying consensus estimates.

In summary, the present study used the 1992 Canadian referendum to examine the extent to which cognitive and motivational factors influence consensus estimates. A significant bias was observed such that Yes-Voters, on average, overestimated the percentage of people who would vote Yes relative to the estimates of No-Voters and also relative to actual referendum results. Subsequent analyses of the estimates of Yes-Voters revealed that selective exposure (a cognitive mechanism) and emotional involvement (a motivational mechanism) were significant predictors of higher estimates. Among No-Voters, attributional influence was the sole predictor of higher estimates. Despite limitations in sampling and measurement, the results are consistent with previous research in providing empirical support for the influence of three of the four mechanisms implicated in the false consensus effect.<sup>4</sup> The

4 Questions can be raised about the representativeness of our sample. Subjects were all college students and predominantly female. However, previous research does not point to any difficulty in generalizing results regarding the false consensus effect across sex or age groups. Questions can also be raised about how we operationalized the mechanisms hypothesized to account for the false consensus estimates. In particular, the way selective exposure was measured is open to reinterpretation. An objective assessment of the opinions of important others was not obtained; instead we relied entirely on subjects' reported perceptions of how important others were likely to vote. These perceptions may be inaccurate and could themselves be the result of bias, such as projecting onto others the views held by the respondents themselves. Although our measure paralleled the one employed by Sherman et al. (1983), those authors focussed on the observable behaviour of smoking rather than on a potentially inaccessible political opinion.

results also go beyond previous research by suggesting that different mechanisms may underlie the bias for people on opposite sides of an important political issue.

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