



Short Communication

The first shall be first and the last shall be last: YouTube, need for closure, and campaigning in the internet age


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ABSTRACT

Political candidates increasingly use new technology to broaden the reach of their campaigns with little knowledge of how its use affects voting behavior. We examined whether scores on the Need for Closure Scale (NFCS) predicted a primacy effect in the voting preference of self-identified politically unaffiliated participants. Participants watched two Internet advertisements of political candidates and indicated their likelihood to vote and preference for each candidate. Participants also completed the NFCS. Completion of the NFCS and presentation of the advertisements were counterbalanced. NFCS scores predicted a preference for the first advertisement controlling for age, perceived political orientation of the candidates, and participant political orientation. Results suggest that using low cost Internet videos early in the election cycle may create a preference in unaffiliated voters with high NFC.

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1. Introduction

Political candidates increasingly seek cost-effective ways to reach constituents. New media, such as YouTube.com, gives candidates a cheap and direct route to potential voters (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2007). However, little is known about how consumption of political information on new media differs from consumption in more traditional media, such as television (Okdie et al., 2014). This study examines the candidate preference of politically unaffiliated participants who observed YouTube campaign videos. We sought to establish that participants' Need for Closure (NFC; Kruglanski, 1989) predicted a primacy effect among politically unaffiliated participants, such that high NFC individuals would prefer the candidate in the first (compared to the second) advertisement they observed. This is important, not only because of the length and cost of modern campaigning, but because the electorate has effectively "sorted" itself (Abramowitz, 2010), making the unaffiliated voter a sought after commodity.

1.1. The modern political campaign

Contrary to popular myth (e.g., Schoen, 2008), unaffiliated, or "independent," voters are not particularly thoughtful when it comes to their

political choices (Sidanius & Lau, 1989). They are not even all that independent; although 40% of the American electorate self-identifies as "independent," when pressed, their voting behavior tends to correspond with one of the established political parties, such that some political scientists estimate that the percentage of voters lacking strong partisan leanings hovers between 10 to 15% (Neuman, 2012). However, independent voters remain important, because their choices can become decisive in close elections (Killian, 2014).

The effort to convince the remaining persuadable voters continues down to the waning hours of an election (Google Inc., 2013). Most advertising money is spent during the final few weeks of the campaign (Holman & McLoughlin, 2001), despite most voters having made up their minds several months in advance (e.g., in the 2004 American presidential election, only five percent of the electorate considered itself "undecided" in mid-June; Nagourney, 2004). Concurrently, political campaigns start earlier than ever; in 2010 "the average length of a U.S. Senate campaign...for those who have successfully knocked off incumbents or won open seats has been 448 days" (Ostermeier, 2010). For many candidates starting campaigns or simply stockpiling their funds for the final push, Internet advertisements provide a cheap way to disseminate one's message to a broad audience (Teinowitz, 2007). This especially applies to independent voters, who tend to be younger (Nagourney, 2004) and "extremely active online" (Scarborough, 2012). Although the Internet may provide cheap, direct access to independent voters, little research has examined how consumption on new media platforms affects voting preferences.

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1.2. The Need for Closure.

Need for Closure (NFC) is a personality trait characterized by strong motivation to reduce ambiguity or confusion (Kruglanski, 1989). When faced with ambiguity, high NFC individuals tend to “seize” on an apparent solution (often, the first plausible solution they encounter) and “freeze” (i.e., not let subsequent information affect their opinion; Kruglanski, 1989). NFC is comprised of five components: Preference for Predictability, Preference for Order, Discomfort with Ambiguity, Decisiveness, and Closemindedness (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). These components can be measured using subscales or combined to form a unidimensional NFC score (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The unidimensional NFC construct has correlated with dozens of perceptual and decision-making constructs, such as preference for the familiar (Mannetti, Pierro, & Kruglanski, 2007) and heuristic processing (Kruglanski, 2004). It also is associated with “primacy effects” in regard to incoming information (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). That is, information arriving first is given more weight in decision-making than subsequent information (Asch, 1946).

1.3. Current study

This study examines whether NFC predicts the importance of the order in which independent voters view political advertisements. Although previous research has examined voting preferences predicted by NFC (e.g., Chirumbolo and Leone (2008) determined that it predicted political conservatism) and the primacy effect created by NFC (i.e., placing greater weight on early-arriving information in a job interview; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), no study has examined whether NFC predicts primacy effects in voting preferences and applied this concept to new technology used in campaigns.

1.4. Hypotheses

Controlling for Participant Age, Participant Political Orientation, and Candidate Political Orientation, high NFC participants will report a greater likelihood of voting for the first candidate presented, compared to low NFC participants.

Controlling for Participant Age, Participant Political Orientation, and Candidate Political Orientation, high NFC participants will show a greater preference for the first candidate presented over the second candidate presented, compared to low NFC participants.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants (134; 77 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 27.10$; $SD = 11.81$) from the United States completed the study online as part of a larger study and were selected because they self-identified as politically unaffiliated. We recruited 52 participants from a national sample using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk), 60 from psychology courses at a Pacific university, and 22 from psychology courses at a southern university. Mturk workers received \$0.50 for participating, while the psychology students received extra credit. Groups did not differ significantly from one another in terms of NFC scores (p -values ranging from .46 to .76). From the 134 participants used in the study, we discarded data from two participants because they were from the same state that the advertisements came from, making them more likely to be familiar with the candidates.

2.2. Procedure

In the larger study, we asked participants, “With what political party (if any) do you most closely affiliate?” Participants who indicated that they did not affiliate with any political party (e.g., “none,”

“independent,” “unaffiliated”) were selected for this study. Participants also indicated their political orientation using a Likert-scale (1 = *Very Liberal*, 7 = *Very Conservative*), and the resulting mean (3.87, $SD = 1.15$) was close to the midpoint of the scale. We refer to this as the “Participant Political Orientation” variable.

Participants watched two short political campaign advertisements taken from Youtube.com (one video from each major-party candidate), answered questions about each advertisement, and completed a 41-item version of the Need for Closure Scale (NFCS; Roets & Van Hiel, 2007). Presentation of the videos was counterbalanced, as was the introduction of the NFCS.

2.3. Videos

The videos originally aired during the 2010 U.S. Senate race in Colorado. We chose these videos because the race was particularly close (48.1% vs. 46.4%; [New York Times](http://NewYorkTimes.com), 2010), and the videos provided no clear indication of the candidates' political parties and were about 32 s long. Both videos featured casually dressed, white males and low-playing, non-lyrical background music. After each video, participants rated the political orientation of the candidate in the video (1 = *Very Liberal*, 7 = *Very Conservative*) and ultimately rated the Republican candidate ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.73$) significantly more conservative than the Democratic candidate ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.69$), $t(133) = 2.35$, $p = .02$, $d = .30$. To control for this in our analyses, we constructed a variable (“Candidate Political Orientation”) measuring the difference in perceived political orientation between the two candidates, $M = .51$, $SD = 2.53$.

2.4. Need for Closure

The Need for Closure Scale (NFCS) used in this study contains 41 statements on a six-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*). We used the version constructed by Roets and Van Hiel (2007), rather than the original version (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), because the original used four subscales measuring motivations, while the Decisiveness subscale measured behaviors. Roets and Van Hiel's version (2007) corrects this problem by measuring Decisiveness as a motivation and provides a robust unidimensional construct. Because we primarily used NFC as a unidimensional construct ($\alpha = .81$) in the current study, we used the Roets and Van Hiel (2007) version. Higher scores indicate greater NFC.

2.5. Dependent variables

After each video, we asked participants, “If you lived in the area where the person in the video was running for office, how likely would you be to vote for that person?” (1 = *Very Unlikely*, 7 = *Very Likely*). After the second video, participants reported which candidate (i.e., the candidate in the first video or the candidate in the second video) they preferred to vote for.

2.6. Covariates

In the regression analyses, we controlled for factors that might increase perceptions of similarity (e.g., Byrne, 1971) and influence participants' candidate preferences beyond NFC. Because we expected that the political beliefs of the participants and the perceived political beliefs of the candidate would be a powerful factor in predicting preferences, we controlled for this using the Participant Political Orientation and Candidate Political Orientation variables. Because the Republican candidate was noticeably older than the Democratic candidate, we included Participant Age in the regression model.

Table 1
Correlations between variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. NFC												
2. Order	.57**											
3. Predictability	.71**	.36**										
4. Decisiveness	.74**	.19*	.30**									
5. Ambiguity	.77**	.30**	.42**	.58**								
6. Closemindedness	.25**	-.17†	.09	.17*	-.06							
7. Age	-.15†	-.08	-.03	-.11	-.28**	.10						
8. Gender	-.16†	-.11	-.19*	-.04	-.21*	.11	.30**					
9. Political Orientation	.01	.13	-.04	-.03	-.02	-.03	.08	.07				
10. Can. Pol. Orientation	-.12	-.14†	.02	-.19*	-.12	.10	.04	-.10	-.10			
11. 1st Candidate Rating	.16†	.18*	.14	.09	.01	.11	.19*	.03	-.19*	.21*		
12. 2nd Candidate Rating	.14	.09	.09	.16†	.05	.05	.03	-.06	-.13	.20*	.22*	
13. Preferred Candidate	-.21*	-.25**	-.14	-.03	-.17*	-.04	.01	.03	.08	-.05	-.26**	.03

Note: Males are coded as 1 and females are coded as 0. Significance tests are based on two-tailed *p*-values. † *p* < .10, * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01.

3. Results

First, we conducted a pair of linear regressions using NFC scores, Participant Political Orientation, Candidate Political Orientation, and Participant Age as predictors. The first regression used participants' reported likelihood of voting for the first candidate as the outcome variable. NFC scores were significant, $t(129) = 2.04$, $\beta = .17$, $p = .04$, such that higher NFC predicted increased likelihood of voting for the first candidate. Participant Political Orientation was significant, $t(129) = 2.11$, $\beta = .17$, $p = .04$, such that greater conservatism predicted increased likelihood of voting for the first candidate. Participant Age was a significant predictor, $t(129) = 2.55$, $\beta = .21$, $p = .01$, such that older participants reported greater likelihood of voting for the first candidate. Candidate Political Orientation was marginally significant, $t(129) = 1.92$, $\beta = -.16$, $p = .06$, such that finding the Republican candidate more conservative than the Democrat predicted increased likelihood of selecting the first candidate.

A second linear regression was conducted using the same factors to predict participants' likelihood of selecting the second candidate. NFC scores were not a significant predictor, $p = .14$. Participant Orientation was significant, $t(129) = 2.14$, $\beta = .18$, $p = .03$, such that greater conservatism predicted increased likelihood of voting for the second candidate. Participant Age, $p = .66$, and Candidate Orientation, $p = .29$, were not significant predictors.

Next, we conducted a binomial logistic regression using the same factors as predictors and voting preference (i.e., whether participants preferred the first candidate vs. the second candidate presented) as the outcome variable. NFC scores were significant, $Wald(1, 133) = 5.17$, $B = -.93$, $p = .02$, such that higher NFC scores predicted a preference for the first candidate. Participant Age ($p = .83$), Participant Political Orientation ($p = .61$), and Candidate Political Orientation ($p = .51$) were not significant predictors.

Finally, we conducted another binomial logistic regression using the five NFC subscales to indicate what factor was driving participants' preference for the first candidate presented. Preference for Order was the strongest predictor, $Wald(1, 133) = 6.20$, $B = -.81$, $p = .01$, such that a greater Preference for Order predicted a preference for the first candidate. Discomfort with Ambiguity was marginally significant, $Wald(1, 133) = 2.93$, $B = -.57$, $p = .09$, such that greater discomfort with ambiguity predicted a preference for the first candidate. Preference for Predictability, $p = .96$, Decisiveness, $p = .16$, and Closemindedness, $p = .19$, failed to reach significance. See Table 1 for correlations among variables.

4. Discussion

These results indicate that undecided voters with a high NFC prefer political candidates whose advertisements they encounter first. This finding probably has a small effect on the overall electorate, because

of the presence of so many other more powerful or accessible motivations. However, being an independent voter is associated with both youth (Nagourney, 2004) and heavy Internet use (Scarborough, 2012), meaning that independents are likely to encounter advertisements like those used in this study early in the election cycle because those advertisements are disproportionately likely to appear online.

The Preference for Order subscale served as the factor driving NFC scores and has been described as people's desire for "definite order and structure in their lives and [abhorring] unconstrained chaos and disorder" (*p.* 1050; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Among the subscales, it showed strong positive correlations with scores on the Intolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Eysenck, 1954) and the Personal Need for Structure Scale (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) and strong negative correlations with scores on the Bieri REP Test's cognitive complexity subscale (Bieri, 1966) and the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Taken together, these findings indicate that Preference for Order may be driving the primacy effect through two channels. First, a Preference for Order indicates a discomfort with (a) ambiguity and (b) a lack of structure. Second, Preference for Order indicates willingness to avoid thinking intently about the ambiguous issue. So, if one is uncomfortable and finds their discomfort sated by the first solution that presents itself, regardless of its merits, one will select that solution. With the solution selected, further thought is not required.

The results of this study suggest that online political advertising may be a good idea—particularly early in an election. Disseminating online campaign advertisements early in the election may sway independent voters who are high in NFC as they are likely to prefer the candidate in the first advertisement that they encounter. Candidates can broadcast cheap advertisements to a comparatively small audience, and this may result in a persistent effect; we say "may" because, even though high NFC predicts attitudinal rigidity (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), the major limitation of this study is that we do not know how long this specific effect lasts. The current sample contained a mix of college and non-college students from various localities and was likely to be representative of unaffiliated voters in the United States, suggesting that this effect is not limited to a particular voting region. Future research should use longitudinal studies to investigate the stability of this effect across the length of a political campaign.

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