Greetings!

You recently participated in a study about Australian political attitudes re the war in Iraq, and indicated that you would be interested in receiving a short summary of the findings. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to have the opportunity to tell you about the results. This write-up gives you a quick look at who the participants in the study were, what we were looking for, and what we found. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3365-6406, by e-mailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072.

VIEWS ON THE WAR IN IRAQ AS POLITICAL ATTITUDES
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SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
We recruited 416 people to participate in the study, from classes in political science, history, and economics, during the time period March 24-April 7 (i.e., while the fighting in Iraq was going on). The sample was about 56% women. We didn't focus on gender particularly, but overall, although both men and women opposed the war, women opposed it significantly more strongly. People ranged in age from 17 to 72, with a median of 19. Again, age wasn't a primary focus for us, but older respondents in our sample were more strongly opposed to the war than younger respondents.

WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
This study is part of a wider social psychological program of research that tries to predict political attitudes and behaviour from party affiliation and identification with the party. The theoretical context is a model called Social Identity Theory, which predicts that when people identify as members of social groups, they adopt the social thinking and actions that are normative (socially defined as appropriate) within that group. There's plenty of research to show that people conform in attitudes and behaviour to what other people who are like them think & do - and we ran a very similar study last year on the issue of asylum seekers, showing that you could predict a lot of the variance in people's attitudes & actions from their party affiliation.

But Social Identity Theory says that if you do NOT conform to an issue that is important for your group, you should disidentify - so e.g., if you see your party's position on an important issue as very different from your own, you should feel alienated from the leadership, be less willing to engage in political action, be less committed to the group, & eventually (where the group boundaries are permeable and your group is low status) leave your group and join another party. One of the things that was interesting in our study on asylum seekers last year was that only government supporters showed the predicted pattern. In the opposition (& specifically, the ALP and Democrats), people who were alienated from the leadership and challenging the party line on asylum seekers were actually those who were most committed to the party. This is quite interesting psychologically, so we wanted to look at that again, using the topic of the war on Iraq.

WHAT WE FOUND
1. PARTY AFFILIATION AND IDENTIFICATION. Focusing only on the Australian students: 42% affiliated with the Liberal/National Coalition, 27% ALP, 8% Democrat, and
21% Green. Big differences were observed between the different classes, though they were not a focus of our research. For example, students in the first year economics class disproportionately affiliated with the Coalition (56%, compared to 33% of the first year history students and 32% of the first year political science class). In past research, often minority party supporters have been found to be more identified with their party (committed & seeing party affiliation as important) than supporters of big parties, but that was not the case here. Party identification did not differ across groups, with average identification hovering in the midpoint of the scale.

2. ATTITUDES TO THE WAR ON IRAQ. We averaged questions about the moral obligation of Australia to send troops to Iraq, perceptions of the best interests of the nation, and support for the war, to form a scale for people's attitudinal support for the war. We also had measures of perceptions of support from their own party and other parties. Overall, coalition supporters supported the war, and opposition supporters opposed the war. The more people identified with their party, the more strongly their attitudes were in line with the perceived party line for their group. So that finding is again consistent with Social Identity Theory: people seemed to pick up the normative attitudes for their group and/or disidentify if they disagreed with the party.

3. WILLINGNESS TO CHALLENGE OTHER GROUPS. We had measures of how much people would respond to differences between groups by trying to change the other parties' positions, vs being guided by them, downplaying the issue, or trying to refocus. Overall, opposition party supporters were more confrontational, and across parties, the more people identified with their party the more they wanted to try to change other groups' positions. These findings are again consistent with past research in intergroup and political behaviour.

4. WILLINGNESS TO CHALLENGE OWN LEADERSHIP. This was our target variable, in this study, & gratifyingly the results were as interesting as last year. Only the Coalition supporters showed the positive relationship between identifying with the party, attitudinal and behavioural conformity, and support for the leadership. In the opposition parties, people who were strongly committed to the party did have attitudes that were consistent with the party line, and were more likely to want to change other parties. However they were also more willing to try to change (vs be guided by) their own leadership. The effect was driven by the results for the ALP and to a lesser extent the Democrats, as in the previous study.

In general, this phenomenon suggests to us that sometimes the members of a party who are most committed to their group are more (not less) willing to challenge their leadership, which is consistent with the political analysis these days of the ALP woes. But what is psychologically most interesting to us is the tension between challenge to the leaders and commitment to the party - when can these both be maintained? And what motivates people, in the fluid electoral context, to maintain their commitment to the party instead of defecting to either the Coalition or the Greens, even when they disagree with the official position on key issues, like asylum seekers and the war? There are a couple of different approaches that we're exploring - part of the answer is obviously trying to balance the relative importance of different political issues under debate (i.e., the war vs long-term issues like regulating the economy & protecting the environment) and the likelihood of other worse or better parties gaining power. If you would like to make some additional comments on what makes people who care a lot about a party but disagree with current policies stop caring, versus try to change their party line, please feel free to get in touch with us!
THANKS AGAIN....

So that's a description of what we found in this study! We welcome your questions, & you can also ask to be sent a copy of what we end up with when we write up for scientific publication. And thank you again for your participation and interest!