Greetings,

You recently participated in a study about "Values & Attitudes for Supporters & Opponents of the Proposed HECS Changes," and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to have the opportunity to tell you about the findings.

This write-up tells you first about what we were looking for and then about 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) 3365-7295, 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. You can also read about other studies that we've done on political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: NORMS FOR POLITICAL LETTER WRITING
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
In this study, we gave participants information that people who supported or opposed the HECS changes had favourable or unfavourable attitudes to a particular form of political action, namely writing a letter to a politician. We wanted to see whether that would have an impact on attitudes towards letter-writing, or willingness to write a letter. Specifically, we wanted to compare two theoretical models for what would happen.

The mainstream model is called “referent informational influence theory” (Terry & Hogg, 1996), which says that the norms of groups you belong to (‘ingroups’) are very important in decisions, while the norms of groups that you don’t belong to (‘outgroups’) are unimportant. This theory says that if people find out that there is a norm in their own group supporting an action, they are more likely to act, but if people in their ingroup oppose an action, they are less likely to act. Information about other groups has no effect. So, the model says that students who support HECS changes will be most influenced by reports about the supporters’ (ingroup) views on letter writing, but not influenced by the views of students who oppose the HECS changes (the outgroup), and vice versa. However, there is another theory (Louis & Taylor, 2001) that says that people do react to other groups’ views if the groups are in conflict with each other. In conflict conditions, according to this other theory, when they think the other group opposes their action people can actually become *more likely to act. In this study, we found that the second model was supported.

During the same session, you completed some questions looking at rumours about the Redfern riots. This is some exploratory work in our lab, and was aimed at relating values, identity, and ethnic attitudes to believe in, and transmission of, social rumours. Basically we found that what people believed and talked about as causes of the Redfern riot was linked to their pre-existing political views and ethnic attitudes, as you would expect!

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During the time period March 16-26, 107 people completed the study. This was about a month after the Redfern riot, which was on February 16th, and at a time of agitation about the HECS reforms (March 25th was the day the UQ Senate passed the 25% fee increase for next year). All participants were Australians recruited from first year classes in psychology. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 53 (but 76% were 20 or younger), and were predominantly female (81%) and White/European Australian (90%). In terms of political affiliation, 11% had no political preference; among the remainder, 36% supported the coalition and 65% one of the opposition parties (45% ALP, 18% Green, 1% Democrat).
WHAT WE FOUND

1. PRE-MEASURES. First we took pre-measures of attitudes to HECS and political behaviour. We asked people to identify as supporting or opposing the proposed HECS changes. Overall, 91% opposed the changes, and 9% supported it.

We also looked at self-reports for 20 BEHAVIOURS that people could have engaged in in the past, and whether people approved or disapproved of these actions as a means of expressing political attitudes. In the past, a majority of respondents had looked for info on particular issues in the news (78%) and spoken to family (92%) and friends (91%) about them. People also reported trying to convince other people to change their views (54%), verbally joking about others with different views (51%), and resisting/arguing when someone tried to convince them (69%). Explicitly political behaviours were uncommon overall, but a majority of respondents said in the past they had signed petitions (71%). Minorities had also engaged in actions like volunteering (26%) or attending a rally (26%).

The key dependent variable in this study was writing a letter to a politician. Most (89%) of the respondents had not written a letter, even though most (68%) approved of this means of expressing political attitudes. On average, HECS supporters and opponents were equally likely to approve of letter writing in theory and to have done nothing about it in practice. This attitude-behaviour inconsistency is very common in political decision-making.

2. SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION and AUTHORITARIANISM. People's belief in hierarchical values for social systems and their faith in authority were also measured in this study, because we expected that these variables might be linked to students' social attitudes. Most participants (92%) rejected hierarchical values and were either suspicious of authority (44%) or had mixed feelings (31%). Social dominance orientation and authoritarianism were not related to views on the HECS changes. But people who were less egalitarian, and more trusting of authority, were less likely to approve of letter-writing. Authoritarian/Social Dominance values were associated with disapproving of active political behaviours in general (except making jokes about your opponents), and approving of behaviours like avoiding thinking about political issues and avoiding talking about them.

3. EXPOSURE TO NORM MANIPULATION. After the premeasures and the study about the Redfern riot (which is discussed below), participants were given graphs that were supposed to show the results of previous studies at UQ. The graphs showed the approval ratings for three political behaviours (letter writing, signing a petition, and attending a rally) for students who supported and opposed the HECS changes. In fact, the graphs were made up and manipulated the approval ratings for letter-writing: the key independent variable. Specifically, there were four conditions: the graphs showed that both supporters and opponents approved of letter-writing; that both disapproved; that supporters approved & opponents disapproved; or that supporters disapproved & opponents approved. Manipulation checks suggested that two participants could not understand the graphs; these two were left out of the analyses, along with one other who said they were suspicious about whether the graphs reflected students' real opinions.

4. DEPENDENT MEASURES. In the final questionnaire, we took measures of how how much people felt they were thinking about their attitudes to HECS while filling in the questionnaire, as well as measures of the perceived benefits and costs of letter-writing, willingness to write a letter, and actual letter-writing behaviour (signing a letter to the Education Minister, Dr. Nelson about the HECS changes). All the measures were recoded so that a higher score indicated attitudes, willingness, or behaviour that was consistent with people's initial views (so if you supported letter writing originally, but changed your mind at
Time 2 or you didn't write a letter, that would be low consistency). On average, Time 2 attitudes to letter-writing, willingness, and actual behaviour were in line with their initial attitudes. People who had stronger opinions about the HECS changes at Time 1 were more consistent in their attitudes and willingness at Time 2, but not in actual behaviour.

5. PREDICTING CONSISTENCY & EXPRESSED BEHAVIOUR. What we were most interested in, though, was the effect of our norm manipulations (graphs of attitudes to letter-writing) on people's consistency. We found that people weren’t really influenced by what their own group said about letter writing. But when outgroup members opposed letter writing, participants became more positive about letter-writing in their attitudes, and were more likely to actually write letters. In fact, 56% of people wrote a letter to the education minister when they were told the other group approved of letter-writing, whereas 77% wrote a letter when they were told the other group disapproved! The fact that people react behaviourally to outgroup members is quite interesting, theoretically, and is something that has been a focus of past research in our lab. Socially it’s important as well – it shows how sometimes when people that you’re in conflict with don’t approve of your behaviour, it produces a backlash that actually makes you more likely to act.

Remembering that as we were conducting the study, people would have been getting a lot of information about the HECS changes that would have consolidated their attitudes and guided their actions (media coverage, friends' views, etc), we were pleased to find effects of our graphed norm manipulations. These findings show the surprisingly strong influence of even subtle normative information on people's decision-making. People were more likely to engage in a political action, letter writing, if they looked at graphs showing outgroup members didn’t approve of the action - a groovy finding, that we are following up in other research!

6. THE REDFERN RUMOURS STUDY. In this part of the questionnaires, we were interested in what happens when there are different versions of a conflict that people can choose to believe. People were asked if they had heard various rumours about what started the riot (in the news or conversation), if they had talked about the rumours, and if they believed them. We compared rumours that emphasized the role of the community in starting the riot (drunk people, criminals, or mistakes about the police) with rumours that focused on the role of the social environment (poverty, racial tension, and police behaviour). Authoritarianism, social dominance, and racial attitudes weren’t related to hearing rumours in the news or conversation, but people who had more positive attitudes to aboriginals tended to believe the social environment was more influential in causing the riot. People who were more positive to authority were more likely to believe that problems in the community started the riot, and more likely to mention rumours about problems in the community in conversation. Importantly, believing rumours that the riot was caused by problems in the community was then associated with supporting punitive riot prevention strategies like “making an example of rioters with jail terms”. Believing rumours that the riot had environmental causes, in contrast, was linked to strategies like supporting "social programs for minorities”. These findings are a good example of how when people hear conflicting stories about events, pre-existing views and identities influence what they believe and talk about, and how they react.

THANKS AGAIN....

So that's a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!