Greetings,

In Semester 1, 2007 you participated in a study about recycled water and political decision making and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was administered by Anna Cooke under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. 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) 3346 9515, by emailing 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 about social influence and decision making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: ATTITUDES TOWARD RECYCLED WATER
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR

The purpose of this study was to investigate people’s attitudes toward recycled water, their intentions to engage politically with this issue, and their actual behaviour. We investigated the effects of social norms about recycled water on these variables, as well as perceptions of the political climate.

We know that our attitudes and intentions are influenced by what other people think and do. This is known as normative influence. In this study, we gave people normative information about what supporters or opponents of recycled water think about how they should act. People were told that supporters of recycled water believed they should inform themselves about the issue and speak out (a positive supporter norm) or were given no normative information. Likewise, they were also told that opponents were encouraging people to be informed and speak out (positive opponent norm) or nothing at all. Our third manipulated variable was political power. People were given a description of the Queensland political context that emphasized that the government (who supported recycled water) had high political power and influence, or one that suggested the government had lower political power and influence.

We were interested in how supporters and opponents would react to the different norm manipulations. As people usually pay more attention to the norms of their own group, we anticipated that supporters would be influenced by normative information from other supporters, and that opponents would be influenced by the norms of other opponents. We also thought that this might be affected by the political climate. For example, if the Beattie government was said to have high political power then supporter norms could have more impact (i.e., because a supporter campaign would be more likely to succeed). Conversely, if the Beattie government was described as having low power we might expect opponent norms to be more influential among opponents, because they could launch a more influential campaign.

We measured the impact of these variables immediately, but also two weeks later (to see if the effects would last).

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From March to June 2007, 149 UQ students completed the first experiment (along with other surveys on health and financial decision-making). Participants’ ages ranged from 17 to 45 (but most were less than 20). Most participants were female (74%), Australian (92%) and were recruited from a first year class in psychology. The majority...
of participants (61%) were politically left-wing, 21% were right-wing and 18% were undecided. Two weeks later, 147 participants completed the same measures of attitudes and intentions as well as their political behaviour regarding recycled water in that period.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. ATTITUDES TOWARD RECYCLED WATER. The majority of participants (76%) supported recycled water. In general, supporters were more likely to see their political orientation as important to them (regardless of whether they were politically left- or right-wing). However, whether people supported or opposed recycled water was unrelated to their intentions to engage politically with this issue. Females were more likely to be politically engaged in general, though were not more likely to be supporters or opponents of recycled water. As expected, people who were more committed to their attitudes toward recycled water reported greater intention to engage politically. Intentions regarding recycled water at Time 1 also correlated with behaviour two weeks later.

2. EFFECTS OF NORMS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD RECYCLED WATER. Our manipulation of supporter and opponent norms didn’t have an impact on attitudes and intentions regarding recycled water. However, measured perceptions of supporter and opponent norms were related to identification as a supporter or opponent of recycled water. If people perceived a strong supporter norm (i.e., supporters wanting people to be informed) they were more likely to support recycled water. Moreover, a perceived supporter norm was associated with the belief that recycled water would benefit Queensland and the self. Conversely, if people perceived a strong opponent norm they were less likely to support use of recycled water. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that normative information influences attitudes and behaviour.

3. EFFECTS OF SUPPORTER NORMS AND POWER ON ATTITUDES TOWARD RECYCLED WATER. As mentioned, we manipulated supporter norms by telling people that supporters were encouraging them to be informed about recycled water (positive norm) or providing no normative information. Whether a supporter norm was presented or not had no impact when the Beattie government was said to have low political power. However, when Beattie was described as having high political power, a positive supporter norm reduced the perception that recycled water would have personal benefits for the participant and also reduced their intentions to engage politically with this issue. We think this is because people assumed that as recycled water supporters were powerful politically, they personally didn’t have to engage with the issue to get the result they wanted. This interaction was observed on intentions at Time 1 and also at Time 2, two weeks later.

4. EFFECTS OF OPPONENT NORMS AND POWER ON ATTITUDES TOWARD RECYCLED WATER. We saw a similar pattern to the one described above in terms of opponent norms. However, in this case when the Beattie government was described as having low power, a positive opponent norm (that is, opponents encourage people to be informed about recycled water) reduced intentions to be involved with the issue of recycled water. This could be because when opponents to recycled water heard that other opponents were encouraging people to be informed, they assumed that someone was already doing something about the issue and that they personally didn’t need to be involved.
5. COMBINED EFFECTS OF SUPPORTER NORMS, OPPONENT NORMS AND POWER ON ATTITUDES TOWARD RECYCLED WATER. When we looked at our three manipulations in combination we found that they influenced intentions and behaviour regarding recycled water. When the Beattie government was described as high power and both supporters and opponents were thought to have positive norms (both encouraged people to be informed), people intended to and actually did engage more with the issue. We think this is because people not only perceived that their own group wanted them to be involved, but that the opposition also wanted their group to mobilize. So instead of assuming that their group would triumph by default they perceived a real threat from the opposition and decided to get involved with the political dialogue regarding recycled water.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
Overall the effects of the manipulated variables on attitudes and intentions were weak and inconsistent. As a result we looked at measured perceptions of norms as well. This study is definitely consistent with other work that demonstrates the importance of perceived norms (be they supporting or opposing your position) in informing people’s opinions. Probably the most interesting effect of our manipulations that we did find was that telling people they should inform themselves about a political issue may actually backfire and cause them to engage less. This has applied consequences for politicians and groups attempting to influence public opinion, especially if the group has high power. We find this an interesting possibility and will be investigating it further in some up-coming studies. Stay tuned!

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!