Greetings!

You participated earlier this year 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 228 people to participate in the study, from classes in political science, economics, and psychology. People were recruited during July 27 – September 17 2004 (before the last election), then we focused in on the 186 Australian respondents. The sample was about 65% women, and people ranged in age from 17 to 57, with a median of 19. We didn't focus on demographics too much, but it turned out although age wasn’t related to war attitudes in this sample, and both men and women opposed the war, women opposed it significantly more strongly.

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 very similar studies in the last couple of years on the issue of asylum seekers (in ’02) and the war in Iraq (in ’03), 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 both previous studies was that only government supporters showed the predicted pattern. In the opposition (& specifically, the ALP), people who were alienated from the leadership and challenging the party line on asylum seekers / the war were actually those who were most committed to the party. This is quite interesting psychologically, so we wanted to look at that again. (You can see the write-up for previous years online at http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/wl0403_2.pdf [last year’s war study] and http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/wl02s2v2.pdf [the ’02 asylum seekers study]).

WHAT WE FOUND THIS YEAR
1. PARTY AFFILIATION AND IDENTIFICATION. When we asked participants who they would vote for, 33% affiliated with the Liberal/National Coalition, 47% ALP, 4% Democrat, and 12% Green, with another 3% missing/other. 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 (54%, compared to 27% of the political science class and 27% of the psychologists). 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 were neutral on the issue, 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 interested in trying to change the other party, and across parties, the more people identified with their group 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, but we didn’t get the same results as in our studies in ’02 and ‘03. We found most people thought if they disagreed with the leadership of their party they should try to change their leaders’ views, and that was true regardless of which party they were in and how strongly they identified with the party. (In practice though people’s attitudes conformed to the party line, as mentioned above!)

What we were interested in from previous years’ data is that sometimes the members of a party who are most committed to their group are more willing to challenge their leadership, but we didn’t find that in 2004. There are a couple of different approaches that we're exploring to figure out when people committed to a group will support vs challenge their leaders - 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.

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!

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