Greetings,

You participated a few months ago in a study about "Opinions and beliefs about current social issues," 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) 3346 9515, by e-mailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis or Dr. Joanne Smith, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies on political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: INJUNCTIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE NORMS FOR POLITICAL ACTION
Working paper, 3/2/05. This paper has not been peer reviewed. Please do not copy or cite without author's permission.

WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
In this study, we gave participants information that other UQ students approved or disapproved of a behaviour (signing petitions / form letters) and had or had not done the behaviour themselves in the past. We wanted to see whether peers’ approval (the injunctive norm) would impact on what participants thought about the behaviour and what the participants did. We also wanted to compare the impact of the injunctive norm with the impact of what other students did themselves (the descriptive norm). Previous research says 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 (e.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996). 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. But the research in the past has tended to lump together descriptive norms about what group members do with injunctive norms about what group members approve of. We wanted to manipulate the two independently and see what influences what.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During the time period September – December 2004, 185 people completed the study. All participants were UQ students, and ranged in age from 17 to 47 (but 73% were 20 or younger), and were predominantly female (63%) and White/European Australian (84%). In terms of political affiliation, 6% had no political preference, 38% supported the coalition and 56% one of the opposition parties (34% ALP, 17% Green, 3% Democrat).

WHAT WE FOUND
1. PRE-MEASURES. First we took pre-measures of attitudes to full fee places and political behaviour. Overall, 62% opposed full fee places, and 27% supported it, with 10% neutral or undecided. 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 (89%) and spoken to family (92%) and friends (95%) about them. People also reported trying to convince other people to change their views (57%), verbally joking about others with different views (65%), and resisting/arguing when someone tried to convince them (78%). Explicitly political behaviours were uncommon overall, but minorities had engaged in actions like volunteering (25%) or attending a rally (21%).

A majority of respondents however said they had signed petitions / form letters in the past (68%) and approved of this behaviour as a way of expressing political views (76%). This was the key variable in this study. On average, supporters and opponents of full fee places were equally
likely to approve of signing petitions, but opponents were more likely to have acted in the past.

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 (87%) rejected hierarchical values and were either suspicious of authority (52%) or had mixed feelings (38%). People who were less egalitarian, and more trusting of authority, were more likely to support full fee places, less likely to approve of signing petitions / form letters, and less likely to have acted in the past. Authoritarian/Social Dominance values were associated with disapproving of active political behaviours in general (except making jokes about your opponents).

3. EXPOSURE TO NORM MANIPULATION. After the premeasures, participants were given graphs that were supposed to show the results of previous studies at UQ. The graphs showed UQ students’ approval ratings for three political behaviours (signing a petition / form letter, attending a rally, and taking a flier from a campus group) and what percentage said they had done each of these behaviours in the past. In fact, the graphs were made up and manipulated the approval ratings and action percentages for signing a petition / form letter. Specifically, there were four conditions: the graphs showed UQ students approved of signing and had done it in the past; that students disapproved and had not signed in the past; that students approved of signing and hadn’t done it much, and that students disapproved of signing but had done it a lot in the past. Manipulation checks suggested that 18% of participants could not understand or did not remember the graphs; these were left out of the analyses, along with 7% more who guessed the purpose of the study.

4. DEPENDENT MEASURES. In the final questionnaire, we took measures of whether people personally approved of signing petitions / form letters, were willing to sign, and actually did sign (a post card to the Education Minister, Dr. Nelson, about full fee places). On average, post-manipulation attitudes to signing, willingness, and actual behaviour were in line with initial attitudes. However, people who opposed full fee places more strongly before the manipulation, or who had more egalitarian and less hierarchical values, were more positive to signing, and more likely to act.

5. PREDICTING CHANGE IN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR. What we were most interested in, though, was the effect of our norm manipulations (graphs) on people's post-manipulation attitudes and actions. We found that participants’ attitudes to signing became more positive if they were told other UQ students approved of signing, and also if they were told other students had signed in the past. Participants’ willingness to act and actual rate of signing decreased if participants were told other students disapproved and hadn’t signed in the past (only 31% signed in this condition), but remained high in the other conditions (more than 60% of participants signed if students approved of signing, had signed in the past, or both).

Remembering that as we were conducting the study, people would have been getting a lot of information about full fee places that would have consolidated their attitudes and guided their actions (media coverage, friends' views, etc), we were pleased to find such big 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 positive about political action and more likely to act in a specific way (signing a postcard to the education minister), if they looked at graphs showing other UQ students approved of the action or had done it themselves. This is a traditional social influence finding, and supports the role of groups in unconsciously guiding our attitudes and behaviour. But what is interesting for our purposes is that the study shows that groups influence our behaviour in two separate ways: both through the injunctive norm (what other people approve of) and through the descriptive norm (what other people do). The study results
seem to show, then, that people will both do what you do and do what you say! One interesting question to follow up on in future research is what happens when people see a mismatch between their group’s views on a behaviour and what their group does.

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!