

Abstract

PERCEIVED KNOWLEDGE AND DEFENSE OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES

by

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Three experiments tested if perceived knowledge on a political issue predicted people's willingness to engage with weak versus relatively stronger belief-threatening information on that issue. Study 1 assessed people's perceived knowledge on four political issues and, for each issue, manipulated whether participants chose between arguing against a weak versus moderate argument or a moderate versus strong argument. Only one issue provided some support for the primary hypothesis. When people believed they were not knowledgeable on the carbon tax, giving them a relatively stronger set of arguments to choose from (moderate versus strong) further increased their preferences for the weaker argument compared to an easier set of choices (weak versus moderate). When people believed they were high in knowledge of the carbon tax, the effect disappeared, demonstrating that they were more likely to engage with strong belief-inconsistent information. Study 2 tested whether perceived knowledge predicted people's choices of whether to counter-argue versus ignore weak versus strong belief-inconsistent information. Perceived knowledge predicted preferences for counter-arguing both weak and strong messages, but the relationship was slightly stronger for strong messages—affirming the hypothesis that it is more epistemically valuable to engage with strong arguments if one has the available knowledge. There was also a strong effect of condition

such that people became significantly more likely to ignore the information when the information was strong than when it was weak. This effect was primarily driven by people's expectations that they could not effectively counter-argue. In Study 3, people chose between two debate partners that were either similar in knowledge versus substantially lower in knowledge or between partners that were similar in knowledge versus substantially higher in knowledge. When people believed they knew little about the debate topic (i.e. the death penalty), their choices were unaffected by the available options; when people believed they knew a lot about the topic, they consistently chose the more knowledgeable debate partner. These findings suggest that people's perceived knowledge and their beliefs about their ability to effectively counter-argue belief-inconsistent information play an important role in how they decide to defend their beliefs.