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SHORT NOTES

Increasing Voting Behavior by Asking People if They Expect to Vote

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In two studies, students contacted by telephone were asked to predict whether they would perform a particular behavior (registering to vote or voting, respectively) in the next few days. The proportion who predicted that they would do these socially desirable behaviors exceeded the proportion of control subjects who performed the behavior without first being asked to predict whether they would. Further, in the voting study these errors of overprediction were self-erasing in the sense described by S. J. Sherman (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1980, *39*). That is, subjects who were asked to predict whether they would vote—all of whom predicted that they would—actually did vote with substantially greater probability than did the no-prediction control subjects. (Actual voting was verified by consulting official voter rolls.) Asking people to predict whether they will perform a socially desirable action appears to increase their probability of performing the action.

When making predictions about their own behavior, people tend to present themselves favorably; they predict that they will do what appears to be proper or good behavior. However, when given the opportunity to act, a person's likelihood of performing a socially desirable action may be reduced by factors such as the action's time and energy costs, the availability of compelling alternatives, and missed opportunity through not responding promptly.

Sherman (1980) showed that asking people to predict their actions does more than just reveal a tendency toward favorable self-presentations; the probability of the predicted action is affected. Once subjects have made a prediction, their behavior is likely to confirm that prediction. In one of Sherman's experiments, subjects who were asked to predict whether they would agree to work 3 hours to collect money for the American Cancer Society (49% said they would) were much more likely (31%) to agree with a later request to do so than were those who were never asked to predict their behavior (4%). Thus, apparent errors in prediction are "self-erasing" (Sherman, 1980). Once a person predicts an action, that action is likely to occur, even when the initial prediction is an apparent gross overestimate of the likelihood of performance. In interpreting this finding, Sherman suggested that making a prediction produces a performance-facilitating cognitive representation in which the person imagines self-performance of the predicted action and associates that action with supporting reasons.

Sherman's self-erasing-errors-of-prediction finding may be useful as a means of increasing the probabilities of socially desirable actions. The influence technique is remarkably simple: It involves asking people to predict whether they will perform the target action. The present research tested this technique's effectiveness in increasing the probability of performance of two socially desirable behaviors—registering to vote and voting in a national election.

Experiment 1: Voter Registration

Method

Experimenters. The experiment was done as a class project in an honors course in social psychology at Ohio State University in October 1984, a month before the Reagan versus Mondale presidential election. Experimenters were 13 students in the course. Each experimenter was given a complete protocol consisting of (a) an interview script, (b) a set of phone numbers within which to randomly select numbers to be called, and (c) a data sheet on which to record the outcome of each call.

Subjects. Odd-numbered telephone numbers were sampled from the exchange that served the Ohio State University student dormitories. Only students who answered an initial question by reporting that they were *not* registered for the upcoming national election were eligible for inclusion. Students who were registered were asked if they had a roommate who was not registered and who could come to the telephone. There was a high rate of participation among those eligible. However, because only a small proportion of the student population was not registered, only about 15% of answered calls (66 out of 419—131 others were not answered) succeeded in obtaining nonregistered subjects. Later, it was discovered that 4 of the 66 subjects were not properly eligible (3 because they were already registered to vote, and 1 who was not a U.S. citizen). These 4 were dropped from the sample, leaving a sample of 62 subjects.

Procedure. Calls were made on the next to last and last days (Sunday and Monday) before Ohio's registration deadline, which was Tuesday,

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October 9th, at 7:00 p.m. Callers identified themselves as working on a study of voter knowledge for their social psychology course. When an eligible subject was identified, the caller proceeded to ask the following:

> You can help us a lot by answering just a few questions about voter knowledge. I will not be asking for any information about your preferences among candidates or parties. However, because I will be trying to recontact some people before the end of the [term], I will need your name. Are you willing to participate?

Subjects who agreed gave their full names and were asked if they knew, first, where to register to vote and, second, when the registration deadline was. Students who indicated lack of knowledge were given the correct information.

Only after the two information questions were asked were subjects assigned to a treatment by the experimenter's selecting, without replacement, 1 of a set of 10 slips. Each slip was marked either "prediction" or "no prediction." The 30 subjects who were, by this means, assigned to the no-prediction condition were thanked for their help and the phone call was ended. The 32 subjects assigned to the prediction condition were asked an additional question before ending the call:

> What do you expect to do between now and the registration deadline of Tuesday evening? Do you expect that you will register to vote or not?

Almost all of the subjects readily answered this question with a yes or no. However, the experimenter was instructed to deal with an "I don't know" response by saying "We would like you to predict your action in any case. Do you think you will register or not?" Those who predicted that they would register were also asked "What would you say is the most important single reason for your registering to vote?" This question was asked on the assumption that providing an explicit reason might increase the probability of subsequently acting in agreement with the prediction (cf. Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982; Sherman, Skove, Hervitz, & Stock, 1981).

Determination of registration. Registration and voting records became available for inspection after the November election. It was expected that almost all of those who registered would register in the election precinct in which their dormitory was located. However, it was possible that some would register instead in their home districts. Follow-up telephone calls were made to all 55 subjects who were not located on the county voter registration rolls. Of the 49 (all but 6) who were successfully recontacted, 16 claimed they had registered in their home locations, rather than in the university area. The remaining 33 confirmed that they had not registered. The 6 who were not recontacted (3 in each condition) were treated as nonregistered. Because it was not possible to verify the responses of the 16 who claimed to be registered outside the university area, the data were analyzed in three ways: (a) treating the 16 "claimants" as if they had not registered, (b) treating them as if they had registered, and (c) dropping them from the sample. (Statistical significance test outcomes were the same for all three analyses.)

Results

Results are summarized in Figure 1 and given in detail in Table 1. As expected, predictions of registration by subjects in the prediction condition (68.8%) significantly exceeded the base rate probability of registration (maximum estimate = 40.6%) by subjects in the no-prediction control condition.

By each of the three methods of determining registration rates in the two conditions, there was about a 10% difference in the expected direction of greater registration in the prediction condition (see Figure 1). However, these differences were not statistically significant.

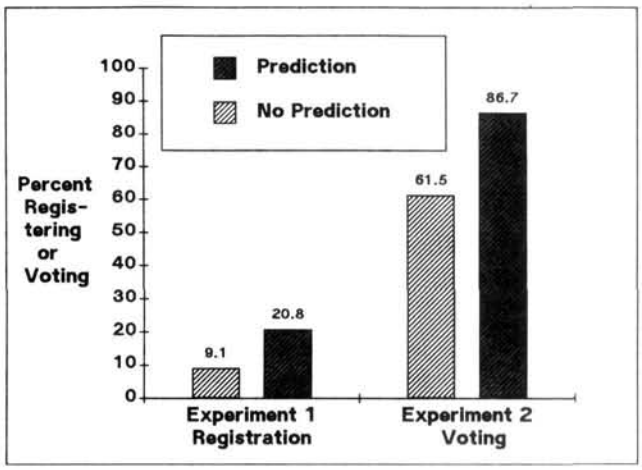

Figure 1. Effects of predicting one's behavior on registering and voting. (This summary uses Method B of Tables 1 and 2, omitting subjects whose claims of having registered or voted could not be confirmed from county records. The results displayed are based on 46 subjects for Experiment 1, and 56 subjects for Experiment 2.)

Experiment 2: Voting

Experiment 2 used approximately the same procedures as Experiment 1 and was conducted before the results of Experiment 1 were known. The study was conducted the Monday evening before the Tuesday, November 6, 1984 election.

Method

Experimenters and subjects. Six undergraduate students, one graduate student, and one faculty member collected data. Eligible participants were resident Ohio State University undergraduates who had registered to vote at the campus election precinct. Experimenters called a total of 452 numbers, 348 of which were answered, and succeeded in contacting a total of 60 students who were eligible and willing to participate. As in Experiment 1, the relatively low yield of subjects was due to the exclusion of the majority of students who were registered at their home addresses rather than at their school addresses. Confining the sample to those registered in the university area was necessary so that county election records could be used as the source of data on voting behavior.

Procedure. Callers randomly sampled only even-numbered telephones within the exchange shared by resident undergraduate students, so as to avoid sample overlap with Experiment 1. Eligible participants were first asked if they knew the location of their voting precinct, and then were asked if they knew the times at which it was open on election day. Most reported that they did know, and those who did not were provided the information. After these two questions, the caller drew a slip to assign the subject randomly to the prediction (n = 32) or no-prediction (n = 28) condition. For subjects assigned to the prediction condition, before completing the call the experimenter asked, "What do you expect to do between now and the time the polls close tomorrow. Do you expect that you will vote or not?" Parallel to the procedure of Experiment 1, subjects were pressed for an answer to this question, and those who answered that they would vote were asked to provide the most important reason for voting.

Determination of voting. The County Board of Election's voter rolls include the record of whether each registered voter actually voted in the election. In all, 50 of the 60 subjects who reported that they were

Table 1
Registration Behavior in Experiment 1

Treatment	*n*	Registered in university area	Claimed registration elsewhere	Not registered	Percentage predicting registration	Percentage registering[a]		
						A	B	C
Prediction	32	5	8	19	68.8	15.6	20.8	40.6
No prediction	30	2	8	20	—	6.7	9.1	33.3
Chi-square (1 *df*)					7.78[b]	1.24	1.23	0.35

[a] These percentages were computed for three different methods of treating the 16 subjects who claimed to have registered outside the university area. Method A treated these subjects as not being registered; Method B dropped them from the sample; and Method C treated them as being registered. The chi-square tests compare the two percentages in each column.
[b] This chi-square test compares the percentage predicting registration in the prediction condition with the highest estimate (Method C) of the percentage actually registered in the no-prediction condition. The former is significantly greater at $p < .01$.

registered to vote in the university area were located on the voter registration rolls for the eight voting precincts in the university area. In attempts to follow up by telephone the remaining 10 subjects, 7 were successfully recontacted. Of those 7, 4 claimed they had voted in other locations, and 3 reported that they had not voted. (The 3 who were not contacted—1 in the prediction condition, 2 in the no prediction condition—were classified as nonvoting.) As in Experiment 1, the "claimants" (2 in each condition) were treated in three different ways in analyzing the data, and again, results of significance tests were the same for all three methods.

Results

Table 2 presents details of the results. All 32 (100%) of the subjects in the prediction condition predicted that they would vote. This was highly significantly more than the highest of the three estimates (18/28 = 64.3%) of the percentage of subjects in the no-prediction condition who voted. Again, therefore, the expectation that subjects would overpredict a socially desirable behavior was confirmed.

The percentage of prediction-condition subjects who actually voted was significantly greater by chi-square test ($p < .05$) than the percentage of subjects in the no-prediction condition who voted, for each of the three methods of estimating the percentage who voted. The difference between the two conditions in percentages voting ranged from 23.2% to 25.2% by the three methods (see Figure 1 and Table 2).

Discussion

These two experiments sought to determine whether the phenomenon of self-erasing errors of prediction (Sherman, 1980) could produce consequential effects that are worthy of application. In assessing the results, we consider their application potential, alternately, from the viewpoint of a skeptic and from that of an enthusiast.

A skeptic's first reaction might be to note the limited statistical significance associated with the two findings. The result of the first experiment was simply nonsignificant, and the statistical test of the second experiment exceeded the .05 criterion by only a small margin. Indeed, if the chi-square tests of Experiment 2 were redone using the correction for continuity (see, e.g., Marascuilo & McSweeney, 1977, p. 20) the three alternative tests of the main result—which were reported as significant at $p < .05$—become results for which the significance level is $.05 < p < .10$. In contrast to this skeptical appraisal, an enthusiast might note that because the direction of result was clearly predicted, a one-tailed statistical test is justified. The result of Experiment 2 is statistically significant at the one-tailed $p < .05$ criterion even when the chi-square correction for continuity is applied.

A skeptic might next note several aspects of the procedures that, although warranted by the circumstances of the present experimental tests, might not characterize an application of the

Table 2
Voting Behavior in Experiment 2

Treatment	*n*	Voted in university area	Claimed to have voted elsewhere	Not voting	Percentage predicting voting	Percentage voting[a]		
						A	B	C
Prediction	32	26	2	4	100.0	81.3	86.7	87.5
No prediction	28	16	2	10	—	57.1	61.5	64.3
Chi-square (1 *df*)					13.71[b]	4.13*	4.69*	4.50*

[a] These percentages were computed for three different methods of treating the 4 subjects who claimed to have voted outside the university area. Method A treated these subjects as not having voted; Method B dropped them from the sample; and Method C treated them as having voted. The chi-square tests compare the two percentages in each column.
[b] This chi-square test compares the percentage predicting they would vote in the prediction condition with the highest estimate (Method C) of the percentage actually voting in the no-prediction condition. The former is significantly greater at $p < .001$.
* $p < .05$.

phenomenon of self-erasing errors of prediction. Some of these are that (a) the callers (accurately) identified themselves as doing research that was a course project, (b) subjects were asked to give their full names before being asked to predict their behavior, (c) subjects were informed that they might be recontacted later, (d) subjects were sampled from a population that was limited to dormitory-resident college students, and (e) the behaviors studied in both experiments were ones that could be performed in only a narrow time range after the prediction was made. If any of these characteristics constitutes a condition on which the effect of the variation of prediction versus no prediction depends, their absence in another application could undo the effect. In reply to these observations, an enthusiast might note that generalizability of the findings is threatened only on the assumption that one of these factors interacts with the prediction variation to produce the self-erasing-errors-of-prediction phenomenon.[1]

Last, a skeptic might observe that the predicted effect was (apparently) obtained in the voting experiment, but not in the registration experiment. Presumably, then, there is some difference between registration and voting behaviors on which the self-erasing-errors-of-prediction phenomenon depends. In response, an enthusiast could note that even the nonsignificant effect of the first experiment was in the predicted direction.

Conclusions

A balanced appraisal may be obtained by considering the magnitude of effects observed in the two experiments. The observed effects were approximately a 10% increase in probability of registration in Experiment 1 and about a 25% increase in probability of voting in Experiment 2. Measured in terms of the w index recommended by Cohen (1977) for describing effect sizes of differences between percentages, the effect in Experiment 1 is approximately $w = .15$, and that for Experiment 2 is approximately $w = .30$. (Cohen, p. 224, identified $w = .10$ and $w = .30$ as "small" and "medium" effects, respectively.) In a large-scale application even the relatively weak effect of Experiment 1 could be of great importance; and the effect observed in Experiment 2 is certainly large enough to alter the outcome of an election. For example, if one could call 10,000 voters who could be counted on to vote for one's preferred candidate, an effect of the strength observed in Experiment 2 would increase that candidate's vote total by about 2,500 votes.

The relative success of Experiment 2 may offer a clue to circumstances under which predicting an action is most likely to increase the rate of performing it. The subjects eligible for Experiments 1 and 2 were, respectively, mutually exclusive subsets of the student population. Subjects in Experiment 1 were among the minority of students who were not registered to vote. Subjects in Experiment 2 were in the majority who were registered. It may have been that registration was a less socially desirable behavior to subjects in Experiment 1 than was voting to subjects in Experiment 2. It is relevant that only 69% of the prediction subjects in Experiment 1 predicted that they would register, in contrast to 100% of the prediction subjects in Experiment 2 predicting that they would vote. Correspondingly, the proportion of control subjects performing the target behavior of registration in Experiment 1 was considerably smaller than the proportion of control subjects in Experiment 2 who performed the target behavior of voting. Another possible difference is that subjects in Experiment 1 may have had less knowledge of how to perform the target behavior of registration than did subjects in Experiment 2 for the target behavior of voting. Thus, it may be that application of the self-erasing-errors-of-prediction finding is more effective the greater the target behavior's social desirability, or the greater the target population's knowledge of how to perform the behavior.

[1] The procedures under which Sherman (1980) obtained self-erasing errors of prediction provide some basis for believing that the effect of the prediction variation is *not* confined to situations in which (a) the procedure is described as research, (b) full names are requested, (c) subjects expect to be recontacted, (d) a dormitory-resident population participates, or (e) the critical actions must be performed in a narrow time range.

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