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Numbers, Trends or Norms: what changes people's support for aid?

Terence Wood

Abstract

A growing body of literature exists studying public support for foreign aid in donor countries. To-date, however, most of this work has focused on publics' views as they currently stand. In this paper I report on the outcomes of three separate survey experiments undertaken to see whether different information can change existing views about aid volumes. Each of these experiments was undertaken using online samples of approximately 1,000 Australian survey participants who were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. In all three experiments the control group was asked a very basic question about whether they wanted Australian government aid increased or decreased. Each treatment group was asked the same question but with some additional information. In the first experiment treated participants were given information on how little aid the Australian government gives. In the second experiment treated participants were shown how Australian aid has declined as a share of Gross National Income over time. In the third experiment treated participants were given information comparing recent aid cuts in Australia to increases in aid in the United Kingdom. Of these three treatments, the first had no effect and the second had only a very marginal effect. The third treatment, however, had an effect that was both statistically and substantively significant, raising support for aid increases and decreasing support for aid cuts. As I discuss these findings, I discuss the psychological processes that likely explain them. I highlight how motivated reasoning probably explains the broad absence of findings in the first two experiments and I contend that a desire to conform to international norms is the most likely explanation of the third treatment.

Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper 52

December 2016

SERIES ISSN 2206-303X

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Wood, T 2016 "Numbers, Trends or Norms: what changes people's support for aid?," *Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper 52,* Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, Canberra.

[1] I am grateful to Dinuk Jayasuriya, Nadia Molenaers and Ben Goldsmith for their feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to participants at the Australian Political Studies Conference and participants at the Domestic Dimensions of Development Cooperation workshop for sharing their insights. I am grateful to Camilla Burkot and other colleagues at the Development Policy Centre for sharing their thoughts about public opinion research. I am grateful to commenters on the Devpolicy Blog for their feedback on my initial findings. Any remaining errors are my responsibility alone.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of academic work now exists focused on understanding the sociodemographic and political traits associated with public support for aid in donor countries. The underlying motivation for this work is the apparent relationship between public support for foreign aid and government aid volumes (Milner & Tingley 2010, p. 216; Milner & Tingley 2011, p. 55; Stern 1998, p. 3). Although there is not clear consensus, existing work appears to have identified a suite of traits (including leftwing political views, age and education) that are typically associated with support for aid (Wood 2015, pp. 3-6). Yet, while this work has helped build a good picture of people's existing views of foreign aid, to-date there has been almost no published academic work looking at whether existing views can be shifted.[2]

There are, however, both good practical and theoretical reasons to be interested in whether public opinion about aid can be shifted and, if so, what is likely to shift it. Obviously, practically, given the apparent link between public support for aid and aid volumes, aid advocates are interested in knowing what might change views. Campaigns in support of aid are often vigorous, and while some may conduct their own message testing, there is little evidence to suggest this is done in a systematic manner. Compounding this at present is the fact that there is currently an insufficient body of academic work to allow campaigners to draw from the findings of social scientists. More theoretically, because foreign aid involves the assistance of people in other countries, the study of aid may offer insights into how humans can, and cannot, be encouraged to care about distant 'others'–people who are not family or compatriots, and who humans might

[2] The main exceptions that I am aware of are the work of Gilens (2001) which was not specifically focused on aid, but which included an aid question, and Karlan and Wood (2014) which did not study government aid, but which looked at the related area of donations to NGOs.

not normally be expected to show concern for (Singer 2011, p. 113).[3] Existing work shows that support for aid is quite high (for example, Wood 2015, p. 13), suggesting that in aid's case some compassion for distant others can be elicited. Existing work on aid also shows that support for aid varies across countries (Clarke et al. 2014) and within countries over time (Wood 2015, p. 1). As a result, learning what changes people's views about aid can feed into a broader understanding about when and why people care, and do not care, about the less fortunate living in faraway lands. Aid is also a subject about which the donor country publics know little (for example, Burkot & Wood 2015, pp. 8-10), meaning it is an area where there is considerable scope for more information to be provided in the name of learning the impacts of information on people's preferences.

In this paper I report on the findings of three survey experiments undertaken to test whether Australians' views about aid volumes can be changed by different types of information. Each of the experiments had different participants and involved the random allocation of participants to treatment and control groups. Each was conducted online and had a sample size of approximately 1,000 people. All of the experiments had the same control: a simple question about whether the Australian government should spend more money on foreign aid. In the first experiment the treatment group received this question but with some additional information on Australian aid as a share of Australian federal government spending (information that showed that the Australian government devotes only a very small share of federal spending to aid). In the second experiment the treatment involved showing people a chart of decreasing Australian aid over time. In the third experiment respondents in the treatment group were provided information on recent Australian aid cuts compared to recent increases in aid in the United Kingdom.

My key findings are that the first treatment had no effect whatsoever and that second treatment's effect was modest at best. However, I found that the third treatment had

[3] Of course people may support aid for other reasons too, such as advancing domestic economic and geostrategic interests. However, Australian evidence (Wood, 2015, p. 24) suggests that a very large majority of Australians want aid given altruistically.

effects that were not only statistically significant but also significant in a substantive sense.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First, in three separate subsections, I describe each of my three treatments and I draw on existing work from the study of political behaviour, as well as other relevant information, to explain why the treatment was included. I also examine why, and why not, the treatment in question might be expected to work. I then provide a description of relevant methodological information before detailing my findings. After my findings I conclude by discussing the findings and their ramifications, and also the potential for further research.

2. The three experiments and relevant literature

As I discuss in more detail in the methods section below, in all three experiments subjects were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. In all three experiments the control group received the following question:

> Every year the Australian government provides aid money to poorer countries. Which of the following options best reflects your opinion about aid spending:
>
> (a) the Australian government gives too much aid;
> (b) the Australian government gives about the right amount of aid;
> (c) the Australian government does not give enough aid;
> (d) I don't know.

Notably, in the control group, no information is provided on how much aid Australia currently gives. Nor was any reference point provided to put current giving in perspective.

2.1 Experiment 1: filling the information void

In Experiment 1 the treatment group was asked a question that was identically worded to the control question except for one additional piece of information. This was

information to do with the share of federal spending devoted to foreign aid in Australia. The modified question was:

> Every year the Australian government provides aid money to poorer countries. Currently just under 1 dollar out of every 100 dollars of federal spending is given as aid. Which of the following options best reflects your opinion about aid spending: [identical response categories to those used in the control question were provided].[4]

Survey data from Australia provided an obvious reason to anticipate that this treatment would be effective in causing an increase in the proportion of Australians who though Australia did not give enough aid, and a decrease in the proportion who thought Australia gave too much. This was that existing data show that, when asked, many Australians overestimate how much aid Australia gives by a significant margin. For example, when the survey company Essential Media asked a representative sample of Australians what they thought the share of the federal budget spent on aid was in its 11 July 2011 omnibus survey, of those who thought they knew, 75 per cent overestimated the amount and 46 overestimated it substantially (Burkot & Wood 2015, p. 9). In 2015, when Essential Media repeated the exercise in the midst of heated public debate about the largest aid cuts in Australia's history, accurate estimates had increased somewhat; however, 32 per cent of those survey respondents who thought they knew the size of the aid budget still overestimated it by at least a magnitude of five (Burkot & Wood 2015, p. 10). In the same surveys, Essential Media also asked survey respondents for their views about whether Australia gave too much aid or not enough aid and there was a clear relationship between overestimation of the aid budget and the belief that Australia gave too much aid. In the 2015 survey, 66 per cent of those respondents who thought Australia devoted more than 5 per cent of federal spending to aid thought it gave too much. Only 26 per cent of those

[4] In designing this question different versions of the treatment were considered including using percentages and giving absolute dollar amounts. After consultation with colleagues this wording was chosen because it appeared the most readily understood. Data were for the 2015-16 financial year. All the data on Australian aid spending used in this paper (as well as their sources and much additional information) can be found at the following link: http://devpolicy.org/aidtracker/.

who thought it gave 1 per cent or less (the correct response) thought it gave too much aid (Burkot & Wood 2015, p. 11).

Some existing research also provided a basis for believing Experiment 1's treatment would work. In a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, (United States-based) participants were asked what they thought aid was as a total share of United States federal spending. They were then asked if they thought the United States gave too much or too little aid. Then they were told how much aid the United States actually gave and were asked again whether they thought the United States gave too much or too little aid. In between being asked the first time and being asked the final time, the share of respondents who thought the United States gave too much aid dropped from 56 per cent to 28 per cent (Bianca Di Julio et al. 2015). Also, in other recent work, Nair (2015) found that survey participants in the United States who were shown how wealthy they were compared to most of the world's population, were, on average, considerably more supportive of aid than their counterparts in a control group, who were not provided this information. In this instance, the information Nair provided was not about aid budgets, but the study still showed that some forms of information, at least, can shift views about aid spending.

However, there are also reasons to believe that treating people by providing them with correct information about the size of the Australian aid budget might not have the anticipated impact. While people who overestimated the aid budget were more likely to want it reduced in the Australian surveys cited earlier, in the same surveys significant proportions of people who said they did not know the size of the aid budget also wanted it reduced (43 per cent of those who answered 'don't know' in 2015 wanted the budget reduced) (Burkot & Wood 2015, p. 11). This suggests that, for at least some Australians, information deficits have not prevented them from forming views about aid budgets, and that view formation may not be entirely rational. Moreover, the Kaiser Foundation study cited above went further than simply providing people with information about aid spending: it also actively corrected people whose estimates were wrong. This could lead to shifts in views that were not altered by information per se, but rather by feelings associated with being shown to have been incorrect.

The findings of some academic work also suggests that providing people with simple additional facts about contentious issues does not change attitudes, or that the effects of such information provision are inconsistent at best. For example, in reviewing a range of experiments in which he provided information on immigration-related matters to United States-based participants, Sides (2007, p. 14) concluded that, "on average, then, providing correct information does not change attitudes toward immigration".[5] Likewise, survey experiments run by YouGov showed that providing people in the United States with detailed information on what their taxes were spent on had little impact on their views about tax levels or government spending levels (YouGov US 2011). In another instance, Nyhan and Reifler (2010, p. 315) found inconsistent treatment effects in their newspaper experiments on views about the Iraq war, with information's effects tending to be higher when it fit with respondents' prior beliefs. Looking at NGO work, Karlan and Wood (2014) found that information about aid project efficacy did not have an overall impact on donations to an aid NGO.[6]

2.2 Experiment 2: a sense of perspective

Another reason why treating people by simply providing information about current aid spending on its own may not have an effect is that such information may not provide people with an adequate frame of reference for evaluating whether present aid spending is adequate, inadequate or more than adequate. Plausibly, if information is to shift views, it might need to be set in a context that shows how much spending is reasonable or feasible. To address this possibility, in the second experiment I provided participants in the treatment group with a point of reference: how much aid Australia has provided (as a share of Gross National Income (GNI)) in recent decades. Specifically, I asked the following question, accompanied by the chart presented in Figure 1.[7]

[5] This is a slight overstatement: at least one of his treatments had a small effect.

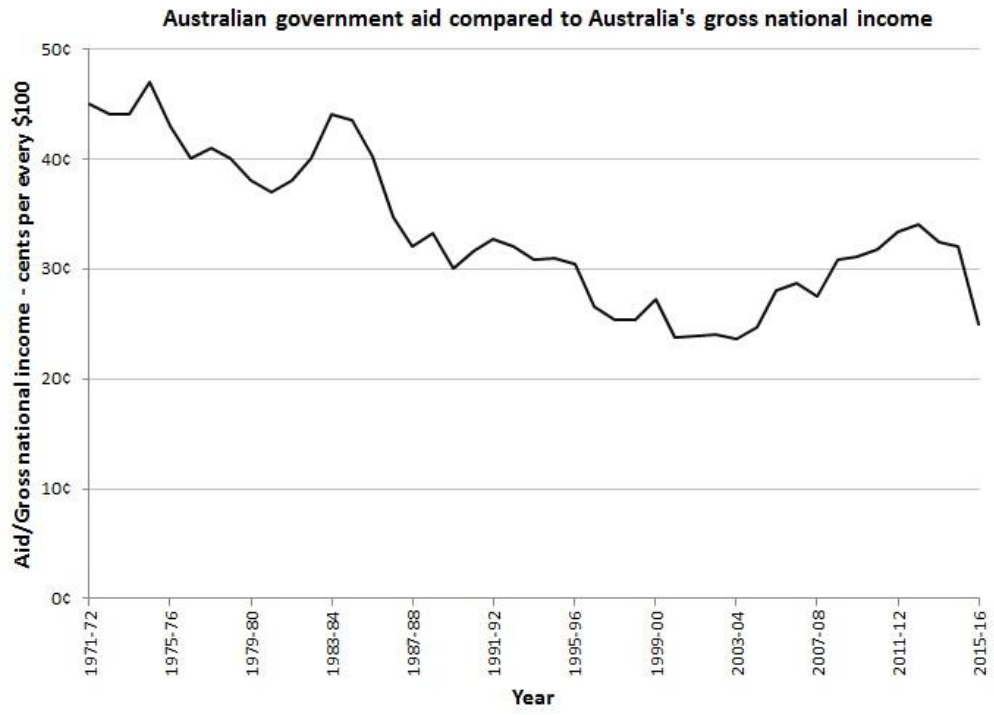
[6] They did find effects for specific subgroups, however.

[7] Aid as a share of GNI rather than aid as a share of federal spending was used as time series data spanning many years exist for aid/GNI. Such data do not exist for aid as a share of federal spending.

Every year the Australian government provides aid money to poorer countries. Over time, compared to the size of Australia's economy, Australia's aid budget has become smaller.

This chart compares Australian aid to Australia's Gross National Income (a standard measure of the size of an economy). In 1971 Australia gave 45 cents of aid for every 100 dollars of Gross National Income. In 2015 it gave 25 cents. Which of the following options best reflects your opinion about aid spending: [identical response categories to those used in the control question were provided].

Figure 1 – Chart provided with treatment two



One would expect that showing people what Australia had spent in the past compared to the size of the country's economy, might provide a useful frame as to what was possible when it came to aid spending. That said, even with past spending as a frame of reference, the reasons detailed in the discussion above about the limited efficacy of information in shifting opinions provide some cause for believing that the information treatment in Experiment 2 might not be guaranteed to be successful. On the other hand, the one

existing published academic experimental study that looks at the efficacy of an information treatment in shifting views about aid (that of Gilens 2001) drew on a treatment which provided information on declining trends in aid as a share of federal spending in the United States. The question Gilens used was:

> The second story is about a new report that was just released about American foreign aid to help other countries. It said that the amount of money we spend for foreign aid has been going down and now makes up less than one cent of every dollar that the federal government spends. Have you heard about this story? (Gilens 2001, p. 381) [Gilens then went on to ask participants' views on aid spending.]

Gilens's key experimental finding to do with aid was that the treatment he used had a significant impact (in the expected direction) on views about desired aid spending, although the effect was most clearly discernible amongst people who were more generally knowledgeable about political issues (Gilens 2001, p. 386).

2.3 Experiment 3: comparison with the United Kingdom

The final treatment I used involved a different point of comparison: The United Kingdom. The treatment question was:

> Every year the Australian government provides aid money to poorer countries. Since 2013 Australia has reduced the amount of aid it gives. At the same time, some countries, such as the United Kingdom, have increased the aid they give. The United Kingdom now gives about 70 cents out of every $100 of its Gross National Income as aid (Gross National Income is a standard measure of the size of a country's economy). By comparison Australia gives 25 cents out if every $100 of its Gross National Income as aid. Considering this, which of the following options best reflects your opinion about aid spending: [identical response categories to those used in the control question were provided].

Part of the motivation for including this question was conversations with Australian NGOs who had commissioned a series of their own survey questions and had found that they had received the most positive (pro-aid) responses to a question that contrasted Australia to the United Kingdom. However, their survey had not been experimental and had asked the United Kingdom question directly after a number of other questions about support for aid, meaning that it was not possible to tell from their data whether it was the United Kingdom comparison or the accumulated weight of previous questions that had caused the effect they appeared to have observed. There are other reasons, however, to believe that comparisons with another member of the global community might have an effect. Recent work from psychology, behavioural economics and political science has shown that human beings' propensity to confirm with norms can shape behaviour and views (Behavioural Insights Team 2012; Gerber et al. 2008; Tankard & Paluck 2016) and it seemed plausible that some form of desire to conform to international norms might alter Australians' views about aid.

At the same time, however, observing a normative effect of Great Britain's behaviour on Australians' beliefs was far from guaranteed. Most of the empirically rigorous empirical work on norm-conforming behaviour has been based around the behaviour of individuals who modify their own personal behaviour to conform with a group of reference (typically their peers or community or compatriots). Unsurprisingly, norms have been shown to be at their most powerful in shaping behaviour when people identify with the relevant normative community being invoked (Tankard & Paluck 2016, p. 197) and experimental research has found that norm-related behaviour modification is sensitive to the type of communities used as frames of reference (Behavioural Insights Team 2012, p. 23). If the United Kingdom treatment were to work on Australians' views about aid, causal processes would be required that involved individuals' concerns about how their country was performing vis-à-vis an imagined international community. In this instance, a necessary condition for the treatment to work (at least if it were to work by normative mechanisms) would be for Australians to feel that the United Kingdom was part of a shared normative community with Australia. Moreover, Australians would need to care about Australia conforming to behaviour within this community in a manner analogous to the way that individuals care about their own personal conformity with more localised

normative communities.[8] Given the differences between people and nation states, and between real communities and the constructed "international community", there seemed considerable cause to anticipate that this treatment might not work.

3. Methods and data

The three experiments were undertaken in three different weeks by different participants.[9] In each week, survey participants were randomly assigned to receive the control question or that week's treatment question. All of the survey experiments were conducted by the commercial survey firm Essential Media as part of weekly omnibus surveys that it ran. All experiments were completed online and had total sample sizes of about 1,000 people. The surveys were conducted between November and December 2015. No other survey experiments were conducted by Essential Media in the weeks the aid survey experiments were run. There were no major media events involving Australian aid over the period in which the surveys were held. Although the survey process used by Essential Media was conducted online, it did not involve self-selection into individual questions. Rather the samples were randomly drawn from a large population (over 100,000 people) of participants in Essential Media's survey pool. Notably, the pool of potentially sampled participants was large and diverse, and a reasonable approximation of the Australian population. As such, potential issues of external validity common in much experimental research were minimised in my study.

I was also provided with data from responses to the sociodemographic and political questions asked in the omnibus surveys so that I could test whether my treatment and control groups were balanced in these aspects. Table 1 provides the key

[8] For the treatment to work, individuals would also need to be ignorant of the fact that the United Kingdom is an unusually generous giver and therefore atypical in its own way. However, given just how little the average Australian knows about aid, this seemed less likely to be an issue.

[9] There was a small chance that a participant might be sampled more than once; however, because the survey company's survey population was very large compared to the samples it drew for its weekly surveys, this risk was slender and at the absolute most would have effected only one or two participants.

sociodemographic and political questions, and the division of responses to them across the control and treatment groups for the three surveys. All of the variables included in Table 1 have been found to be statistically significant predictors (or close to significant predictors) of attitudes to aid in other non-experimental research (Wood 2015). As can be seen in Table 1, randomisation produced reasonably comparable groups, particularly in the second and third experiments. However, to control for any variations that could occur, in the results section, in addition to simple tests between treatment and control groups, I also present analysis using regressions controlling for variation between the treatment and control groups. I was also provided with survey weights designed to make the samples demographically representative of the Australian population. I have not applied these weights in the basic information below or in the simple tests comparing treatments and control groups. However, I used weighting in the regression analysis.

Table 1 – Sociodemographic and political information on survey participants

	Obs. Control	Obs. Treatment	Control (mean or proportion)	Treatment (mean or proportion)	Difference	Std. error of diff	p-value (2 tailed)
Experiment 1							
Male	509	497	0.51	0.46	0.05	0.03	0.10
Age (propn > 35)	509	497	0.68	0.74	-0.05	0.03	0.07
Urban	509	497	0.63	0.71	-0.07	0.03	0.01
Mean income (thou; ln)	427	419	4.10	4.09	0.01	0.05	0.80
Academic education	505	493	0.35	0.40	-0.05	0.03	0.14
Party							
Coalition	488	475	0.38	0.36	0.02	0.03	0.58
Labor	488	475	0.30	0.33	-0.03	0.03	0.29
Greens	488	475	0.09	0.08	0.01	0.02	0.43
Other	488	475	0.08	0.12	-0.04	0.02	0.04
Don't know	488	475	0.14	0.10	0.04	0.02	0.06
Experiment 2							
Male	513	499	0.50	0.47	0.03	0.03	0.37
Age (propn > 35)	513	499	0.70	0.71	0.00	0.03	0.95
Urban	513	499	0.66	0.66	0.01	0.03	0.80
Mean income (thou; ln)	427	439	4.07	4.01	0.06	0.05	0.21
Academic education	508	491	0.39	0.38	0.01	0.03	0.83
Party							
Coalition	501	483	0.37	0.37	0.00	0.03	0.97
Labor	501	483	0.31	0.30	0.01	0.03	0.75
Greens	501	483	0.10	0.11	0.00	0.02	0.85
Other	501	483	0.11	0.10	0.01	0.02	0.67
Don't know	501	483	0.12	0.13	-0.01	0.02	0.55
Experiment 3							
Male	532	468	0.49	0.46	0.04	0.03	0.24
Age (propn > 35)	532	468	0.74	0.75	-0.02	0.03	0.53
Urban	532	468	0.66	0.66	0.00	0.03	0.91
Mean income (thou; ln)	458	392	4.07	4.04	0.04	0.05	0.44
Academic education	527	464	0.38	0.38	0.00	0.03	0.99
Party							
Coalition	522	448	0.39	0.37	0.02	0.03	0.44
Labor	522	448	0.26	0.29	-0.02	0.03	0.41
Greens	522	448	0.09	0.10	0.00	0.02	0.91
Other	522	448	0.15	0.14	0.01	0.02	0.75
Don't know	522	448	0.10	0.11	-0.01	0.02	0.78

4. Results

In the following section I work through each of the three experiments, first presenting basic findings, before reporting on logistic regressions in which the sociodemographic variables identified above were controlled for, and in which survey weights were applied.

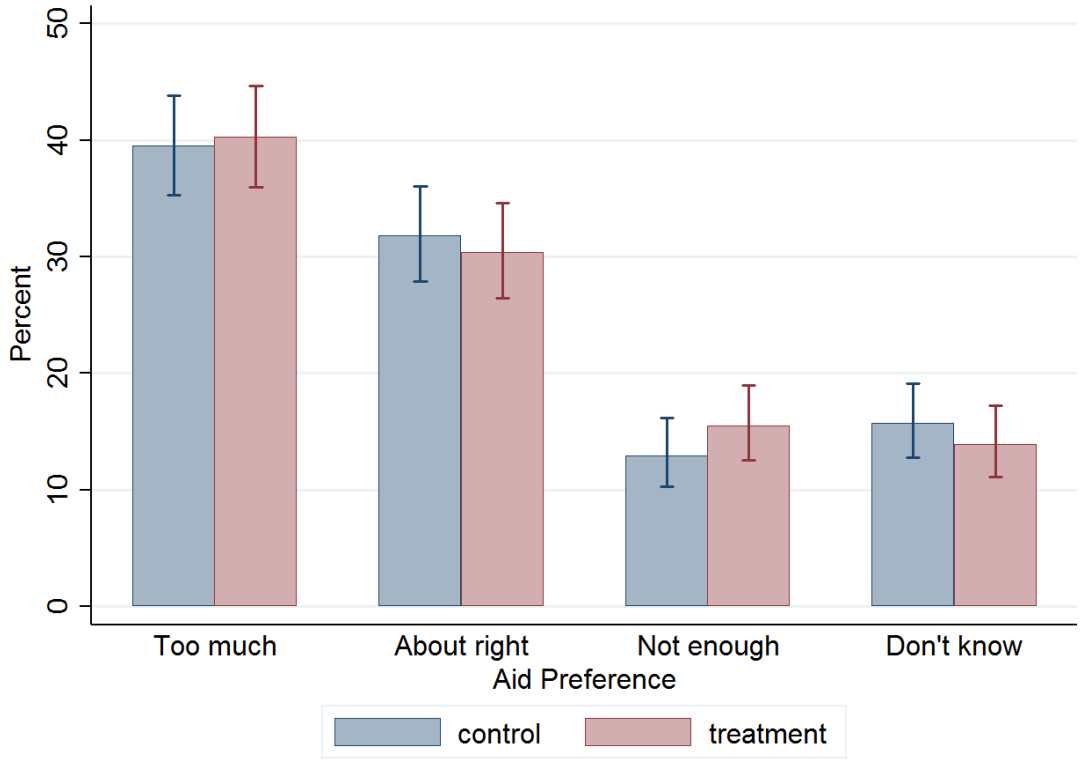
4.1 Experiment 1 – filling the information void

Figure 2 is a bar chart of the percentage of respondents in the treatment and control groups who gave each of the possible replies in Experiment 1 (in which the treatment group was told how small Australian aid was as a share of Federal spending). While the treatment reduced the proportion of respondents who answered 'don't know' slightly, and increased the proportion of respondents who answered 'not enough' to the question about Australian aid levels, the changes are not statistically significant. Even if one is willing to ignore statistical insignificance, they are very modest in a substantive sense. Table 2 details the results.

Table 2 – results from aid as share of federal spending treatment

	Proportion control	Proportion treatment	Difference	Std. Error of diff	P-value (2 tailed)
Too much	0.39	0.40	-0.01	0.03	0.81
About Right	0.32	0.30	0.01	0.03	0.62
Not Enough	0.13	0.15	-0.03	0.02	0.25
Don't know	0.16	0.14	0.02	0.02	0.41

Figure 2 – results from aid as share of federal spending treatment



Because there were some imbalances between the treatment and the control group, Table 3 shows the results of two logistic regressions run with control variables added. The controls were chosen on the basis that these variables have been found to be associated with attitudes to aid, either in other Australian work or in international work (see, Wood 2015, for discussion). In the first logistic regression the dependent variable is binary and coded one if the respondent answered 'not enough'. In the second model the dependent variable is binary and coded one if the respondent answered 'too much'.[10] Although some of the control variables were statistically significant predictors of attitudes to aid volumes, the treatment variable was not.[11]

[10] This approach was chosen for simplicity's sake. Running multinomial logistic regressions did not change the results in any substantive manner.

[11] Intriguingly, the age variable appears to have a non-linear effect, with elderly people being the least likely to believe the right amount of aid is given, but being divided in their views as to whether too much aid is given or not enough.

Table 3 – logistic regressions with aid as share of federal spending treatment and controls

	Not enough aid	Too much aid
Treated	1.16	0.98
	(0.53)	(0.88)
Male	0.66*	0.95
	(0.08)	(0.74)
Over 35	1.95**	2.04***
	(0.02)	(0.00)
Urban	1.02	0.89
	(0.93)	(0.50)
Income (in)	0.99	0.90
	(0.95)	(0.39)
Academic Education	3.20***	0.52***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Party		
Labor	3.31***	0.91
	(0.00)	(0.60)
Greens	17.74***	0.29***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Other	2.20*	1.53
	(0.08)	(0.12)
Don't Know	2.34*	0.56**
	(0.06)	(0.03)
Constant	0.02***	0.99
	(0.00)	(0.98)
n	815	815

Odds ratios & p-values shown; regressions run with survey weights & robust SEs
* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

4.2 Experiment 2 – aid over time

Figure 3 is a bar chart of the percentage of respondents in the treatment and control groups who gave each of the possible replies in Experiment 2 (in which the treatment group was told about trends in Australian aid spending). The chart suggests that the treatment effect is very small for three of the response categories "about right", "not enough" and "don't know". However, the effect on people who believe too much aid is given is somewhat larger – about 4 percentage points.

Figure 3 – results from information on aid trends over time treatment

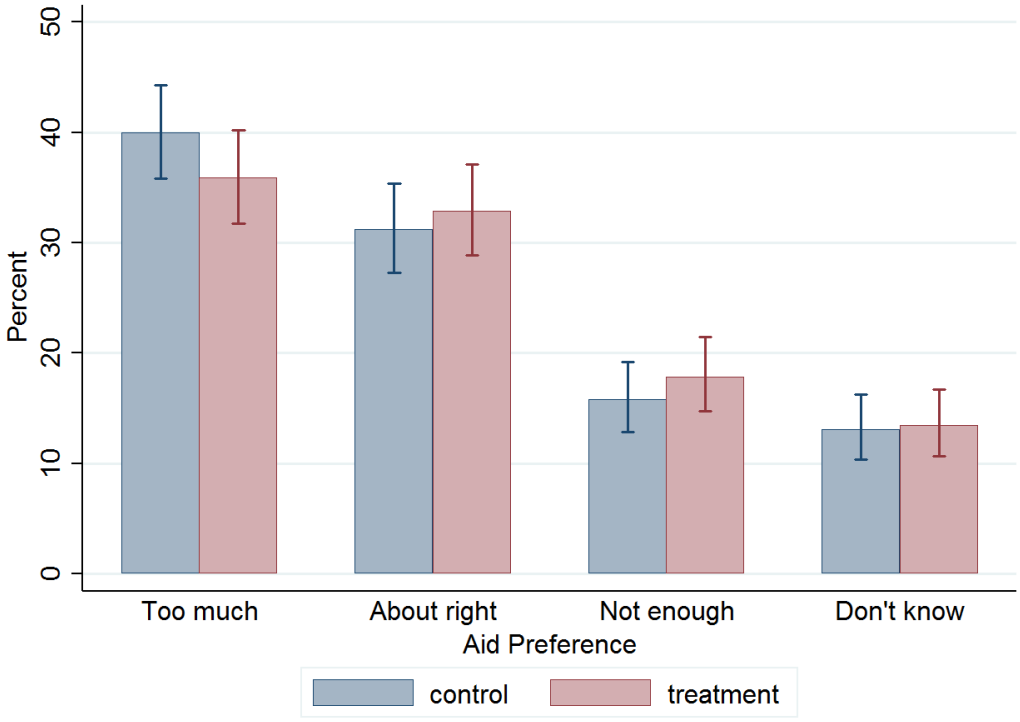


Table 4 provides more details on the results. As can be seen in this basic comparison, even the treatment's effect on the proportion of people who think Australia gives too much aid is not statistically significant. However, because there is a clear expected direction of effect (a reduction), running the tests with a one-tailed test might be more appropriate. If this is done, the p-value is 0.09, suggesting this is a finding that we can be somewhat confident in if we wish to be lenient with regards to conventions of statistical significance.

Table 4 – results from aid trends over time treatment

Response	Proportion control	Proportion treatment	Difference	Std. Error of diff	P-value (2 tailed)
Too much	0.40	0.36	0.04	0.03	0.18
About Right	0.31	0.33	-0.02	0.03	0.57
Not Enough	0.16	0.18	-0.02	0.02	0.38
Don't know	0.13	0.13	0.00	0.02	0.86

Although there was no clear evidence of imbalances in the sociodemographic and political variables between the treatment and control groups in Experiment 2, Table 5

reports the results of logistic regressions in which the same controls are used as in Experiment 1. And in which binary dependent variables were coded as in Experiment 1.

Table 5 – logistic regressions with aid trends treatment and controls

	Not enough aid	Too much aid
Treated	1.27	0.73**
	(0.26)	(0.05)
Male	1.15	1.27
	(0.53)	(0.13)
Over 35	0.83	2.09***
	(0.44)	(0.00)
Urban	1.60*	0.55***
	(0.07)	(0.00)
Income (ln)	0.86	0.91
	(0.29)	(0.46)
Academic education	2.67***	0.54***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Party		
Labor	3.42***	0.67**
	(0.00)	(0.04)
Greens	8.34***	0.31***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Don't Know	1.12	0.59*
	(0.83)	(0.10)
Other	3.97***	1.05
	(0.00)	(0.85)
Constant	0.06***	1.31
	(0.00)	(0.64)
n	842	842

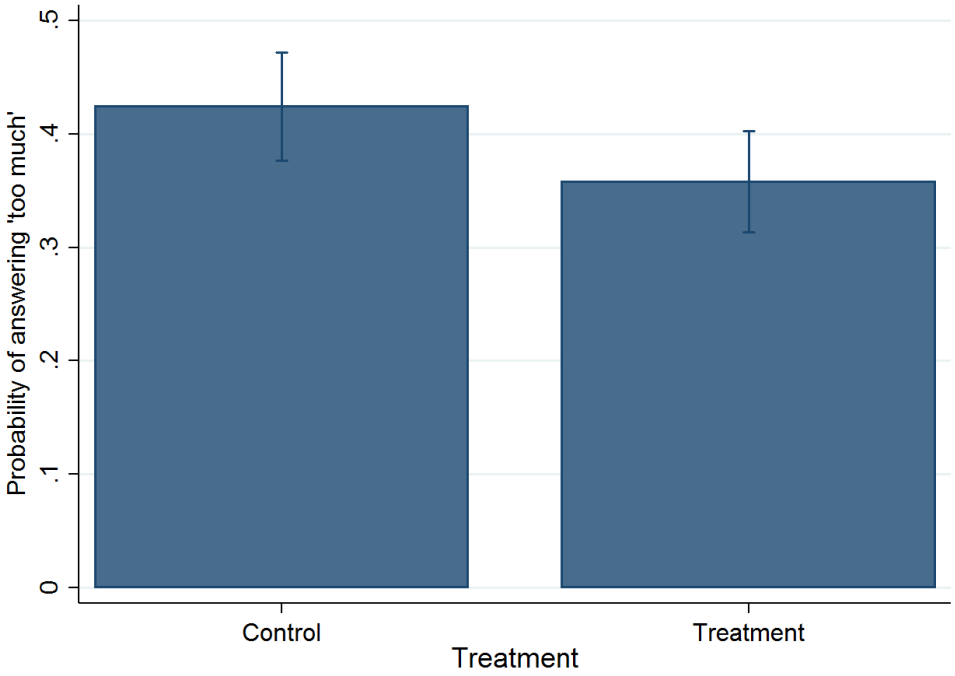
Odds ratios & p-values shown; regressions run with survey weights & robust SEs
* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

With the control variables added, the impact of the treatment on the proportion of respondents who think Australia gives too much aid now becomes statistically significant at the five per cent level. This is something of a surprise given that the comparisons in Table 1 suggested that the treatment and control groups were relatively well balanced. However, the change is a product of both including survey weighting (which reduces the p-value slightly) and control variables improving the precision of the estimate, particularly once political parties are controlled for.[12]

[12] With parties controlled for (with no other controls included) the p-value falls to 0.08.

Figure 4 plots the predicted marginal effect of the treatment estimated from the results of the logistic regression. It is provided to give a sense of the substantive effect of Experiment 2's treatment on the proportion of Australians who think Australia gives too much aid once controls have been added. As can be seen, the magnitude of the treatment effect is similar but slightly larger than that presented in the bar chart above. The effect has become statistically significant but it is confined to one answer category and its substantive effect is still fairly modest.

Figure 4 – Estimated effect of treatment with information on aid trends



4.3 Experiment 3 – comparison with the United Kingdom

In the final experiment, the treatment was a comparison between increases in aid in the United Kingdom and recent aid cuts in Australia. Figure 5 is a bar chart of the percentage of respondents in the treatment and control groups who gave each of the possible replies to experiment three. The contrast with the previous experiments is striking. In Figure 5 the treatment clearly appears to have worked: the percentage of respondents who think Australia gives too much aid is over 10 percentage points lower in the treatment group than it is in the control group. The percentage of respondents who thinks Australia does

not give enough aid is almost 10 percentage points higher. Table 6 provides the exact proportions for each category and the results of tests of the statistical significance of the difference. For the categories "too much" and "not enough" the differences are both statistically significant and substantively significant.

Figure 5 – results from information the United Kingdom comparison treatment

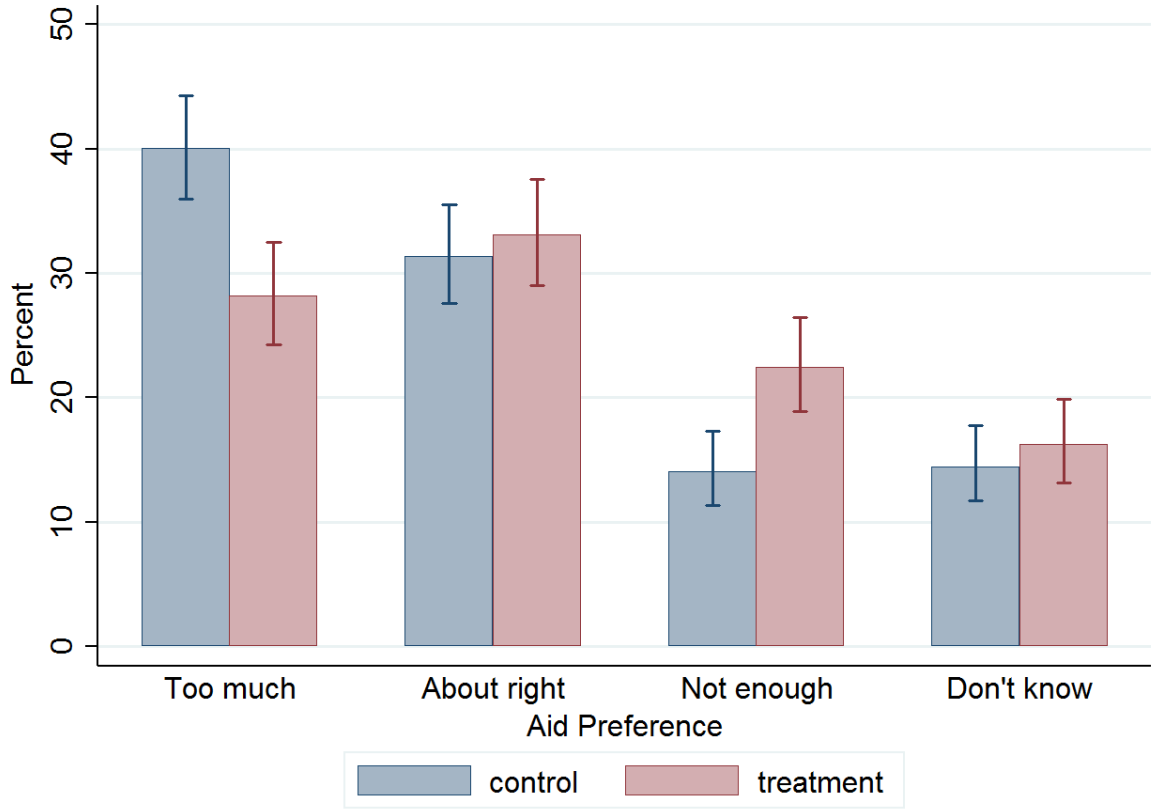


Table 6 – results from United Kingdom comparison treatment

Response	Proportion control	Proportion treatment	Difference	Std. Error of diff	P-value (2 tailed)
Too much	0.40	0.28	0.12	0.03	0.00
About Right	0.31	0.33	-0.02	0.03	0.56
Not Enough	0.14	0.22	-0.08	0.02	0.00
Don't know	0.14	0.16	-0.02	0.02	0.44

Although there was no clear evidence of imbalances in the sociodemographic and political variables between the treatment and control groups in Experiment 3, Table 7 reports the results of logistic regressions similar to those used in the previous two experiments. Table 7 shows the key findings from the simple tests of proportions hold even after the inclusion of control variables. Figures 6 and 7 are margins plots showing the predicted effects of the treatment derived from the logistic regressions. Figure 7 suggests a small decrease in the impact of the treatment on the 'not enough' category. The change is now only 6 percentage points rather than eight. The impact of the treatment on the 'too much' category is effectively the same.

Table 7 – logistic regressions with United Kingdom treatment and controls

	Not enough aid	Too much aid
Treatment	1.62**	0.54***
	(0.03)	(0.00)
Male	1.04	1.40**
	(0.86)	(0.05)
Over 35	1.13	1.32
	(0.62)	(0.17)
Urban	1.77**	0.77
	(0.03)	(0.15)
Income (ln)	0.89	0.82
	(0.50)	(0.15)
Academic education	2.10***	0.45***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Labor	1.88**	0.74
	(0.02)	(0.13)
Greens	8.84***	0.15***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Don't Know	1.03	0.76
	(0.95)	(0.35)
Other	0.80	1.29
	(0.59)	(0.36)
Constant	0.07***	2.19
	(0.00)	(0.20)
n	822	822

Odds ratios & p-values shown; regressions run with survey weights & robust SEs
* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Figure 6 – Estimated effect of treatment with United Kingdom on 'too much'

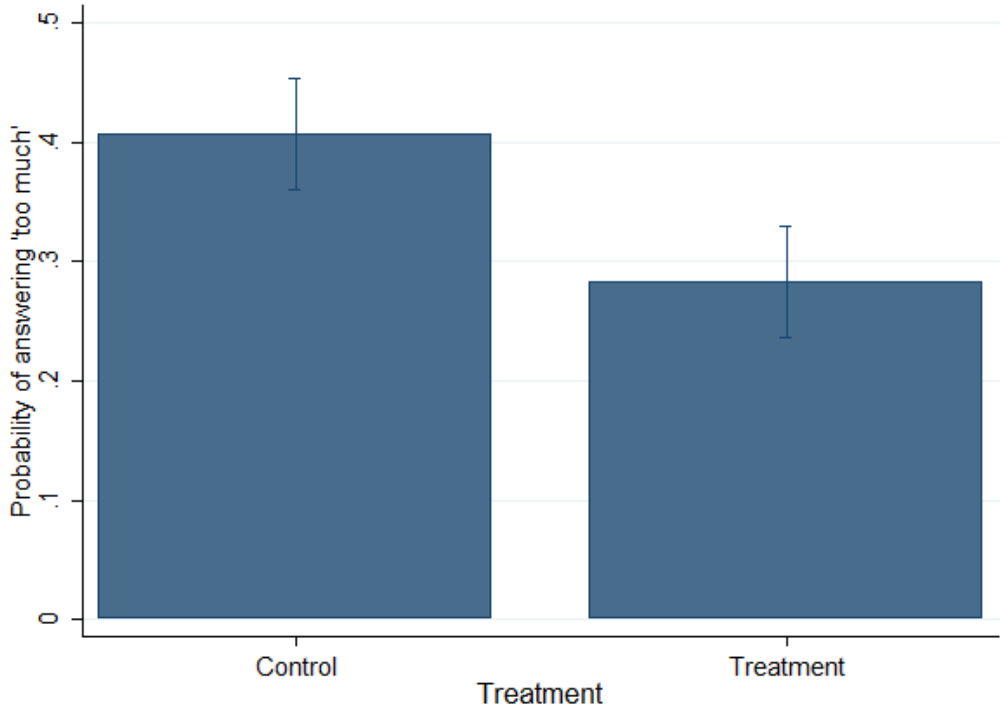
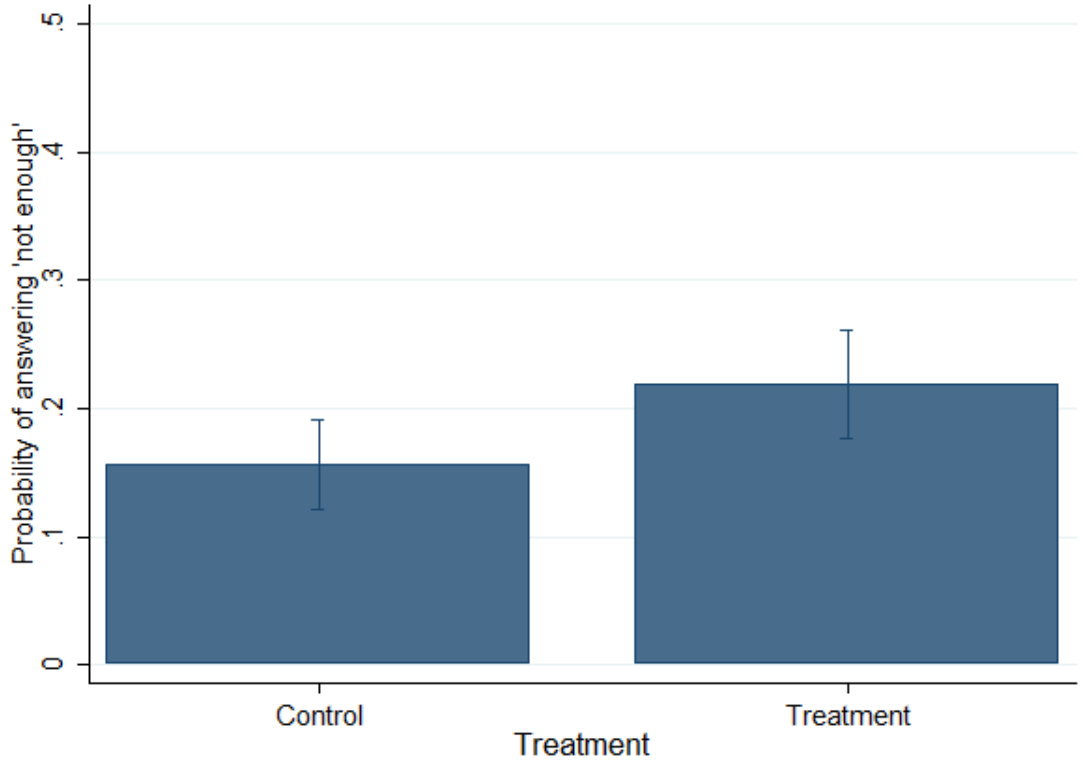


Figure 7 – Estimated effect of treatment with United Kingdom on 'not enough'



5. Discussion

In this paper I have reported on the findings of three survey experiments run to test the impacts of different types of information on people's support for foreign aid. In the first experiment, the provision of accurate information on how little aid Australia gives had no discernible impact on Australians' views about Australian aid giving. In the second experiment, the state of current giving was contextualised by showing participants trends in Australian aid generosity over time. Adding context in this manner produced one statistically significant finding, reducing the proportion of respondents who thought Australia gave too much aid. However, only one response category was affected and the substantive impact of the treatment was hardly overwhelming. Had my analysis stopped at that point it would have suggested that, while Australians are often poorly informed about how much aid their government gives, their attitudes are not readily shifted through additional information. However, the third experiment proved otherwise: contrasting Australian aid cuts to rising aid budgets in the United Kingdom moved opinions in a way that was both statistically significant and meaningful in a real world sense. Australians' views about aid are not intractable; however, it appears the psychological processes involved in their shifting do not involve simple calculation and reasoning.[13] Rather, the results from these survey experiments suggest views are most easily shifted by other psychological processes. Because Experiment 3's treatment contained no additional information other than a comparison to another country,[14] the most likely pathway involved in its effect is some desire for Australia to conform to international norms.

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[13] It is possible to concoct an argument through which the information on the United Kingdom's aid budget had an impact in a rational manner because calculating Australians feared the loss of geostrategic or economic benefits as their country lagged behind a 'competitor'. This explanation, however, is unconvincing. Other survey data show that about three quarters of Australians want their country's aid given to benefit people in poorer countries rather than to benefit their own country (Wood, 2015, p. 24). This makes competitive comparisons involving national interest an unlikely explanation for shifts in opinion.

[14] Experiment 3 also mentioned Australian aid cuts. Recall, however, that Experiment 2 also showed clearly that Australian aid had been cut in recent years. In addition, it showed a clear downwards trend over time.

In many ways, these findings fit quite well with studies of other aspects of human behaviour. A range of work studying domestic political behaviour has shown people to be "motivated reasoners"–decision makers who tend to be unpersuaded by evidence unless it fits with their existing priors (Milton Lodge & Charles S. Taber 2013; Redlawsk 2002; Taber & Lodge 2006). This fits well with the findings of the first two experiments. By the same token, the fact that people tend to be norm conformers, at least under certain circumstances, is well established (Tankard & Paluck 2016). Also, while not uncontested, the importance of norms is central to some strands of international relations theory (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998). However, the findings in this paper are novel in that they provide good evidence to show the importance of such psychological processes influencing the ways people think about aid.

From here there is much scope for additional work. One obvious area is to test whether the different treatments I have looked at have differing impacts on different population sub-groups. Possibly, for example, younger people, or people on the political left, or better educated people, may be affected more by the different treatments I have used. Also, my treatments were chosen with the view that they might plausibly increase support for aid. Further work could be undertaken to see what types of information, if any, decrease support for foreign aid. It would be interesting, for example, to test whether participants in the United Kingdom would become less supportive of their country increasing aid if they knew that Australian was decreasing its aid effort. There is also scope for learning which sorts of countries work well as normative comparators. Would, for example, Australians be as moved by comparisons to other generous aid donors such as Sweden with which they have no historical ties. Investigation of different treatment information would also be useful. An obvious additional treatment would be information about the severity of poverty in aid-recipient countries. More challenging, but equally important, will be to learn how information shapes views when treatments are delivered through more realistic modes. Most people do not form their views about the world answering survey questions, which means that attempts to offer information via other mechanisms, such as newspapers and social media, could add considerably to understanding in this area.

For now though, this paper has demonstrated that Australians' views about aid volumes can be shifted by additional information. However, the information required is not the information one might expect, and the psychological processes underpinning the change in views do not appear to be rational in the conventional sense of the term.

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