

Running Head: RELEVANCE OF THE ISSUE TO THE GROUP AND VOTING
INTENTIONS

The importance of the relevance of the issue to the group in voting intentions: The case of
the Australian republic referendum

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Abstract

A questionnaire was distributed on the Australian republic issue to examine the interplay between norms and relevance of the issue to the group on voting intentions. Supporters of an Australian republic ($N = 188$) indicated the level of support for a republic within their peer group, the relevance of the republic issue to the group, and measures designed to assess voting intentions and other attitude outcomes. Analysis revealed an interaction between normative support and relevance of the issue to the group. On the measure of intention, increasing normative support was associated with increased intention to vote in an attitude-consistent way at both relevance levels, but the effect was heightened when the issue was highly relevant to the group. On the outcomes of willingness to express opinion and perceived personal importance of the republic issue, normative support had a positive effect only when the issue was highly relevant to the group. Mediation analyses revealed that the impact of normative support and group relevance on intention were mediated through perceived personal importance of the republic issue.

The importance of the relevance of the issue to the group in voting intentions: The case of
the Australian Republic Referendum

Attitudes are thought to guide behavior and, therefore, to contribute to its explanation and prediction. In 1935, Gordon Allport, an influential champion of the attitude concept, described it as “probably the most distinctive and indispensable concept in contemporary American social psychology” (p. 798). In the years following Allport's statement of the importance of the attitude construct, many social psychologists assumed, with little foundation, that attitudes do guide behavior. Indeed, it was not until the rediscovery of LaPiere's (1934) classic study in the 1960s that social psychologists began to question the validity of the attitude concept. Wicker's (1969) subsequent review of the empirical literature revealed only weak correlations between measures of attitudes and measures of behavior, suggesting that attitudes typically do not predict behavior.

In response to the apparent lack of correspondence between attitudes and behavior, researchers argued that it is necessary to take other variables, such as norms, into account in order to understand how attitudes influence behavior. Most influential in the “other variables” approach have been the theories of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985). The central premise of these theories is that behavioral decisions are not made spontaneously, but are the result of a reasoned process in which behavior is influenced, indirectly, by attitudes and norms, and, in the theory of planned behavior, perceived behavioral control. Specifically, the model proposes that attitude—or the person's evaluation of the target behavior—and perceived social pressure regarding performance of the behavior (termed the subjective norm) influence behavior primarily

through their impact on behavioral intention.

In previous research using the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior, there has been little support for the proposed role of norms—a problematic finding given evidence from other areas of research that norms have a strong and reliable impact upon behavior (see Cialdini & Trost, 1998, for a review). In a number of meta-analyses, the average regression weight for attitude (in predicting intention) has been found to exceed the average regression weight for subjective norm by a factor of 1.5 to 2 (e.g., Farley, Lehmann, & Ryan, 1981; Hausenblas, Carron, & Mack, 1997). This lack of empirical support for the role of norms in the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior prompted Ajzen (1991) to conclude that social factors are not important in the attitude-behavior relationship and that personal factors (attitudes and perceived behavioral control) are the primary determinants of behavioral intention.

The failure to find evidence for the influence of normative factors on behavior may be due to problems with the manner in which social influence is defined within the theories of reasoned action/planned behavior. In these theories, social influence is conceptualised as the extent of perceived pressure from significant others to perform the target behavior (i.e., subjective norm). Such a conceptualization suggests that norms are external prescriptions that influence behavior and is inconsistent with the more widely accepted definition of norms as the accepted or implied rules of how group members should and do behave (e.g., Turner, 1991). Thus, norms may have a stronger impact upon the attitude-behavior relationship if they are tied more closely to contextually salient group memberships—an approach that is in line with the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

The Social Identity Approach to Attitude-Behavior Relations

The social identity perspective incorporates both social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), which are general social psychological theories of intergroup relations, group processes, and the social self. The basic premise of the approach is that belonging to a social category (e.g., a nationality, a sporting team) provides members with a definition of who one is and a description and evaluation of what this entails—that is, a social identity. Furthermore, social identity is associated with distinctive group behaviors—that is, behaviors that are depersonalized and regulated by context-specific group norms (see e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

According to the social identity approach, norms of salient social groups should influence willingness to engage in attitude-consistent behavior because the process of psychologically belonging to a group means that, through the process of assimilation to the in-group prototype, self-perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior are brought into line with the position advocated by the in-group norm, particularly if the group membership is a salient basis for self-definition. Thus, according to the social identity approach, people are influenced by group norms not simply because they lead to social approval in a public context, but because they prescribe the context-specific attitudes and behaviors appropriate for group members.

Building upon the social identity approach, Terry and Hogg (1996) argued that norms should impact upon the attitude-behavior relationship provided that: (a) the norm emanates from a behaviorally relevant reference group and (b) the group is a salient basis for self-definition. It can thus be predicted that normative support from a salient group will strengthen the attitude-behavior relationship, particularly for those for whom the group is a

salient basis for self-definition. Previous research has provided some support for this perspective on the role of norms in attitude-behavior relations. In two tests of the theory of planned behavior, Terry and Hogg (1996) found that the perceived norms of a specific and relevant reference group were related to students' intentions to engage in health behaviors, but only for students who identified strongly with the group. In addition, these results have been replicated in a series of recent experimental studies (e.g., Terry, Hogg, & McKimmie, 2000; Wellen, Hogg, & Terry, 1998; White, Hogg, & Terry, 2002), providing more direct support for the social identity approach to attitude-behavior relations. The results of these studies have demonstrated that exposure to a group norm that is incongruent with one's attitude reduces the level of attitude-behavior consistency displayed, but only for individuals who identify strongly with the group.

Although the social identity approach to attitude-behavior relations has clarified and strengthened the role of normative and group membership factors in the attitude-behavior relationship, some questions remain unanswered. One aspect that has not been explored is whether there are specific issues on which normative support has the most impact on behavior. The answer to this question might lie in a consideration of the relevance of the attitude issue to the reference group. Just as some traits and characteristics may be typical of a group, some attitude issues may be highly relevant to the group and central to the group prototype (e.g., political parties). Thus, it might be expected that the effects of in-group norms should be most marked on issues that are of central relevance to the basis for the social categorization. As noted by Mackie, Worth, and Asuncion (1990), persuasive messages on group-relevant issues should increase people's capacity, as well as their motivation, to process the message. Similarly, in the context of attitude-behavior relations, whether or not

the attitude object is group-relevant should influence the extent to which the group norm is processed and, in turn, the extent to which it is regarded as an appropriate guide for action in that context. Moreover, it might be expected that issues that are of central relevance to a valued reference group become personally important, a variable that has received a considerable amount of attention in previous attitude research.

Attitude Relevance and the Attitude-Behavior Relationship

Advocates of the personal relevance or vested interest hypothesis propose that attitude-behavior consistency will be maximized when the behaviors suggested by a specific attitude have clear and obvious hedonic relevance for the actor (e.g., Krosnick, 1988; Sivacek & Crano, 1982). Indeed, a large body of evidence suggests that the attitudes people consider personally important are firmly crystallized and exert especially strong influence on social perception and behavior. More important attitudes should be powerful guides to attitude-expressive behaviors, such as voting, writing letters to public officials, and making contributions to political organizations (e.g., Krosnick, 1988; Schuman & Presser, 1981). In addition, attitude importance has implications for information processing in that perceiving an attitude to be personally important influences how people process information, make decisions, and take action. According to Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent (1995), to attach personal importance to an attitude is to make a commitment to think about the object, to gather information about it, and to base decisions and actions on that information.

Although initial research examining the moderating effect of attitude importance focused on the consequences of attitude importance in relation to action and information processing, more recent research has begun to examine the antecedents of attitude importance or personal relevance (e.g., Boninger et al., 1995; Crano & Prislin, 1995).

Membership in, and identification with, a social group may lead an attitude to become important to a person if the group's rights or privileges are perceived to be at stake or if the group considers the attitude issue to be important or relevant to the group. In this way, group membership may influence the personal importance that individuals place on their opinions and thus the attitude-behavior relationship, a finding supported by the research of Boninger et al. (1995). In five studies using different methodologies, Boninger et al. (1995) found evidence indicating that social identification and group membership influence people's decisions to become personally invested in particular attitudes.

Social groups do not only give members information about the importance or relevance of the issue (Boninger et al., 1995), but are also a source of norms about correct or appropriate courses of action. Thus, relevance of the issue to the group does not influence attitude-behavior consistency alone. It is possible that an issue that is highly relevant to the group and hence personally important to the individual will not be translated into behavior if the individual perceives that there is little normative support from the group for that course of action, and that engaging in the behavior would not result in group membership benefits to the individual. Thus, to fully understand the impact of social identification and group membership on attitudes and the attitude-behavior relationship, it is necessary to consider both the relevance of the issue to the group and the level of normative support for one's attitude from the group. In the current research, the impact of group relevance and normative support were examined in relation to intention to behave in an attitude-consistent manner, and a number of other attitude outcomes.

The Present Research

In late 1999, the Australian public was asked to vote in a referendum on the issue of

whether Australia should become a republic, a proposition that was ultimately defeated. The present research was designed to examine the interplay between group-level normative support for an Australian republic and the relevance of the republic issue to the group on intended voting behavior in the referendum, and perceived importance of the republic issue.¹

On the basis of the social identity approach to attitude-behavior relations (e.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996), it was predicted that normative support from the group would be associated with increased intentions to behave in an attitude-consistent manner (H1). However, this effect was expected to be moderated by relevance of the issue to the group such that normative support was expected to have most impact when the issue was perceived to be of high relevance to the group (H2). Moreover, the relevance of the issue to the group was expected to have a direct impact on individuals' ratings of the importance of their opinion. That is, when the issue was perceived to be highly relevant to the group, individuals were expected to perceive the republic issue to be more personally important and important to Australia's future (H3). Finally, it was expected that the impact of normative support and relevance on intentions would be mediated through perceptions of the personal importance of one's opinion. That is, when the issue is of high relevance to the group, increasing normative support should result in greater personal importance, which, in turn, should be associated with greater attitude-consistent intentions (H4).

Method

Design and Participants

Participants were 188 (82 male and 106 female) supporters of the republic recruited through a letterbox drop in two electoral divisions in the capital city of an Australian state. Due to the low number of opponents who completed both phases of the study ($n = 45$), only

the data from those whose responses on the 9-point attitude scale indicated that they supported the republic (i.e., above the scale midpoint) were analysed. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 83 ($M = 41.69$ years; $SD = 16.42$), and the modal level of education was a bachelor degree. Respondents were required to complete measures assessing their attitudes towards the formation of an Australian republic, normative support for an Australian republic, and relevance of the republic issue to the group of their friends and peers. The measures used in the present research were embedded in the follow-up to a large-scale study on public opinion in relation to the republic issue. Of the 411 respondents (295 supporters, 108 opponents) to the first questionnaire in the large-scale study (out of 2500 surveys distributed), 233 respondents completed the second questionnaire and 188 supporters completed all the items used in the present research, representing a return rate of 46%.

Measures

Attitude towards the formation of an Australian republic was assessed using a single item (“Do you personally support the formation of an Australian republic?” 1 *no, definitely not*, 9 *yes, certainly*). Perception of normative support for respondents’ position was assessed via two items, measured on 7-point scales: “In general, do your friends and peers think that Australia should become a republic?” and “In general, do you think that your friends and peers will vote in favour of Australia becoming a republic in the upcoming referendum?” (1 *definitely not*, 7 *definitely*). Responses to the items were combined to form a measure of normative support ($\alpha = .88$).³ The relevance of the republic issue to the group was assessed using three items, each measured on 7-point scales: “In general, how much do issues, such as the upcoming referendum, concern your friends and peers?”; “In general, how much do issues, such as the upcoming referendum, interest your friends and peers?”; and “In general,

how important are issues, such as the upcoming referendum, to your friends and peers?" (1 *not at all*, 7 *a great deal*). Responses to the items were combined to form a measure of relevance to the group ($\alpha = .90$).

The main dependent measure was respondents' intention to vote in the republic referendum. Respondents were asked to indicate their intention to vote and how much confidence they had in their intention to vote. These measures were combined to produce a measure of intention to vote in an attitude-consistent manner ranging from -7 (*extremely confident that I'll vote against a republic*) to $+7$ (*extremely confident that I'll vote in favour of a republic*). Respondents also indicated how willing they would be to express their opinion on the republic in groups of friends who held different views (1 *not at all willing*, 9 *very willing*), and how confident they were about expressing their opinion on the republic (1 *not at all confident*, 9 *very confident*). These items were combined to form a measure of willingness to express one's opinion ($\alpha = .77$). Finally, to assess personal importance of the republic issue, respondents were asked to indicate how personally important their opinion on the republic issue was to them (1 *not at all important*, 9 *very important*). Thus, analysis was performed on three dependent measures—voting intentions, willingness to express one's opinion, and perceived importance of the republic issue. The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Results

Regression Analyses

A series of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted on each dependent measure for all the respondents. At Step 1, the covariates of gender, age, and education were entered. The main effects of normative support and relevance to the group were entered at Step 2. Finally, the interaction term was entered at Step 3. Significant interaction terms were explored using simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991).

On the measure of voting intention, inclusion of the covariates did not account for a significant amount of the variance. However, when the main effects were entered at Step 2, there was a significant increment in the variance accounted for, $R^2_{ch} = .12$, $F(2, 176) = 11.90$, $p < .001$. Inspection of the beta weights revealed a main effect for normative support only, $\beta = .34$, $t = 4.38$, $p < .001$. As expected, respondents who perceived more normative support for their attitude were more likely to intend to vote in an attitude-consistent manner. At Step 3, the inclusion of the interaction term also accounted for a significant increment in variance, $R^2_{ch} = .02$, $F(1, 175) = 4.39$, $p < .05$ ($\beta = .15$).

Simple slope analysis on the Normative Support x Relevance to the Group interaction indicated that the effect of normative support on voting intention was significant under both low relevance ($\beta = .22$, $t = 2.35$, $p = .02$) and high relevance conditions ($\beta = .48$, $t = 4.67$, $p < .001$). However, as shown in Figure 1, this effect was much stronger when the issue was of high relevance to the group. In other words, when the issue was of high relevance to the group, increasing normative support was associated with an increase in intention to vote in an attitude-consistent manner.

Figure 1 about here

On the measure of willingness to express one's opinion, the covariates did not account for a significant proportion of the variance. Inclusion of the main effects did, however, do so, $R^2_{ch} = .05$, $F(2, 176) = 4.42$, $p < .02$. Inspection of the beta weights revealed a significant main effect for relevance of the issue to the group only, $\beta = .18$, $t = 2.19$, $p < .03$. Thus, as the republic issue increased in relevance to the group, respondents were more willing to express their opinion. However, this effect was qualified by a significant increment in the variance accounted for when the interaction term was entered at Step 3, $R^2_{ch} = .04$, $F(1, 175) = 8.20$, $p < .005$ ($\beta = .21$).

Examination of the Normative Support x Relevance to the Group interaction indicated that the effect of normative support on willingness to express one's opinion was significant, and positive, only when the issue was of high relevance to the group, $\beta = .28$, $t = 2.67$, $p < .01$. As shown in Figure 2, when the issue was of high relevance to the group, increasing normative support was associated with an increased willingness to express one's opinion. However, when the issue was of low relevance to the group, level of normative support had no significant impact on willingness to express one's opinion.

Figure 2 about here

On the measure of the perceived personal importance of the republic issue, the covariates did not account for a significant proportion of the variance, but inclusion of the main effects did, $R^2_{ch} = .07$, $F(2, 176) = 7.04$, $p < .001$. Inspection of the beta weights revealed a main effect for relevance to the group only, $\beta = .27$, $t = 3.38$, $p < .001$. As the

relevance of the issue to the group increased, participants' perceptions of the importance of the republic issue also increased. However, this effect was qualified by a significant increment in the variance accounted for when the interaction term was entered at Step 3, $R^2_{ch} = .03$, $F(1, 175) = 7.02$, $p < .01$ ($\beta = .19$).

Examination of the Normative Support x Relevance to the Group interaction indicated that the effect of normative support on perceptions of the importance of the republic issue was significant, and positive, only when the issue was of high relevance to the group, $\beta = .22$, $t = 2.01$, $p < .05$. As shown in Figure 3, when the issue was of high relevance to the group, increasing normative support was associated with an increase in respondents' importance ratings. However, when the issue was of low relevance to the group, level of normative support had no impact on importance ratings.

 Figure 3 about here

Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted in order to investigate whether the effects of normative support and relevance to the group on voting intention were mediated through perceived personal importance of the republic issue. Baron and Kenny (1986) outlined three requirements to support a mediation model: (1) there must be a relationship between the predictor and the criterion; (2) there must be a relationship between the predictor variables and the proposed mediator; and (3) the relationship between the predictor variables and the criterion must become non-significant (full mediation) or be substantially reduced (partial mediation) when the mediator is introduced into the equation.

In order to test the final requirement for mediation, the two component main effects were entered into the regression equation predicting attitudes at the second step (after the covariates had been controlled for) followed by the interaction at the third step and then the personal importance measure at the final step. At the point of entry, the interaction term was a significant predictor of voting intention ($\beta = .15, t = 2.08, p = .039$) but when perceived personal importance was entered, this interaction became non-significant ($\beta = .10, ns$). The Sobel test for mediation (Sobel, 1982) revealed that the effect of the Normative Support x Relevance to the Group interaction on voting intention was indeed mediated through perceived importance of the republic issue ($t = 2.18, p = .029$)—see Figure 4.

Figure 4 about here

Discussion

Consistent with the social identity approach, and in support of the first hypothesis, normative support from the group influenced intentions. Increased normative support was associated with increased intention to vote in an attitude-consistent manner. However, as predicted, the effect of normative support was moderated by how relevant or important the issue was to the group. Normative support had most impact on intention when the issue was highly relevant to the group. In support of H3, the relevance of the issue to the group was positively associated with willingness to express one's opinion and perceptions of the importance of the republic issue. However, these effects were qualified by an interaction between normative support and relevance. With respect to the attitude outcomes, normative support had an effect—and this effect was positive—only when the issue was highly relevant

to the group. A final analysis revealed that the effects of normative support and relevance on voting intentions were mediated through perceived personal importance.

Research on attitude importance has demonstrated that social identification is one of the antecedents of attitude importance (Boninger et al., 1995). That is, attitudes become personally important through their association with important groups in the individual's social world. The results of this study provide support for the importance of social identification in determining personal importance. When individuals perceived that the issue was highly relevant to the group under consideration, they reported that their own attitudes were more personally important. However, the results of the present study go further to demonstrate that attitudes that are group relevant, and therefore become personally important, get translated into behavioral intentions, and hence, behavior, only when there is perceived to be normative support for the course of action. Thus, these results highlight the importance of the social context in constraining and guiding individual behavior.

In addition to clarifying the impact of social factors on attitude importance, these results provide further insight into the way in which norms influence behavior. Just as an in-group message elicits systematic processing only when the persuasive message is group relevant (Mackie et al., 1990), these results suggest that in-group norms elicit conformity more when the issue is relevant to the group. To paraphrase George Orwell, it appears that while group norms do influence behavior, some group norms are more influential than others. Certain norms are linked more closely to the group prototype and may become more definitive of group membership. Thus, it seems that in deciding whether to act in an attitude-consistent manner, individuals do not follow group norms automatically, but take into account the extent to which the issue and the norm are both relevant and central to group

membership.

Although this study was exploratory, a number of implications can be drawn. First, the evidence that norms and group relevance interact to influence personal importance of an issue, which then influences intention, provides support for norm-attitude links within the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior (e.g., Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier, Pelletier, & Mongeau, 1992). Researchers have argued against the supposition in these models that attitudes and norms are independent constructs that have independent effects on intention (e.g., Acock & DeFleur, 1972; Liska, 1984), an argument supported by the present research. Thus, supposed internal and personal constructs such as attitude importance are influenced by social factors such as group membership and group norms. A second aspect of the present research is the applied implications of the finding that people are influenced more by norms when they perceive the issue to be important to the group. For example, stakeholders attempting to change health behavior would be advised to not only link the issue to a relevant group, but also to ensure that the issue is relevant for the group.

The current research was not without limitations. Due to the exploratory nature of the present research, the study was self-report and correlational, with the result that levels of normative support and group relevance reported were quite high (the means were 5.39 and 4.77 on a 7-point scale, respectively), and there was a moderate correlation between the predictors ($r = .39$). Consequently, an experimental replication is needed in which the key variables of normative support and group relevance are manipulated orthogonally in order to understand the interplay between these constructs. In addition, the present research investigated reported voting intention, not actual voting behavior after the referendum. However, research suggests that voting intentions are a good proxy of voting behavior (e.g.,

Bassili, 1995), and meta-analyses of the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior suggest that measures of behavioural intention account for between 20 and 40% of the variance in actual behaviour (e.g., Sheeran, 2002; Sutton, 1998).

Finally, and on a theoretical note, the social identity approach to attitude-behavior relations posits a role for identification with the group, a factor not investigated in the current study. Identification was not measured in this study because the group used, friends and peers, tends to elicit high reported levels of identification (see Terry & Hogg, 1996), reducing the variability in the data. It is important for future research to investigate the interplay among relevance of the issue to the group, normative support, and level of identification. Based on the social identity approach, it might be expected that the relationships that emerged in this research would be magnified for individuals who identify strongly with the group. Alternatively, it might be the case that when individuals identify strongly with the group, the only factor that matters is whether there is a norm to guide behaviour, rather than the relevance of the issue to the group.³ The role of identification in the relationships among normative support, group relevance, and personal relevance is a critical question for future research.

In conclusion, this study adds to the growing body of research redefining the role of norms in the attitude-behavior relationship. However, the current research moves one step beyond in providing a glimpse at a more detailed picture of the role of the group in guiding individual behavior. Individuals are not slaves to the norms of the group, blindly following the group on all issues, but consider both the level of normative support for the course of action from the group and the centrality of the issue to the group.

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Footnotes

1. The social identity approach to attitude-behavior relations (Terry & Hogg, 1996) posits that identification with a group moderates the impact of normative support. However, because the primary goal of the research was to examine the interplay between group norms and the relevance of the issue to the group on attitude-behavior outcomes, and due to the exploratory nature of the research, the role of identification was not investigated in the present study.
2. Although the group “friends and peers” is rather general and amorphous, this reference group was selected over others (e.g., Australians) because it was believed that it would be easier for respondents to report the level of normative support for the republic in their immediate social groups compared to the even more amorphous category of “Australians”. It should also be noted that this reference group has been used in the past on the social identity research to the attitude-behavior relations within general community samples (Astrom & Rise, 2001; Johnston & White, 2003; Schofield, Pattison, Hill, & Borland, 2001; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999) and tends to elicit high levels of reported identification, indicating that it is a salient reference group for the general community.
3. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations among the Measures

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Normative Support	5.39	1.35	(.88)				
2. Relevance of Issue to Group	4.77	1.23	.39**	(.90)			
3. Voting intention	4.43	4.47	.34**	.13	a		
4. Willingness to express one's opinion	7.56	4.56	.17*	.21**	.25**	(.77)	
5. Perceived importance of the republic issue	7.03	1.91	.12	.30**	.31**	.44**	a

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Reliabilities for the scales in the diagonal; a indicates a single item measure

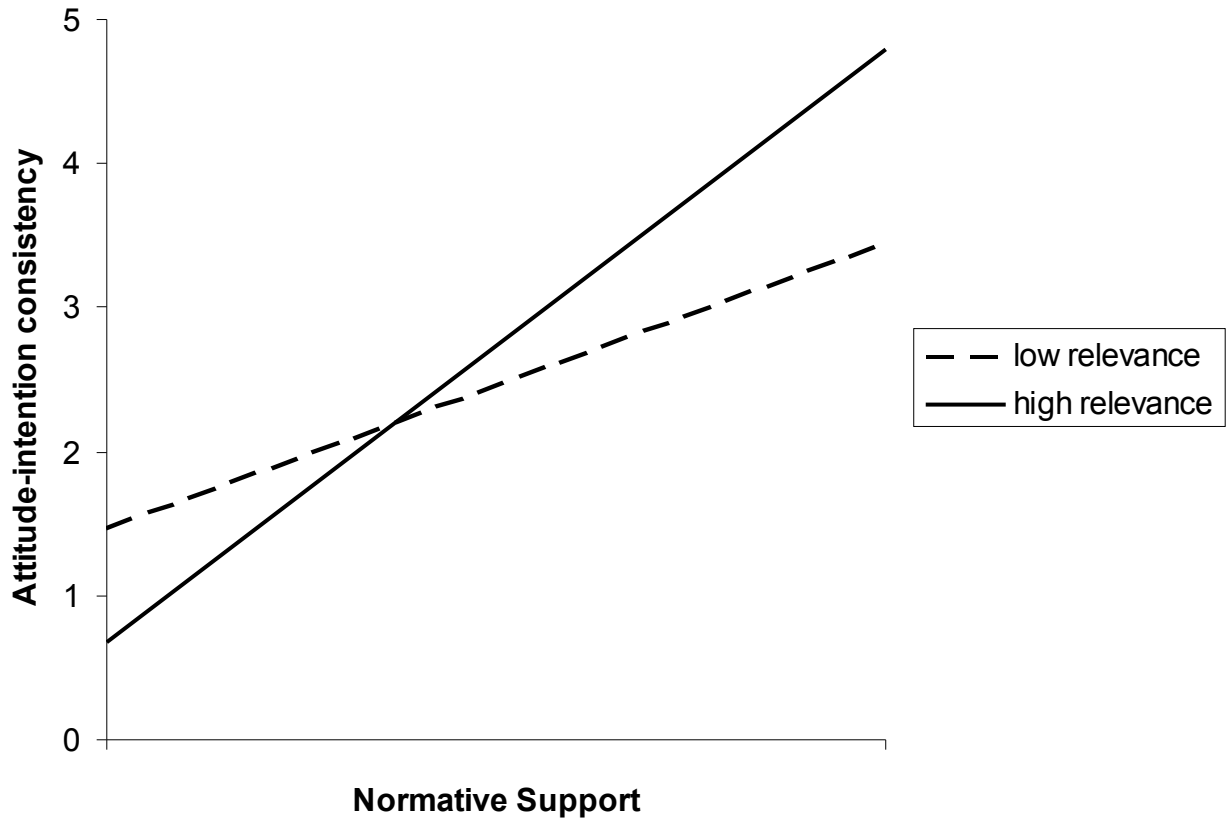
Figure Captions

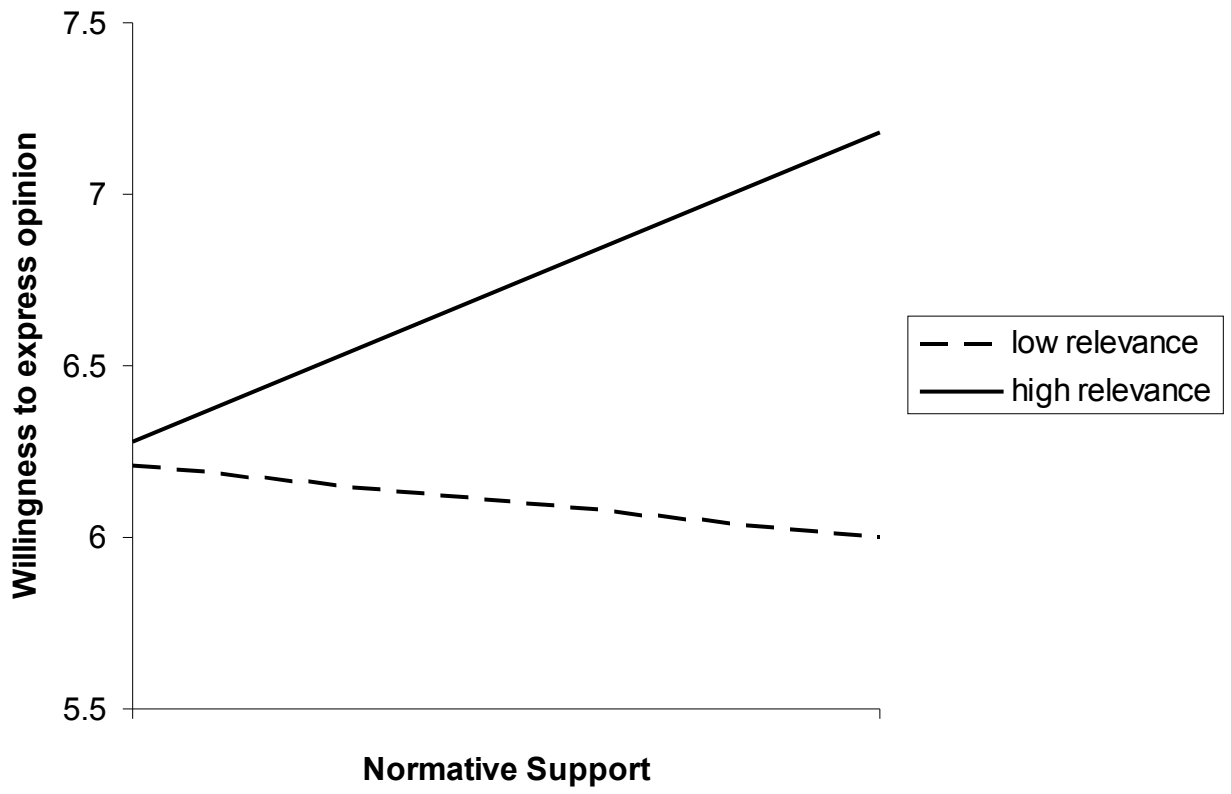
Figure 1. Interaction between normative support and relevance to the group on attitude-intention consistency.

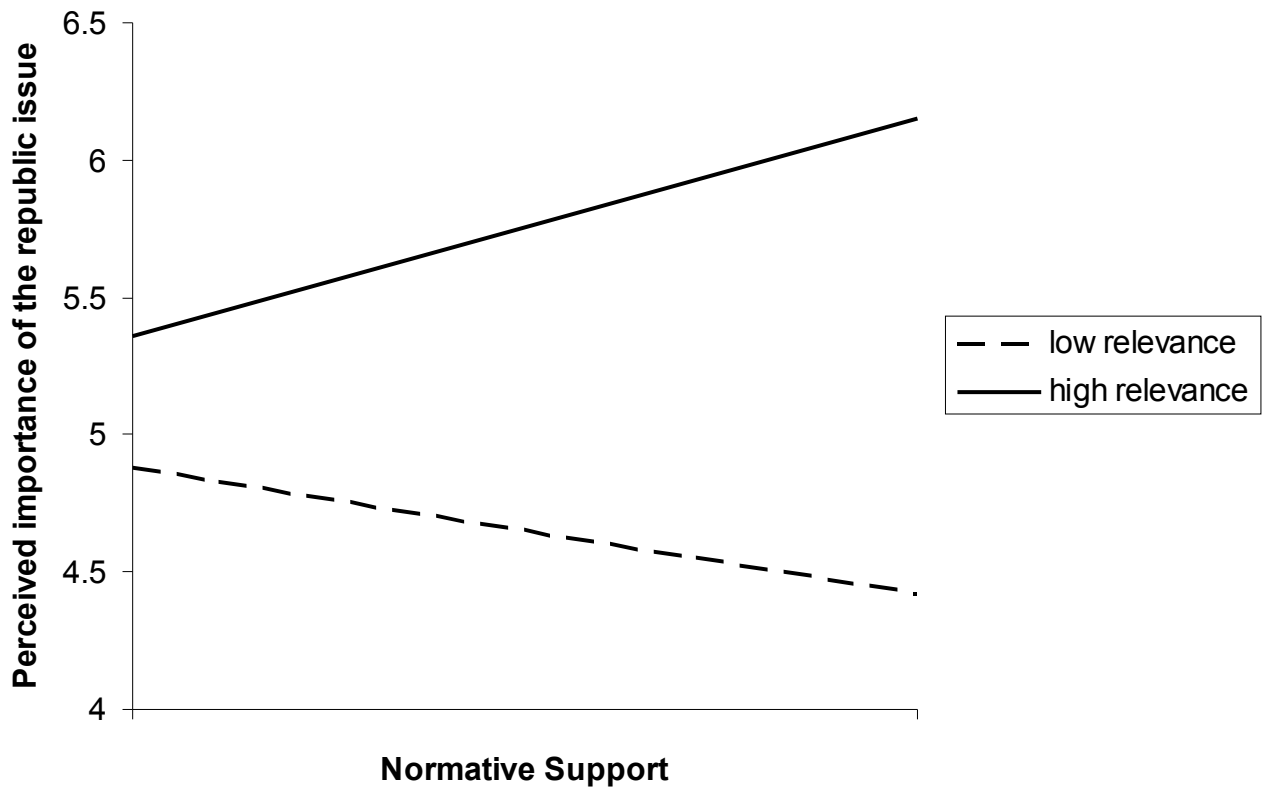
Figure 2. Interaction between normative support and relevance to the group on willingness to express one's opinion.

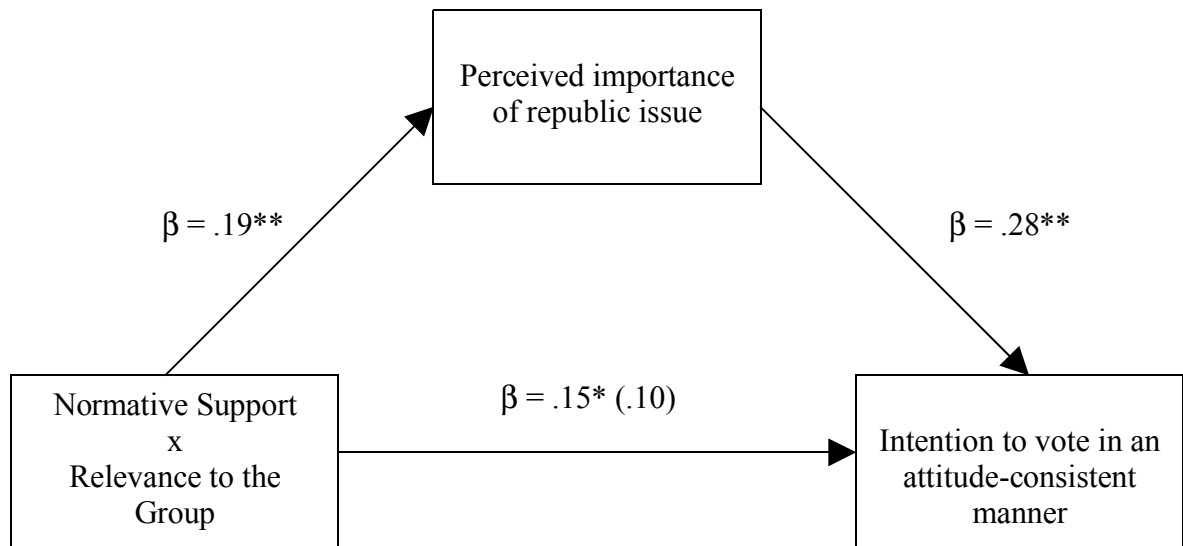
Figure 3. Interaction between normative support and relevance to the group on perceptions of the importance of republic issue.

Figure 4. Mediation of attitude-intention consistency through perceived importance of the republic issue.









* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Sobel test for mediation: $t = 2.18, p = .029$